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‘There is no relationship’: Service provider staff on how LGBT young people experience policing

Angela Dwyer¹ and Justine Hotten²

¹ School of Justice, Faculty of Law, Queensland University of Technology
(ae.dwyer@qut.edu.au)

² School of Justice, Faculty of Law, Queensland University of Technology
(justine.hotten@qut.edu.au)

Contact for paper:

Dr Angela Dwyer

Lecturer, School of Justice, Faculty of Law

2 George Street, Brisbane, QLD, 4001

W: 07 3138 7107

M: 0413 001 279

E: ae.dwyer@qut.edu.au

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Abstract

There has been an extended engagement with how young people experience policing, with a focus on the intersection between policing and indigeneity, ethnicity, gender, and social class. Interestingly, sexuality and/or gender diversity has been almost completely overlooked, both nationally and internationally. This paper reports on LGBT youth service providers’ accounts about police and LGBT young people interactions. It overviews the outcomes of semi-structured interviews with key LGBT youth service providers in different regions of Brisbane, Queensland. As the first qualitative engagement with these issues from the perspective of service providers, it highlights not only how LGBT young people experience policing, but also how service providers need to ‘work the system’ of policing to produce the best outcomes for LGBT young people.

Keywords: service providers; LGBT youth; police experiences; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender

Introduction

Interactions between young people and the police have been noted as problematic (CMC 2009). Many sociological researchers have examined the contextual issues that mediate these interactions, particularly for marginalised groups like indigenous young people (Cunneen and White 2007). To this point, however, no research has examined how

sexuality and/or gender diversity mediates this relationship. This is despite the huge body of literature documenting victimisation experienced by LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) young people, like homelessness and substance use (Cochran et al. 2002), and how this can produce interactions with police (Remafedi 1987).

This paper outlines a research project exploring these areas of concern. It reports on interview data with key service providers in Brisbane, Queensland, as a starting point for exploring the complex issues that inform policing experiences for LGBT young people. The study focused on service providers, referring here to assistance providers (that provide housing, needs assistance, counselling, and connections to vocational education and training) to LGBT young people. The paper shows how service providers' opinions about, and previous experiences of victimisation (like discrimination, harassment) from, police significantly shape how service providers think about policing experiences of LGBT young people they support. Participants note how interactions of police with LGBT young people they support is characterised by distance, fear, and mistrust. Most importantly, they elaborate how they 'work the system' to maximise positive policing experiences for LGBT young people they support, and policing practice requiring future improvement.

Why service providers? Researching service provision for the LGBT community

Service providers are often targeted for research with LGBT communities, as these communities are ostensibly unknown populations, with sexuality and/or gender identity still not recorded in the Australian Bureau of Statistics National Census. Numerous international studies have used service providers to gain information from and access to LGBT community members (see for example Allen 2006; Merlis and Linville 2006). Researchers draw on clients of service providers to explore social and health issues for LGBT

communities. Merlis and Linville (2006), for example, used a United States counselling service to survey LGBT clients about intimate violence and HIV/STD risk. This trend has continued in Australia, with LGBT service providers targeted for research about financial and work-related entitlements (HREOC 2007), homelessness (ACON 2004), individual and community needs (Pisarski and Gallois 1996), parenting (Short 2007), health and wellbeing (QAHC 2007), and intimate partner violence (Chan 2005). Overall, only limited work has drawn on LGBT youth service providers to recruit young participants. Allen (2006: 163), for example, recruited LGBT young people from New Zealand service providers to explore LGBT sexual diversity. Overall, this research demonstrates that service providers have been most useful for research about core social and health issues in LGBT communities.

Only few studies interview service providers directly about social and health issues. American studies have used surveys and interviews with service providers to explore LGBT domestic violence (NCAVP 1998). Most importantly, however, just as few studies specifically interview service providers about issues impacting on LGBT young people (SPRC 2008), with only two Australian studies interviewing service providers in Sydney. Scott and Bavinton (2005: 83) talked to community youth service providers about the appropriateness of models of service delivery for LGBT young people. Similarly, the Twenty-Ten Association (2007) conducted survey and questionnaire research with 26 service providers about issues concerning LGBT young people, including education, employment, accommodation, and family dynamics. Existing research clearly demonstrates that service providers have a wealth of knowledge to draw on in understanding LGBT youth issues. Even so, to date, no studies interview service providers about how LGBT young people experience policing.

Service providers were therefore chosen for three reasons. Firstly, they were accessed as stakeholders uniquely situated to comprehend how victimisation, as well as other contextual issues, informs policing experiences of LGBT young people. Secondly, the study drew on service providers as best placed to understand the complexity of these issues and to speak directly from their experiences where they have provided support to LGBT young people in their interactions with police. Thirdly, accessing service providers is useful as LGBT young people are widely considered a 'hard to reach' group (Liamputtong 2007). For example, LGBT young people are not as readily accessible as heterosexual young people through schools as LGBT young people rarely disclose their sexual orientation for fear of bullying from other students (Hillier et al 2005).

The research project therefore employed a qualitative exploratory approach that generated in-depth, rich data with service provider staff. The approach received ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Queensland University of Technology in October 2008. Data was generated by conducting one-on-one and (where possible) small group semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of seven (7) key service provider staff in Brisbane, Queensland, including service providers in inner city and outer lying areas. These staff worked for the only two (2) LGBT youth support services in Brisbane, and one (1) university LGBT support service. They are the leading providers of support to LGBT young people in Brisbane. In line with the exploratory approach, in-depth analysis of coded data was guided by a grounded theory approach involving generating ideas from data "as opposed to testing theories specified beforehand" (Gibb 2007: 49). Firstly, open coding involved a detailed reading of the data to identify key concepts. Axial coding then focused on building broader categories and identifying key relationships between the

different concepts, including policing processes. Finally, selective coding involved creating an overarching analytical account of the data.

Sample

Service providers included three females, two males, and two identified as no gender/unsure. All staff identified as lesbian and queer, with one person each identifying as same sex attracted and gay. They were aged 23-44 and all identified as Anglo-Australian, with two others born in New Zealand and Scotland. Their average income was \$540 week. Four had university degrees and three had technical education qualifications (TAFE).

I'm supportive of police, but...: how service providers frame the police

Service providers' interpretations of how LGBT young people experienced policing were mediated by a range of factors, including the media and schooling. For example, participants did acknowledge the role of police was to support and protect them as members of the general community. However, they were guarded in how they described this and often demonstrated a tension between positive and negative ideas about police. For service providers, how supportive police were depended on therefore the *context* of their interactions:

We had a reasonable amount to do with the police at school in a very positive context...They ran our drug and alcohol programs...Second context was student activism where I saw a lot of my mates have the crap beaten out of them by cops particularly in regards to being lesbian or being gay male (Astro)

Participants appear to be using what Hewitt and Stokes (1975: 3) called disclaimers, framing police in a way that mirror 'I'm not racist but...'. This serves to contextualise and make safer their more negative statements about police. The historical context of policing

in Brisbane also heavily influenced their thinking about how LGBT young people experienced policing. Participants' discussed how, as LGBT young people, they grew up in "a really right-wing police state" (Ben) and learned from the media about the police as an oppressive authority that "arrested people for trying to march" (Fallen Angel).

The most significant factor influencing their views of police was their own personal experiences of policing when they were themselves LGBT young people. They often worked through their own experiences as evidence that the LGBT young people they currently supported would be having difficulties with the police:

Just trying to think back to my experiences when I was pulled over with my girlfriend and that change, it was quite obvious that we were partners and the change in their attitudes when that was figured out...maybe if I just looked like her friend, may have probably been treated quite a bit better (Lucy)

Many specific experiences were recounted by service providers that clearly shaped how they thought about police-LGBT young people interactions in contemporary times. Their accounts demonstrate a strong intersection between service providers' LGBT status, their personal experiences of police victimization as an LGBT young person, and how they articulated the experiences of LGBT young people they supported in their employment.

Distant, fearful and untrusting: accounts of police-LGBT young people relations

All service providers described the relationship between queer young people and police as characterized by distance (Xavier), mistrust (Lucy), fear of discrimination (Alex), feeling unsafe (Ben), and harassment (Caitlyn). Comments suggested that LGBT young people had contact with the police in various forms, with accounts focused on negotiating interactions

between young people and the police in their role. Interactions between LGBT young people and police were noted in three specific circumstances.

Firstly, LGBT young people had interactions with police outside the service premises, particularly when they were 'hanging out' outside waiting for drop in times to begin:

We can go out the front and we got ten kids waiting to drop in and all of a sudden we've got four coppers out the front, then we'll go out and explain that we're youth workers here and these kids are waiting for our service to open, then we'll be kinda like a mediator support person between the two (Caitlyn).

Service providers consistently noted frustration with 'operations' police that policed the areas around the service each day because they spoke of repeatedly explaining to police the purpose of the service and why the young people were waiting around outside.

Secondly, LGBT young people had interactions with police when they had been victimised or threatened. Service providers talked about how they organised, for example, "an escort to get some clothes from a dangerous situation, they definitely don't have the confidence to create that relationship with the police on their own" (Lucy). Service providers noted how they organised and mediated interactions between LGBT young people and the police. Other situations included: young people who were threatened by members of the public; young people that were threatened by an acquaintance; and young people that had been sexually assaulted. The most positive responses discussed related to sexual assault victims.

Thirdly, interactions between the police and LGBT young people involved situations where a young person had offended, where service providers negotiated and provided information

for these LGBT young people. These interactions were interpreted as mostly negative experiences like the following situation with a young person suspected of drug offences:

Yeah they had on camera from outside Warry Street doing what looked like a drug deal. So because they had information that she was here they bought seven of them [officers] down and they strip searched her in the office where we did counselling. Fuckin' assholes. It was terrible...It was 'We didn't know what we were walking into', and I was like 'Mmm, a phone call would have helped' (Fallen Angel).

Even though situations like this were interpreted negatively, they typically prompted forging more positive relationships with the police: "Yeah that was actually the beginning of our really good relationship with the police. Cause that's such a terrible thing to happen that we had to respond to it at several levels" (Fallen Angel).

Looking queer: the importance of visibility in public

While a range of contextual factors were noted by service providers as mediating police-LGBT young people interactions (such as disrespect from the young person), the core contextual factor in the discussion was *visibility*. 'Looking queer' was the most dominant way that service providers noted that LGBT young people could be visible, although this was also informed by 'looking alternative' (wearing hooded jumpers and 'punk' clothing). Service providers' recounted situations where police reacted specifically to 'looking queer', as demonstrated by the following case of a young gay male who evaded a taxi fare while "dressed up in his make-up":

Fallen Angel: They manhandled him and bashed him...

Astro: Called him a fag and...

Fallen Angel: Yeah. Denigrated him for being queer. Locked him up. The guy was going out to Fluffy's and because he had on make-up and stuff. They called him Britney Spears and cry-baby and they were insulting him for being gay whereas if he hadn't have been dressed up and going out and had make-up on and stuff, I don't think they would have even picked up on him being gay necessarily.

Police appear to have responded to this young person in terms of how he 'looked queer'. Visibility is clearly implied in the reaction by police in this instance.

Working the policing system: seeking positive outcomes for LGBT young people

Many outcomes were noted by service providers, including outcomes for LGBT young people and for service providers. Outcomes for young people included: not accessing police for protection because "there's not a lot of trust in the police force from the young people, they're going to make a judgment on their personal experiences" (Alex); emotional harm for young people that "are already so at risk of feeling really isolated" (Lucy); and their hatred of the police will lead to further conflict with police "because they'll make a nasty remark directly to the cop once they've been caught" (Astro). These were all core areas of concern for service providers for LGBT young people that they already considered vulnerable to victimisation.

The most significant outcomes for service providers involved what they called 'working the system', where they manipulated and negotiated police processes to gain the best possible outcomes for LGBT young people. Two participants, for example, explained how they would ring specific officers they knew would be supportive of those requiring assistance:

Astro: it's what we tend to do isn't it, when we call the police we don't call the general station number.

Fallen Angel: We never call the general station number.

Astro: We call a good officer and if we don't call that number sometimes it's a lottery. Sometimes you get someone who's good and other times you get someone who tells you like this isn't an issue.

Fallen Angel: It's true. We don't ever ring cold.

Astro: No, we don't.

Fallen Angel: We always ring people we know and they may be designated LGBTI or they may be people that we've got a working relationship with [and] we know they treat the young people with respect.

Shifting police culture and process: identifying areas of improvement

Service providers spoke at length about what might improve policing for LGBT young people, with two core themes informing this discussion: police processes and police culture. Service providers suggested various ways to improve police processes so that the perceived 'divide' between the police and LGBT young people could be reduced. These included hate crime reporting, presence at LGBT community events, and strategically recruiting LGBT local police officers, particularly those that are already 'out'. The most dominant discussion, however, focused on changing police culture. They suggested more careful police recruitment procedures to 'filter out' people that are homophobic and "who are into enforcement of power" (Fallen Angel), and to recruit more people that "are into social justice". They also noted the need to challenge dominant community stereotypes with police, particularly the stereotype that LGBT communities are heavily engaged in drug use. The most common suggestion for changing police culture was training about LGBT issues

for police officers, particularly those issues involving LGBT young people. Training only new recruits, however, was not considered adequate, with follow up professional development suggested to ensure officers were “not going out and saying words that could be taken as queer phobia” (Ben). Finally, service providers noted that they wanted to be recognised “as a cultural group attached to the Assistant Commissioner’s office. We’re a cultural group of 10%...Why are we in bloody community policing where the head of it is the head of the Police Christian Association?” (Fallen Angel).

Conclusion

This research has highlighted the importance of examining service providers’ accounts of how LGBT young people experience policing. The data analysed above not only elucidates what these experiences are, but most importantly the range of contextual factors that mediate these interactions. The role of ‘looking queer’ in policing, for example, is significant in how it demonstrates the lack of progress since writers like Cherney (1999) noted these issues a decade ago (Cherney 1999). More importantly, the data demonstrates that service providers engage in labour intensive ways of ‘working the system’ to get the best outcomes for young people. While both police and service providers need to work to produce better outcomes for LGBT young people, this research points out unique areas of concern to be addressed for service providers in future.

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