

“What does the term ‘gay community’ mean to you?” – Understandings among gay men in Glasgow and North Lanarkshire

Nicola Boydell-Wright, Katie Buston and Lisa McDaid

MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, Glasgow

Background

‘Community’ responses to HIV have been linked to successful HIV prevention among gay men. Recent research has questioned the role of ‘gay community’ in responding to recent increases in HIV incidence, highlighting changes in its role in HIV prevention (Fraser 2004; Davis 2008; Dowsett 2009; Holt 2011). Gaining insight into how men understand ‘gay community’ has important implications for future HIV prevention interventions.

Aim

To explore the meaning of the term ‘gay community’ to a sample of gay men, how relevant they felt it was, and which social networks are most important to them.

Method

- Two face-to-face focus groups were conducted with a total of 15 men in Glasgow and North Lanarkshire
- A combination of focusing exercises and more structured questions used to explore key topics:
 - Social networks
 - Gay community
 - Community more generally

A picture sorting exercise designed to facilitate discussion around ‘gay community’ and how men understand and describe it



Focusing exercise designed to explore how men understand the term social network. Image shows men's responses to the question: “When you hear the term ‘social network’ what comes to mind?”

Findings

Men’s understandings of the term gay community were complex and diverse. Several men across both groups expressed doubts about its existence, while other men questioned what constitutes gay community.

NBW:some people say gay community exists, some people say it doesn't exist...

Scott: It does

Tim: It doesn't (Focus Group 2)

Some men suggested that multiple communities exist, rather than a unified ‘gay community’. Others felt that gay community/ies are underpinned by organisations providing support to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans people.

Keith: The more that the conversation has been going on, I don't actually believe that there is a *gay community*. I believe there is many, many small communities, and whether that is groups of friends, or people who go to different things, and I think each person belongs to maybe hundreds of different communities...

Alan: See like the gay community is that not, classing it with kind of Terrance Higgins Trust, LGBT. Like when we started off talking about the gay community is it not...

Simon: Well what do you believe it is then? What do you think?

Alan: Well, I think the gay community starts being about gay communities like THT, LGBT, all the groups, and support groups is classed as the gay community

(Focus Group 1)

Men discussed the importance of terminology in defining community, and questioned whether a unified gay community exists.

Anthony: Well, first of all, as you say, it's the terminology. I mean, depending if you refer to it as a unified gay community, I mean, there's a gay scene, but is there a gay community in the sense that you've got your local neighbourhood community?

Tim: The only thing for me that makes me think... the first time I would say I experienced what people call gay community was during the 80s and 90s when HIV hit and for then I did see a community, what could be classed as a community, a real group of people coming together.

(Focus Group 2)

Despite the use of different terminology, and debate among the men about what constitutes community, there was a consensus that the term has many meanings in different contexts and to different people.

NBW: ...What is a community?

Graham: A group of people. Different people that know each other.

In fact, they don't necessarily need to know each other.

NBW: Mmm, so what defines it then?

Simon: It could be identity, geography, age, HIV, hmm, HIV status, I don't know. Gender. Religion or religious belief.

John: An interest in something.

NBW: What does anyone else think?

Simon: (To Keith) Come on then...

Keith: I don't know if I agree with that.

[Loud cheers and laughter from group members]

(Focus Group 1)

Implications and future directions

Findings are similar to previous Australian studies exploring the meaning of ‘gay community’ (Fraser 2004; 2008; Holt 2011). The findings of this PhD pilot study raise an important issue around the use of terminology in research – in exploring relationships between gay men and significant others, is ‘gay community’ the best term to use? The research highlights the need to explore wider communities and social networks which may influence gay and bisexual men’s sexual health. Thus, the findings have been used to inform the development of a larger PhD study which will explore how links to communities and social networks, particularly gay communities, relate to awareness of sexual health, specifically HIV prevention and safe sex.

References

- Davis, M. (2008). The ‘loss of community’ and other problems for sexual citizenship in recent HIV prevention. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 30(2), pp. 182–196.
- Dowsett, G. (2009). Dangerous desires and post-queer HIV prevention: Rethinking community, incitement and intervention. *Social Theory and Health*, 7(3), pp. 218–240.
- Fraser, S. (2004). *Changing community, changing practice?: Young men, HIV and gay community*. Research Monograph. Sydney: University of New South Wales - National Centre in HIV Social research.
- Fraser, S. (2008). Getting out in the “Real World”: Young men, queer and theories of gay community. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 55(2), pp. 245–264.
- Holt, M. (2011). Gay men and ambivalence about ‘gay community’: From gay community attachment to personal communities. *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 13(8), pp. 857–871.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the men who participated in the study and made this project possible. Thanks to Terrance Higgins Trust and Gay Men’s Health who assisted in promoting the research