

LGB YOUTH OUT OF FOCUS: LGB Youth and non- decision making.

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Abstract

As an LGB young person who has been lobbying locally and nationally regarding LGB youth and social exclusion for around two years as Young People's Representative at the Allsorts Youth Project, I was interested to examine why LGB youth were marginalised or ignored in policies by using theories of interest groups and non-decision making in particular with relation to the Social Exclusion Unit. This paper uses research and interviews to explore if the SEU is non-decision making regarding LGB youth, and how this can be addressed.

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to two young people who committed suicide earlier this year. It was a tragic reminder that these issues are not merely academic, but directly affect the lives of LGB young people.

Despite around two years lobbying on the needs of LGB young people, and for more support in policy I have seen little change. I know that a number of people, including young LGB people themselves are pressing for changes and I hope that our needs will be recognised and addressed as a serious issue soon.

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Definitions and Abbreviations

DfES – Department for Education and Skills

LGB – Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual

LGBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Transsexual

PHSE – Physical Health and Social Education, a subject in schools, which may also refer to PHSE teams within the Local Education Authority who are responsible for the subject in their area.

QYA – Queer Youth Alliance (an organisation run for LGBT young people by LGBT young people)

“Heterosexuality, is the term given to the expression of attraction and the associated sexual behaviour of those who have relationships with the opposite gender.

Homosexuality is the term given to the expression of attraction and the associated sexual behaviour of those who have relationships with members of their own gender.

Bisexuality is the term given to the expression of attraction and the associated sexual behaviour of those who have relationships with members of both genders.

Homophobia is a fear or dislike of someone who is LGB. It can vary in intensity from passive resentment to active victimisation.

Hetrosexism describes the presumption that everyone is heterosexual. It refers to a culture in which individuals, families and their lifestyles are categorised according to a heterosexual model. Examples include the assumption that a male pupil will have, or be looking for, a girlfriend; or that a female parents, when talking about her partner, is referring to a male.”

(Jennett, 2004, p.6)

“Homophobic Bullying is often present in an environment that fails to challenge and respond to homophobia. It can take the form of rumour-mongering, social isolation, text messaging and frightening looks, as well as more obvious forms of bullying.”

(Jennett, 2004, p.6)

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Introduction

This investigation aims to investigate the strategies which lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youth as an outsider group in British politics can employ to overcome policy non-decision making in the area of social exclusion.

This subject of focus has arisen from a previous report *Clear Night Sky*, in which this author examined the Connexions service in relation to LGB youth. It was clear that Connexions does not have a clear top down approach to dealing with LGB youth. As the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) wrote the report *Bridging the Gap* which informed the development of the Connexions service, the SEU and social exclusion was an obvious next area of study. Therefore the SEU will be the focus of the study, although this is only one government department, which deals with issues around social exclusion (others include the Department for Education and Skills and the Department of Health). It is also my proposition that how the SEU deals with the issue of LGB young people is indicative of decision-making and policy more generally. However, such an analysis of other Government departments is outside the reach of this paper.

The title indicates a number of propositions that will be examined. First the research methodology used for the research will be explained, followed by the historical background of exclusion of LGB people in the UK and the effect of this on LGB youth. Third, the theoretical background examining power and non-decision making and outsider groups in politics. Fourth, how social exclusion actually affects LGB youth, which will be illustrated through the issue of education. Fifth, the relationship between the Social Exclusion Unit and LGB youth, considered using the theoretical

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approaches of non-decision making and outsider groups, this will be based upon primary research of interviews with decision makers and other actors involved in this field. Finally, the strategies, which LGBT can employ to overcome non-decision making and to become an insider group, will be discussed.

Research Methodology

As discussed in the introduction, this research has arisen out of my previous report Clear Night Sky. As a young person who has been involved in political lobbying regarding LGB youth I was interested to gain more understanding about how LGB young people were marginalised in politics and policy. Investigating this through theories of non-decision making and interest groups gave a theoretical background to my assumptions about the marginalisation of LGB young people in politics, and examining the strategies which could be employed to overcome this, aims to provide practical solutions.

In the project proposal it was decided that a qualitative research method was more appropriate to the investigation. Quantitative data would have been little practical use in determining non-decision making, especially without a large sample the data would have held little statistical significance or reliability. From a small number of interviews it was possible to find out more detailed information on LGB and social exclusion, and how this related to the Social Exclusion Unit. Therefore inductive interviews were chosen the natural method of obtaining information for the project.

At the planning stage it was proposed to examine the documents outlining the policy and workings of the Social Exclusion Unit, which proved not possible given the timescale of the project. I suspect locating such documents may have also proved

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difficult. It was also not possible to interview anyone connected with the SEU, as had been intended. Clare Tyler, Lord Rooker, and the Rt. Hon John Prescott MP and Rt. Hon. Margaret Hodge MBE MP all declined interviews, while Yvette Cooper MP did not reply, (although Margaret Hodge referred to Lester Parker, who was available). However, e-mail correspondence on behalf of Clare Tyler did prove interesting.

However, a number of good interviews were obtained including decision makers and people of influence such as Charles Hendry MP and Lester Parker in the DfES. Also lobby groups were interviewed, specifically Stonewall and the Queer Youth Alliance (which is run by LGBT young people for LGBT young people). While different sets of questions were used for decision makers, and for lobby groups an informal interview style was used to allow the interviewees room to discuss broader issues, which they felt, were important. Hopefully an informal approach also allowed interviewees to relax and speak freely, although it was necessary to record the interviews for later transcription. Some areas discussed were ‘off the record’ and as such it was necessary to respect confidentiality and boundaries, such conversations added to my understanding of the issues, and may have shaped my approach and conclusions regarding LGB youth and non-decision making, even if they are not made in explicit comments.

As well as interviews, reports published by the Social Exclusion Unit were examined. This was to gain an understanding of what work the Social Exclusion Unit was undertaking, and to determine if they were recognising the needs of LGB young people. More general reports regarding LGB youth and social exclusion were also examined, to show how social exclusion affects LGB young people, and what their needs are.

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To provide a historical background to the social exclusion of LGB youth, the Sexual Offences Act and Section 28 were examined, along with the associated parliamentary debates.

This paper contains excerpts from the interviews and reports and wider reading to illustrate how nondecision making is marginalising LGB youth, and the strategies, which they can employ to overcome this situation. The references are by no means exhaustive as the interviews alone provided a lot of useful information. It was also necessary to exclude much of the wider research of LGB youth social exclusion, although a comprehensive work is needed in this area; it is not the aim of this paper.

Historical background

The historical exclusion of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual people in general in the UK cannot be pinpointed to any one clear date or set of events. The history of exclusion of LGB people in the UK however is clearly longstanding:

The proscription of sodomy in the English tradition began in 1533 when King Henry VIII adopted contemporary church doctrine into a system of laws at the time of the English withdrawal from the Catholic Church. Sodomy became both a sin and a crime, since ecclesiastical law recognizes no distinction between the concepts of "sin" and "crime." Sodomy included any form of non-procreative acts including masturbation, oral and anal sex.

(Sodomylaws.org, 2004)

Likely contributions to this exclusion of LGB people include the biblical basis of British Law, the influence of the Victorians and their ethics, it is famously said that Queen Victoria did not believe that two women could have a relationship or sexual

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intercourse. It is therefore interesting to note that none of the laws outlining homosexual sexual offences have included women, but have focused solely on men.

This study however will consider contemporary history, and will briefly trace the Sexual Offences Act of 1956 and the subsequent changes, and the role of Section 28 of the Local Government Act, as context for the social exclusion of LGB youth.

The modern exclusion of LGB people can arguably be started with the Sexual Offences Act of 1956. The act formally made buggery (anal sex) an offence: “It is felony for a person to commit Buggery with another person or with an animal” (Sexual Offences Act UK ST 1956 c 69 Pt I s 12) criminalizing anal sex. As well as buggery, other sexual acts between men were made illegal, as they were classified as gross indecency. Depending on the circumstances it was also illegal for men to contact other men for sexual purposes (Honoré, 1978, p.85). This was a clear difference from the way heterosexual people were treated by the law:

“The fact that it is criminal to procure or attempt to procure another person to do a homosexual act which is not in itself an offence marks a difference between the way in which the law treats homosexual and heterosexual acts, for there is no corresponding crime of procuring heterosexual acts.”

(Honoré, 1978, p.98).

As mentioned, lesbian homosexual acts are treated substantially differently; there is nothing to show that homosexual acts between women have ever been regarded as crimes at common law (Honoré, 1978, p.100). This can most probably be attributed to the denial of the existence of lesbians and lesbian invisibility. Therefore homosexual acts were criminal in England only, and in criminal law homosexual acts

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between women were treated more lightly than acts between men (Honoré, 1978, p.100/101).

Honoré in the same book looks at the basis of the Sexual Offences Act, stating: “the law is not concerned with homosexual attitude, but with acts” (Honoré, 1978, p.89). I take a different interpretation. The way the Sexual Offences Act is worded, and the associated debates reduce the relationships of homosexual men to sexual acts, ignoring in law, the associated parliamentary debates, and society at large the ability of homosexual men to have relationships and love. This perspective highlights the legacy of prejudice against LGB people in general whose relationships, particularly of gay men, are seen only at a sexual level. This has undoubtedly played a part in determining the behaviour of LGB youth, reinforcing stereotypes of promiscuity.

Changes to the act in 1967 made buggery no longer criminal, if they took place between men over 21 in private, between women such acts were lawful over the age of 16. (Honoré, 1978, p.90/91). This amendment had the effect of creating in law an unequal age of consent for young gay men, which was 21, compared to their heterosexual peers where the age of consent was set at 16. Although the basis for this was the protection of young people, it also sends a message that homosexual relationships are not equally valid to those of heterosexual relationships. While the protection justification for the unequal age of consent reinforces often-false stereotypes of gay men being predatory and is often based on the false notion that predatory gay men would convert young men to being gay or sexually abuse young men. Institutions such as the American Psychological Association support arguments saying that that this is not the case, and that gay adults do not present a heightened

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danger of sexual abuse. Also, that most paedophiles are heterosexual, or have never developed a mature sexual orientation (See the APA's involvement in Boys Scouts of America v. James Dale, APA, 2000).

Changes in the Sexual Offences Act (Amendment) 2000 equalised the age of consent for homosexual sex between gay men to the age of 16 (Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 2000, UK ST 2000 c 44). This was a significant event for young gay and bisexual men particularly as it placed their relationships on an equal footing with those of their heterosexual peers. Prior to this amendment the age of consent for homosexual sex had been 18, although this had previously been lowered from 21 in the Sexual Offences Act Amendment 1976. The reason that this only applied to gay and bisexual men is that under the Sexual Offences Act, buggery is the offence, which cannot be committed by lesbians. Also significant about the amendment of 2000 is that it was passed through Parliament using the Parliament Act of 1949 to force the Act through the House of Lords. This was necessary as previous attempts to pass more liberal legislation regarding homosexuality had at best been difficult, and more often had failed. An excerpt from the Lords Hansard, shows the level of some of the debate in the House of Lords, which appears to be based on personal moral positions rather than consideration of what is in the best interests for the public and LGB young people, and on modern understandings of homosexuality:

“My views on these matters have not changed and I shall put them briefly. I stated them more than 40 years ago when I was the first person to back the Wolfenden report in this House by introducing a debate. ...First, I regard homosexuality, certainly lifelong homosexuality, as a sad disorder and handicap. It makes it very unlikely that a proper, healthy family life can be attained. Secondly, homosexual leanings are not to be condemned, any more than schizophrenia or a tendency to alcoholism. However, when they are put

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into practice they are sinful by Christian standards, and I believe by the standards of other Churches, from whom we shall no doubt hear later.”

The Earl of Longford (Lords Hansard, 2000)

Homosexuality is no longer seen as a disorder by professionals, including those working in mental health:

“...led the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from the DSM in 1973 (it had been listed as a sociopathic personality disorder). In 1975, the American Psychological Association publicly supported this move, stating that "homosexuality per se implies no impairment in judgment, reliability or general social and vocational capabilities...(and mental health professionals should) take the lead in removing the stigma of mental illness long associated with homosexual orientation." Although prejudice and stigma still exist in society, this research has helped millions of gay men and women gain acceptance in the mental health community.”

(American Psychological Association, 2005)

The changes in the Sexual Offences Act 2003 were concerned primarily with increasing the protection for young and vulnerable people in relation to sexual offences (Stevenson, Davies and Gunn, 2004, p.1). Although, sex between more than two men over the age of consent was made legal (FPA, 2004). Therefore, changes made to the act in 2003 do not specifically relate to the background of this study. The amendments to the act discussed are not a comprehensive guide to all the changes made to the act but illustrates changes that affected LGB people.

While the Sexual Offences Act forms part of the background of exclusion for LGB youth, arguably the major piece of legislation affecting LGB was Section 28 the commonly used name for Section 2a of the Local Government Act 1988, introduced by the Thatcher government prevented local councils from promoting homosexuality:

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- (1) A local authority shall not—
- (a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality;
 - (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship."

(Local Government Act 1988, s.28)

Although this did not apply to schools, at best it created a climate of confusion, at worst it was deliberately used as an excuse by teachers to avoid teaching about homosexuality or responding to homophobic bullying, even when 82% of teachers were aware of verbal incidents and 25% were aware of physical incidents (DfES, 2002).

Section 28 was first repealed in Scotland in July 2000 (BBC, 2000). However, the repeal in England was made more difficult as the House of Lords refused to allow the repeal to be passed. After a number of debates in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, those against the repeal were defeated. Section 28 was repealed on Thursday 10th July 2003. While there is still much work to be done the repeal of section 28 is clearly important:

“[Important areas of social policy include]...,the repeal of Section 28, especially with the work I do and working with young people in schools because, on a positive note, it sent messages about the equality of LGB young people. It also took away an excuse for a lot of schools for not talking about homosexuality, even though [Section 28] never should have prevented it.”

(Interview, Mark Jennett, 27/1/2005)

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The media have also had a large part to play in this social legitimating of homophobia. Among the most infamous of campaigns was the Daily Mail's Clause 28 Watch reporting on local authorities illegal 'promotion of homosexuality' the result of this climate of fear among those in youth work, was that it made it very difficult to carry out support work with young LGB people:

"Each day we are putting the focus on a different area and the way taxpayers' money is used to introduce young people to the facts of life.

Today: Stockport.

EDUCATION chiefs in Stockport have begun a recruitment campaign for youth workers to run groups specifically aimed at homosexuals.

Adverts in a newspaper and the gay Pink Paper announced: 'We are seeking to appoint a youth worker to continue the development of our Young Gay Men's project.'

(Daily Mail, 2000)

While arguably things have moved on since Clause 28 Watch, even today LGB youth projects need to be careful with how they promote their services and how, if at all to tackle political issues affecting LGB young people. The press still write biased articles, such as the Mail's 'Teachers told to promote Gay Pride' article regarding the release of the *Stand up for us*, guidance written by Mark Jennett.

It can be seen that the role of the media has three broad roles in affecting LGB youth. First is the general lack of mention of LGB young people in the press and television, and the lack of positive LGB role models. While young heterosexual people have a wide range of celebrities and family to act as role models, young LGB people see very

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few LGB people open about their sexuality in public life, those who are in the press and media tend to be portrayed as stereotypes. Second, the same lack of LGB young people in the media acts as a denial that young LGB people exist. If media is a reflection of our society, then by not acknowledging them as valid members of the community their needs and issues that affect them will not be taken into consideration. Third, articles such as ‘Teachers told to promote Gay Pride’ and the ‘Clause Watch’ serve to reinforce homophobia in society, validating discrimination and abuse of minorities as acceptable. Thus, the way the media deals with issues around sexuality and LGB young people must have some bearing on how they, and society perceives them.

It is from this background that LGB young people are at risk of social exclusion. The Sexual Offences Laws and Section 28 have had the effect of legitimising and entrenching homophobia in the British society.

These factors leave young LGB people in a vulnerable position when they are growing up into an LGB identity, as they risk homophobic bullying in school, where despite the repeal of Section 28 many schools are only just considering the needs of LGB pupils for support. Bullying, and fear of rejection from parents, as well as issues around their identity, sexual health and relationships, places LGB young people under great amounts of stress. My own research found that of a group of 15 young LGB people over half the group had self-harmed, and 60% of the group had attempted suicide (Proctor, 2004, p.5).

Therefore young LGB people are at a risk of social exclusion. Although a broad term, social exclusion can be seen as:

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“... a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas face a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown. These problems are linked and mutually reinforcing so that they can create a vicious cycle in people’s lives.”

(SEU, 2004a)

The social exclusion of LGB youth is manifested in many ways including, as mentioned depression, and a risk of self-harm and suicide. Social Exclusion is usually related to young people in terms of preventing them becoming not in education, training, or employment, which is the focus of the Connexions service. Yet in light of the evidence of the high risk of social exclusion: “72 per cent of participants indicated that they had either feigned illness or played truant to escape anti-lesbian/gay abuse at school” (Rivers, 2000, p.16) the link between LGB youth and social exclusion has not been made at a national level when developing policy, this will later be examined in more detail.

Theoretical Background

Next, the theoretical background shall be considered. First the concepts of power and non-decision making, second of how interests are organised through insider and outsider groups.

The consideration of non-decision making in politics is necessarily linked with the concept of power, raising questions how power is theorised and used. Much of the

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traditional literature of power within politics has focused on actions of power which are observable, and rely on positive action. However, inaction can also be a way of exercising power: “the index of an actor’s power can be his ability to avoid or resist performing positive actions” in this context Lukes gives the example of George W. Bush refusing to ratify the Kyoto protocol (Lukes, 2004, p.77).

Non-decision making takes this analysis further than recognising that inaction can be an expression of power. Rather, decisions can be deliberately not made, or issues ignored by those who makes decision and exercise power, in order to maintain the status-quo. Another approach to this, is that the actors will not even realise that non-decisions are being made. Therefore, the process of the system and how decisions are made, are a source of exclusion for marginalised groups:

The radical, however, maintains that people’s wants may themselves be a product of a system which works against their interests, and, in such causes, relation the latter to what they would want and prefer, were they able to make the choice.

(Lukes, 2004, p.38)

The difficulty with non-decisions is that there are from the theoretical perspective an infinite number of alternatives with different motives posing a danger of ideological interpretation: “infinite variety of possible nondecisions...reveals the idea’s adaptability to various ideological perspectives” (Wolfinger in Lukes, 2004, p.41).

Therefore it is necessary to determine the context of suspected non-decision making allowing a theoretical check. This, combined with the fact that non-decision making is often difficult to observe makes research of non-decision making problematic. The advantage of this approach however is that it allows analysis of how the pluralist

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system may be biased in favour of certain groups, and against others (Lukes, 2004, p.39).

From the perspective employed in this investigation interest groups are related to decision-making, and nondecision making. Wilson defined interest groups as “organizations, separate from government though often in close partnership with government, which attempt to influence public policy” and that “interest groups raise issues and particular needs far more diverse than can be presented or discussed by political parties” (Wilson, 1990, p.1). Therefore following these criteria LGB youth are an interest group in British politics, in that they attempt to influence public policy (for example the Civil Partnerships Bill) and they are raising specific issues regarding sexuality which are rarely discussed by the major political parties.

Interest groups allow ‘intensive minorities’ who are affected by policy issues, which may not affect the majority of the population, to prevail over majorities. (Wilson, 1990, p.2) Interest groups can be further divided into inside groups and outsider groups. Insider groups are those that are co-opted into the government, or at least have influence on policy making. This fulfils the rest of Wilson’s definition of an interest group that is “separate from government though often in close partnership with government, which attempt to influence public policy” (Wilson, 1990, p.1). These groups therefore have influence in decision-making, and therefore are consulted and decision may even be made with these groups and their interests in mind.

Outsider groups however, do not have this access to the government and policy making. While some LGB youth groups have been consulted on specific issues they only have the influence to affect minor changes rather than the direction of social

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policy overall. An example of this was the consultation of the Sheffield LGB Youth Initiative on the drawing up of the Connexions guidelines on engaging LGB youth. (Connexions, 2004, p.5) Therefore it is outsider groups rather than insider groups who are at more risk of having their interests excluded by nondecision making.

As LGB youth have organisation around political issues through QYA and local youth groups, at the time of writing they lack substantial access to the government and to policy decision making in any coherent manner. The closest which LGB youth have come to mainstream political involvement was a “Gay Summit” on 30th of March 2004 hosted by the Shadow Minister for Children, Young People, and Families Charles Hendry MP.

LGB Youth and Social Exclusion

There are a wide range of areas of social exclusion that are incorporated into the social exclusion of LGB youth, including homelessness, educational underachievement and unemployment, mental health, and physical health. To highlight the effect of social exclusion on LGB youth the issue of education will be briefly considered.

Probably the most difficult issue for LGB young people is of education and how they are treated in schools. Homophobia in schools can range from verbal abuse to physical assault from other students, while many teachers are unaware or unwilling to deal with issues of homophobia. There is also anecdotal evidence that when LGB young people have been bullied, it is they that have been removed from the classroom or school rather than the bullies: “I was asked to leave my school for my own safety.

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I never got to sit my GCSEs and would have loved to. People who pick on me don't understand what being gay is" (LGB young person in Jennett, 2004, p.8). This serves only to reinforce the false notion that there is something wrong with being lesbian, gay or bisexual, but the issue remains hidden:

"When you look at the department for education and skills they have policies in place, sexual orientation it is there, but it is not being discussed, people don't know about it. The policy and practise is disconnected, and that is what education for all will be trying to help do that. It is around challenging homophobic bullying in schools, as it is quite an easy win. Even if you are anti-gay you can't be pro-bullying"

(Interview, Alan Wardle, 13/01/2005).

Therefore, despite various guidelines, research suggests that more needs to be done to combat the culture of homophobia and heterosexism in schools:

"Absenteeism was found to be associated significantly with three particular forms of harassment, psychological intimidation (being frightened by a person's look or state), being ridiculed publicly by peers, and having personal belongings stolen and suggests that the victimisation absentees faced was, more likely than not, unremitting, taking place both within the school building as well as outside."

(Rivers, 2000, p.16)

The Rivers report also found that there was little evidence to suggest that anti-gay/lesbian abuse had an impact upon academic performance, it was found that substantially more non-absentees successfully complete a course of study at A level than absentees (Rivers, 2000, p.17). Given the overwhelming evidence of the situation of homophobia in schools, while his study in 2000 may not demonstrate it, I argue that such an environment must surely have some negative impact on the academic achievement of LGB students. Yet the policy needed to address these

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issues does not exist, or is not firm enough to ensure the needs of LGB young people are met:

“I think there is a huge raft of social policy that ignores the needs of LGB youth and needs to address it. In terms of education, things would be improved if PHSE became a statutory subject and guidelines about what should be taught in PHSE lessons were more explicit about the fact that it needs to address all members of the school population, including LGB young people. It would give schools that want to address these issues honestly a remit, and the ones that don't encouragement. Many schools have policies around bullying or equality which include lists of groups but these need to be comprehensive. If you mention some and not others [eg. LGB people] these policies won't be seen as relevant to them. It's important that they are also explicit about how a school will tackle homophobic bullying. Staff need support around how to address the issue – simply telling them to do it is not enough. “

(Interview, Mark Jennett, 27/1/2005)

The issue of education illustrates how homophobia and heterosexism, with a lack of policy and action can adversely affect LGB young people. Such bullying will not only effect education attainment, but also the young persons feelings of self-esteem and confidence, and even their mental health: “50% of LGB men and women who had been bullied at school contemplated self-harm or suicide, while 40% had made at least one attempt to self-harm.” (Rivers, in Jennett, 2004, p.8) , while Mullen found that more than 20% had attempted suicide (Mullen in Jennett, 2004, p.8). This illustrates how the different aspects of social exclusion are in fact all closely related. While the lack of awareness of LGB issues and young people has a clear effect, making LGB young people feel let down and marginalized from society:

“LGB young people have been let down time and time again and it is happened even today. The single equalities commission is full of several

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major holes, which will deny some basic, yet essential rights that we really do need. Only one LGB organisation was invited by the government to take part in the main consultation for that... not one young people's organisation was invited so where is our voice? Who is standing up for us?

I think the issue is being recognised by certain decision makers but in a very politicised, self serving, tokenistic way that does little to recognise victims of their past and present failures.”

(Interview, David Henry (President, Queer Youth Alliance) 17/3/2005)

The Social Exclusion Unit and LGB youth

The investigation assumes that issues regarding LGB youth are excluded from decision making within the Government's Social Exclusion Unit (SEU). The SEU was created in 1997 by the Labour Government, and is located in the Office of Deputy Prime Minister (SEU, 2004c). The SEU works with other parts of the Office, including the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit and the Homelessness and Housing Support Directorate (SEU, 2004c). In a speech regarding the introduction, the Prime Minister said:

“That is a new government with a new sense of purpose. A government that believes in giving everyone the chance to succeed and get on in life. It is a government that has a will to win. To those who have lost hope over the last 18 years, I offer them a fresh start. The best thing any government can offer is hope, and that is what I bring today.”

(Blair PM, 1997, p.9)

During the research conducted, it was discovered that the SEU has not published any reports regarding LGB youth and social exclusion. This was then confirmed by primary research with interviews conducted by people who work in this field, and from correspondence with the SEU.

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The publicly available documents from the SEU which were studied were:

- Bridging the Gap (which informed the creation of the Connexions service)
- Review of the Social Exclusion Unit 1999
- Mental Health and Social Exclusion
- Preventing Social Exclusion 2001
- Tackling Social Exclusion 2003
- The impact of government policy on social exclusion among children aged 0-13 and their families
- Rough Sleeping

The only mention of lesbian, gay and bisexual people and social exclusion was in the report *Mental Health and Social Exclusion*, with the following quotes:

“Other people with mental health problems who may face such double discrimination include those with physical or sensory impairments, and gay, lesbian or bisexual people.”

(SEU, 2004b, p.28)

“Sexuality: Many lesbian, gay and bisexual adults with mental health problems feel unable to seek help through traditional services but very few specialist services exist to meet their particular needs.”

(SEU, 2004b, p.46)

The other instances were in relation to PACE in London:

“PACE is now London’s largest provider of mental health and well-being services to the lesbian, gay and bisexual communities. Its range of services includes counselling, groupwork, mental health advocacy, employment, youthwork and family therapy services. All PACE services can be accessed by self-referral.”

(SEU, 2004b, p.53)

While the issue of mental health and sexual orientation is an important issue, and indeed related to social exclusion as a number LGB young people have issues around

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mental health including depression, self-harm, and suicide. These documents do not indicate that the SEU is considering or acting on the needs of LGB young people, or consulting them at any level.

From the primary interviews that were conducted for this study a clear picture emerged, that those working in areas of LGB youth, or youth in general were not aware of the SEU doing any work connected with LGB youth:

“The Social Exclusion Unit probably pays little attention to issues of sexuality and I think that it is probably rather the focus of economic exclusion and education exclusion and that there is a strong case for it having a wider remit which takes account of sexuality more.”

(Interview, Charles Hendry MP, 21/01/2005)

Similarly, the Director of Parliamentary and Public Affairs at Stonewall, was also not aware of the SEU working around LGB youth and social exclusion: “The Social Exclusion Unit have, as far as I know have never done any work on LGB issues at all, seven years on they should be looking at LGB youth” (Interview, Alan Wardle, 13/01/2005). However, the clearest picture of this emerged from the Social Exclusion Unit, in response to a request for an interview for the study: “Unfortunately the SEU has not done any specific research around Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgendered issues” (E-mail Correspondence, Suzanne Jelska on behalf of Claire Tyler, Director of the Social Exclusion Unit, 17/02/2005).

It is therefore possible to relate the lack of research into LGB issues and social exclusion, as shown in the reports published by the SEU, and the comment on behalf of Clare Tyler to theories of non-decision making. By not acknowledging the issue of LGB youth and social exclusion, nondecisions are being made to maintain the status-

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quo. To quote Alan Wardle: “there has defiantly been a lack of recognition of sexual orientation as a valid issue, and particularly in relation to young people.” (Interview, Alan Wardle, 13/01/2005). By not recognizing the issue, it is being kept off the agenda and therefore maintaining existing power structures and decision making in favour of groups whose interests have been co-opted and can express their needs, or whose views are implicitly taken into account when decisions are made. Therefore, if nondecision-making is:

“...a means by which demands for change in the existing allocation of benefits and privileges in the community can be suffocated before they are even voiced; or kept covert; or killed before they gain access to the relevant decision-making area; or, failing all these things, maimed or destroyed in the decision-implementing stage of the policy process”

(Bachrach and Baratz in Lukes, 2004, p.22/23)

Then this is clearly what is occurring with the Social Exclusion Unit in relation to the needs of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth.

In the case of the SEU, non-decision making in the form of the above description is manifested as not recognizing the issue of LGB youth and social exclusion, in turn preventing the issue even being voiced and being included on the agenda. Thus, while not fully realized by Bachrach and Baratz, (as they conceptualize it power only shows up in conflict) this form of nondecision-making is “the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict from arising in the first place” (Lukes, 2004, p.27).

As has already been stated LGB youth are an outsider group in British politics, national LGB youth organizations most notably the Queer Youth Alliance lacks the

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access to government and policy makers which insider groups such as Stonewall have achieved. To quote David Henry:

“I wouldn’t say we have involvement directly but we definitely have some influence. We’ve met with MP’s and local councillors in the past to discuss our issues, face to face and at various events – Margaret Hodge, Stephen Twigg and Charles Hendry for example. I doubt they always listen and act on what we’re saying but it’s good they listen and at least know what the young LGBT perspective is.”

(Interview, David Henry, 17/3/2005)

This provides the background for nondecision making to occur, if they had good insider access it would be more likely that their interests would be implicitly taken into account. Being an insider group would also give access to better information from which to lobby on such areas.

While other marginalized groups have successfully integrated their interests into the SEU, I suspect this is by their interests being taken as on-going concerns by the government and policy makers such as the needs of Black and Ethnic minorities, and therefore subsequent developments based on SEU reports, the same cannot be said for LGB youth. Consequently, LGB youth are marginalized from decision making by both non-decision making, and being an outsider group in British politics.

It is important to note that LGB youth as an outsider group and non-decision making in the SEU is more than purely academic, it has a direct bearing on the lives of LGB young people. The Social Exclusion Unit is partly responsible for driving the policy for creating youth services. The SEU wrote the report *Bridging the Gap* which informed the development of the Connexions service, and was involved in *Every*

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Child Matters the green paper which is the basis of the Children's Trust, which will integrate all young peoples services from 0 to 19 (Children's Trust, 2004). Neither report mentioned the needs of LGB youth:

“*Every Child Matters* is interesting as it is cross government, and will drive the way that all children's services should be set up. It is true that the needs of LGB youth aren't explicitly addressed. Where you have imaginative partnerships who are flagging up the work they are doing with LGB young people, that may well be picked up and noted by OFSTED, but they are not going to be looking for it because they don't have to. It isn't in itself going to drive anybody to do anything that specifically addresses LGB youth – although such work would undoubtedly address the five outcomes so, again, it gives a remit and encouragement to those who are keen to provide that support.”

(Interview, Mark Jennett, 27/1/2005)

Clearly, good policy is required to generate good practice. As voluntary and statutory youth services are being mainstreamed through Connexions and the Children's Trust, it is vital to ensure that already marginalized young people are not further excluded. To avoid this, when mainstreaming minority youth, policy must be created to ensure that their specific needs are recognized and met.

With a large body evidence from Stonewall, the DfES, and independent research, showing the link between being young LGB and at risk of social exclusion, it would not be outside of the SEU's remit to engage with LGB young people, and could make a large difference to the live of LGB young people “The SEU could have an influence over the way in which policy is developed for LGB young people, I am sure there is the potential for that.” (Interview, Lester Parker, 17/2/2005).

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Conclusion

It is clear from the interviews that were carried out that there is nondecision making occurring regarding social policy and LGB youth within the Social Exclusion Unit. As highlighted by the response to a request for an interview by Clare Tyler, referred to earlier, that “Unfortunately the SEU has not done any specific research around Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgendered issues”, (E-mail Correspondence, Suzanne Jelska on behalf of Claire Tyler, Director of the Social Exclusion Unit, 17/02/2005).

It is important to note the historical background to the exclusion of LGB youth, including in law through legislation such as the Sexual Offences Act and Section 28, and through socialized homophobia and heterosexism, which is legitimated by the media. It is these factors with the evidence showing needs and risk of social exclusion of LGB young people, from lower attainment at school to increased risk of self harm and suicide that requires national policy to ensure their needs are met, through the services connected with Social Exclusion such as Connexions, the Children’s Trust and the SEU, but also through mainstream services such as the NHS.

While it has been shown that the SEU has failed to recognize the needs of LGB youth as an issue, I believe it is indicative of how the government and national bodies as a whole fail even to recognise the needs of LGB youth appropriately, let alone address them. While LGB young people themselves and lobby groups clearly have roles to play in raising these issues and ensuring they are on the agenda, it is vital that decision makers recognise the issue of LGB youth and social exclusion, and take LGB young people into account when making decisions.

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