Book review

Exploring LGBT Spaces and Communities; Contrasting Identities, Belongings and Wellbeing

Eleanor Formby
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This book draws on the findings of a study funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council Cross-Council programme 'Connected Communities'. Still running, this programme 'is designed to help us understand the changing nature of communities in their historical and cultural contexts, and the role of communities in sustaining and enhancing our quality of life.' (AHRC, 2020).

The author, Dr. Eleanor Formby, is a Reader in Sociology and Youth Studies at Sheffield Hallam University in the UK. Before joining the University, she was a researcher for a research consultancy firm and prior to that a researcher for a Member of Parliament.

The research on which the book is based sets out to explore the notion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community/ies and explores the implications for health and wellbeing. The premise is that it is essential to start with an understanding of how community is conceptualised by those individuals who are being put into this basket.

First published in 2017, the field work on which this book is based was undertaken in 2012 throughout the UK. Whilst that might seem some time ago, the literature sections have been updated and reflect the position up to 2015. The research on which the book is based importantly draws on the concept of intersectionality and the overlapping aspects of identity. Given the aim of the book to explore the implications of the work for health and wellbeing, it is particularly relevant to read about the policy implications of the research.

Each chapter contains a useful summary of the existing literature, recognising that it is limited to reviewing material drawn from the English-speaking world. The main themes identified are: spatial, cultural, imagined, friendship based, personal and virtual connections, and the varying ways in which communities are constructed by geographers, anthropologists and sociologists.

Chapters 2 to 8 each take a specific theme from the research and contextualise the results in relation to the existing literature. Each chapter ends with a summary, which can be helpful to read before tackling the body of the chapter.

The key message of Chapter 2 is around the principle of "who attributes the label to whom". This holds true for all identity groups.

In Chapter 3, what becomes apparent is that notions of community can overlook issues of diversity and the impact of the intersection of LGBT with age, ethnicity or social class. Perhaps not surprisingly, this research showed that people within the LGBT grouping who identified as bi-sexual and/or trans were more likely to experience discrimination from lesbian or gay people.

Chapter 4 examines why the respondents engage with the idea of community/ies for friendship and activism. Chapter 5, the longest chapter, looks at how respondents conceptualised communities spatially, whether in relation to geographic areas, towns or neighbourhoods, organisations or virtually, and the importance of different spaces for facilitating friendship and support.

The 'scene' as a form of space is explored in Chapter 6, which also examines the complexity of scene spaces and how they can simultaneously exclude or marginalise and yet also be inclusionary in providing what the author terms 'a diversion from heteronormativity'.

Chapter 7 focuses on events, specifically on Pride events and temporary spaces, whilst chapter 8 explores and focuses on what the participants said about imagined spaces, and the virtual links which establish a sense of connection even though people don't meet.

In the final two chapters the author starts to discuss the impact of what she found out about health and wellbeing and draws out some of the implications for policy and practice in these areas. The qualitative nature of the research is justified, although it means that the research is unable to provide all the kinds of empirical evidence sought by policy analysts. Nonetheless, the more general insights will help policy makers and service providers, and others who have read it, to question their own approaches.

An important lesson coming from the book is that policy analysts can benefit from using the term 'community' in relation to shared interests or rights but not as a lumping together or homogenising device. In addition, the notion of the 'LGBT community' is seen to be problematic when it is thought to denote a similarity that many respondents/participants felt did not exist. The acronym LGBT does not capture the diversity within a community mainly defined on the basis of sexual orientation and discrimination. This is particularly the case when the term community is used in the singular. In this instance, the conceptualisation of an LGBT 'us' may be as problematic as a monolithic 'them'. In sum, the term LGBT should not be seen as a homogeneous grouping but rather as a series of loosely connected communities.

Reviewing the research responses, it was surprising to see the number of people who did not want to disclose their gender or sexuality and it will be interesting to see if this changes over time.

The acronym LGBT is still widely used, although nowadays it is more often extended to LGBT+ or LGBTIQ = Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Questioning. On her own web page Eleanor Formby now uses the acronym LGBT+. Nonetheless, the principles identified through the surveys are likely to apply to communities which encompass such a wide grouping, and there are merits in this kind of research being undertaken on a regular basis. The 2012 survey would benefit from being repeated within the next couple of years, to give that sense of changing perspective. Social media has developed apace since the research reported in this book was undertaken; and now the world is in the midst of a global pandemic which is creating all sorts of issues around discrimination against ethnic and other minority groups.

This book makes for an enjoyable read. It is written in a very accessible style, is very well structured and easy to navigate. The sectioning of the literature reviews into sub themes means that it is not overwhelming.

The reviewers from the UK and Canada believe this to be an important book, dealing as it does with the vexed and complex topic of community, which is often used in policy work and service provision in over-simplified ways. The book makes a very useful contribution to the field. For anyone in the UK or elsewhere working and researching in the field of community, it should be essential reading, as it provides a helpful series of introductions to the literature in a number of different sub themes.

From an urban planning perspective, it raises the question: what is the implication for place making and urban design? A key message, which is consistent with work in the gender and age fields, is that how places and spaces are imagined becomes important to how they are experienced. If a space is perceived as being mixed and accepting then people tend to use it, as it reflects their imaginings, and their wellbeing and health are not undermined.

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References

Arts and Humanities Research Council (2020) *Connected Communities: Understanding the changing nature of communities in their contexts and the role of communities in sustaining and enhancing our quality of life.* Research prospectus available at https://ahrc.ukri.org/documents/publications/connected-communities-brochure/