

## **Sexuality, Space, and Intersectionality: The case of lesbian, gay and bisexual equalities initiatives in UK local government**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The notion of intersectionality has been the subject of uncertainty, with debates taking place as to whether intersectionality studies should focus on the interstices between social characteristics, or should encompass approaches that interrogate the structuring effects of specific social forces. This paper contributes to these debates, by exploring intersectionality in relation to lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) equalities initiatives in UK local government. The paper demonstrates the importance of two social categories, sexuality and the spatial, in structuring LGB equalities work. By siting analysis partially at the institutional level, it also reveals the way in which an individualising approach to intersectionality studies, which focuses only on the interstices, is problematic. The paper therefore provides an argument for an intersectionality studies that incorporates category-based analysis, whilst retaining a concern with the interstices between foundational categories.

### **KEY WORDS**

Bisexual/gay/equality/lesbian/local government/sexuality/space/Wales

*'...it is not at all clear whether intersectionality should be limited to understanding individual experiences, to theorizing identity, or whether it should be taken as a property of social structures and cultural discourses'* (Davis, 2009: 68).

The last forty years have seen major transformations in the theorisation of sexuality, with wide-ranging implications for the fields of social theory and policy. Intersectionality theory has emerged during this period, as a means of addressing the complex ways in which social characteristics are routed through each other. The origins and development of intersectionality theory has been well documented by authors such as Brah and Pheonix (2004), Walby (2007), Nash (2008), Shields (2008), and Grabham et al. (2009). Intersectionality theory contributes to our understandings of sexuality in that it can be used to bridge two seemingly disparate approaches to understanding of sexuality: those that take a foundational approach, framing sexuality and gender – or other forces, such as the material – as fundamental to the ways in which individual and social identities are shaped, and those that seek to deconstruct foundational categories (Davis, 2009). Intersectionality studies have focused primarily on gender, class, and race; where included, sexuality is often placed in a marginal position (see Crenshaw, 1997, Shields, 2008, Hurtado and Sinha, 2008). There have been some exceptions, including Beckett's (2004) study of the operation of heterosexuality in the lives of lesbian and disabled women, and Fish's (2008) research on LGBT identities and health care.

The concept of intersectionality has been the subject of confusion (Davis, 2009), and there have been controversies around whether intersectionality should be seen as a crossroads (Crenshaw, 1991), as axis of difference (Yuval-Davis, 2006) or as a dynamic process (Staunaes, 2003, cited in Davis 2009:68). There are tensions within the field of intersectionality studies, relating to broader debates within sexuality studies and feminisms, concerning whether to pursue category-based analysis or to develop analysis along a range of foundational axis (see Walby, 2007, and Weldon, 2008). Concerns have also been raised that intersectionality analysis has led to a problematic focus on the individual, identity, and representation (Conaghan, 2009). As Valentine states, 'the contemporary focus within the social sciences on the fluidity

of identity categories and the complexity of intersections risks losing sight of the fact that within particular spaces there are dominant spatial orderings that produce moments of exclusion for particular groups' (2007: 19).

Following Crenshaw (1991), conventional approaches to intersectionality focus on the place where more than one force of inequality is operating. However, subsequent authors have developed other interpretations, for instance, McCall's (2005) intracategorical, anticategorical and intercategorical forms of intersectional analysis, and Walby's (2007) separation of multiple inequalities into different approaches, which tend to fall into either systems-oriented approaches or postmodernist, deconstructive and identity-focused ones. This paper was suggested by the work of these authors, building in particular on McCall's intercategorical approach, which interrogates relations of inequality between whole groups, and manages the complexity of this by reducing analysis to one or two inter-group relations at a time (McCall 2005: 61).

This paper seeks to explore a key debate concerning the remit of intersectionality theory, between the conventional approaches, and those who argue instead for attention to specific social categories and forces, which may be seen as foundational. In order to explore this debate, the paper examines the operation of two structuring forces within the context of LGB equalities initiatives in UK local government: sexuality and spatiality. The category of sexuality is shown to be important in shaping the lives of LGB people and the work of the local authorities which interface with them. The category of the spatial was selected because empirical findings indicate that the spatial dimension is key to the structuring of sexualities at a local level; the level at which local authorities interface with the population. The paper draws on scholarship in the field of geographies of sexuality<sup>i</sup>, the trajectory of which is well rehearsed by authors such as Collins (2004), and Brown et al. (2007). The focus of the paper is narrowed in that it looks at LGB equalities, and transgender (T) is not included<sup>ii</sup>; transgender is discussed elsewhere (see for example Monro 2005, Hines, 2007, and Monro and Richardson 2010).

The paper begins by providing an overview of the literature and the contemporary situation regarding local government sexualities equalities initiatives, noting the major recent policy changes, and then summarising the types of work that are taking place and the ways in which local authorities do – or do not – deal with intersectionality. In doing so it develops understanding of sexuality as a foundational category, and addresses the intersectional nature of sexuality, within the context of UK local government. The paper then brings in a second category via an exploration of spatiality, focusing on the lives of the LGB people whom local authorities represent. I conclude by arguing for an intersectionality studies that interrogates social categories as well as their interstices, as illustrated by my use of data regarding LGB equalities work in local government, where spatiality forms one aspect of the complex and situated structuring of sexualities.

The empirical content of the paper is based on anonymised findings from a large ESRC funded study of local authorities in Northern Ireland, Wales, and Northern and Southern England<sup>iii</sup>. We utilised a participative action research approach (McNiff, 1998), specifically Action Learning Sets, which met four times in each region (a total of 16 meetings, with members representing different local authorities, community organisations and partner agencies from across the regions). We also tracked the development and implementation of sexualities equalities policies in four local authorities which were purposively sampled to represent authorities of different types, levels of performance, political colours, activity concerning equalities, and levels of deprivation. We did fieldwork with strategic level and frontline local authority

officers (focusing on 2 different service areas for each authority), and their partners in statutory sector and voluntary/community sector agencies (total 37 interviews). A further strand of the methodology consisted of interviews with key national stakeholders across the three countries (15 interviews), and a final strand comprised of 5 interviews with local authority Members (councillors). This paper is based on data from North East England and Wales, including 2 Action Learning Sets, 18 interviews in case study localities, and interviews with 10 national stakeholder representatives<sup>iv</sup>. The data is used primarily as evidence for the argument that category-based, as well as intersectional, approaches to intersectional analysis are necessary.

### **Sexualities Equalities in Local Government**

There is a small but growing body of work concerning sexuality and equality and diversity initiatives in local government. A number of writers, including Carabine (1995, 1996a,b), Cooper (1994, 1997), and Tobin (1990), focus on developments in the 1980s and early 1990s. This era saw the development of lesbian and gay equalities work amongst some left wing local authorities, and a subsequent right wing backlash which led to the introduction of s 28<sup>v</sup>, and the collapse of most sexuality equalities initiatives. The next phase of sexuality equalities work, which was brought in by a politically more heterogeneous tranche of local authorities in the 1990s, was quite different in many ways, with a shift taking place towards programmes addressing homophobic violence, and a decline in overtly political affirmations of gay identity, as well as some areas of work such as AIDS initiatives (Cooper and Monro 2004, see also Carabine and Monro 2004 and Monro 2006, 2007). The most recent body of work is just emerging (Monro and Richardson 2010, and Richardson and Monro forthcoming).

Fieldwork was conducted at a time when the field of UK lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) equalities work was undergoing a period of rapid change, fuelled by the introduction of a range of new legislation, including the Adoption and Children Act 2002, the Civil Partnerships Act 2004, and the Equality Regulations (Sexual Orientation) 2007<sup>vi</sup>. A tranche of policy directives and implementation mechanisms were being developed in tandem with statutory drivers. LGB equalities initiatives were further affected by the recently introduced Commission for Equality and Human Rights, as well as the Single Equality Bill<sup>vii</sup>.

Overall, the research findings indicated that LGB equalities work has become a normalised aspect of the local authority service provision remit to a degree, alongside other strands of equalities (race, gender, disability, age, faith, and Welsh language in Wales), partially as a result of the legislative drivers. However, although LGB equalities work is established in some authorities, provision is patchy, and sexualities equalities initiatives remain marginalised in relation to other equalities strands. The larger metropolitan, unitary and borough councils are generally more active concerning LGB equalities work, but some of the rural councils are also proactive in this field.

The research findings showed that there are debates amongst local authority actors about the extent to which LGB service users have sexualities-specific interests or needs, as opposed to interests/needs that are shared with the rest of the population. This issue is of importance to discussions about intersectionality, in explorations of the extent to which sexuality is examined as a category within the local authority context. Areas of local authority provision that are of key importance to LGB people revolve around hate crime and bullying, especially homophobic and biphobic bullying of children and staff in schools. Health and social care are areas of concern, including for example awareness of the needs of older people in same-sex

relationships. Housing is another key area, including same-sex partner provision, and provision for people made homeless due to homophobic abuse. Culture and leisure are also of importance, including the licensing of lesbian and gay venues, support for Pride and Mardi Gras events, and library provision.

An intersectional analysis of sexualities equalities initiatives in local government will be concerned with the discursive and cultural construction of LGB issues in local government. Within local authorities and their statutory partners, sexualities equalities work is associated with the private sphere, and with a lack of visibility as compared to strands associated with people who may have more physically evident characteristics. The research findings indicate that sexualities equalities work is particularly subject to affective issues such as nervousness and embarrassment, as well as normative judgements around notions of choice, legitimacy, and worthiness, so that for instance disability related issues are likely to be seen as more worthy of support than sexualities equalities issues. The supposedly private nature of sexuality issues has a number of impacts in the local authority context, including ongoing difficulties with carrying out monitoring concerning employee and service user sexual orientation.

Although the research demonstrated that there are specific attributes associated with local authority LGB equality initiatives, it also revealed the wide variation across local authorities regarding the discursive formation of sexualities equalities work, as well as the ways in which such formations played out in terms of policy and practice. Local authorities differed considerably in terms of institutional norms concerning sexualities equalities; embedded pro-equalities cultures were present in some, whereas others had cultures of homophobic banter and active resistance to sexualities equalities work. Overt homophobia was evidenced in some cases, for instance a female equalities officer in a Welsh authority described how 'I have had red lines through reports, where I've used the terminology 'lesbian, gay, bisexual'; she was told to replace this with the term 'different communities'. Homophobia impacted directly in service provision in certain ways, for instance many local authorities place firewalls on their computers, preventing members of the public (and in some cases, officers) from accessing information regarding LGB services and support groups, as shown by the following quote, provided by a female Welsh bisexual community representative:

*'A lot of library services block searches that include the words, lesbian, gay or bisexual, and it's a blanket block because it assumes that they're all spam or porn. So people who are generally looking for support or advice or help can't actually find those services if they don't have their computer at home, and that quite often is these people who need it most, because they're likely to be the most economically deprived'*

The particular positioning of local authorities, as accountable to their local electorate, also interfaces with LGB concerns in a distinct way as compared to other statutory bodies. Councillors are highly sensitive to pressure from their local communities, who can be actively homophobic and who can exercise homophobic as well as pro-equality views via the mechanisms of local democracy.

To summarise, the field of local authority sexualities equalities work has emerged alongside, although often marginal to, other areas of equalities work such as race and disability. Whilst it has become normalised to a degree, it is patchy across different authorities, with evidence of homophobic cultures within some local authorities, as well as proactive LGB equalities work. Sexuality can be considered to be an important structuring force within the context of local government service provision, because the LGB population that local authorities serve have some sexuality-specific

interests and needs, sexuality equalities is constructed as having particular affective and political sensitivities, and homophobia may be institutionalised in some local authorities in ways that other forms of prejudice are not.

### **Local government and intersectionality regarding sexualities equalities**

In the 1980s, a small number of local authorities began doing lesbian and gay equalities work, taking what could be seen as an intersectional approach to equalities (see Cooper 1994) although there were significant omissions regarding bisexuality. Historically, the term 'intersectionality' was not generally used by local authorities, and this absence has continued. The notion of 'intersectionality' does however have currency amongst national players, one of whom said that:

*'I don't think they [the local authorities] have reached the stage where they are talking about intersectionality much, and I think the strands-specific approach is pretty, still pretty strong - or they jump right up to generic - local authorities that have been doing work in this area for a long time are maybe doing well, but there is little discussion of the particular issues faced by, for example, someone who is gay and Sikh. We use the term multiple disadvantage, not intersectionality'* (national stakeholder)

Despite the absence of intersectionality rhetoric in local government, the research findings evidenced a substantial shift towards an intersectional approach to equalities work, with the development of integrated frameworks for conducting work on the different equalities strands in tandem having been introduced over the last few years<sup>viii</sup>, as well as the establishment of the Commission for Equalities and Human Rights, which takes an intersectional approach at a national level. These integrated frameworks, which deal with the different equalities strands in conjunction, are being used to manage equalities work more strategically, as well as to make it more politically palatable. For instance:

*'The more innovative public sector organisations have worked out that it is easier to take a multi-strand to equality than a single-strand approach – it is quicker and politically it plays well, it allows people to be more imaginative in thinking about the links – for example local Pride festivals which incorporate family friendly initiatives'* (national stakeholder)

The implementation of intersectional approaches to sexualities equalities work in local government is achieved via impact assessments, as well as briefings to service directorates, and professional trainings associated with specific service areas (such as social work). Impact assessments involve examining service plans and policies to ensure that the needs and interests of marginalised social groups are taken into account, for instance a male officer in Wales said that:

*'there's nearly 300 impact assessments there... we look at the seven strands of equality<sup>ix</sup> in an impact assessment so part of the, one question on the impact assessment is "how have the needs of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities of [town] been considered and embedded into the policy?"'*

Front line staff work to the service plans and policies, routinely taking approaches that can be seen as intersectional; in other words, they attempt to be aware of the different facets of identity that service users have. The research provided evidence that intersectional approaches to training are also being taken, for example one officer in Wales described the way in which she carries out a generic equalities training with staff in which there is discussion about the social construction of identity, with

attention being paid to sexual diversity, and that ‘we try and get people to understand that we don’t just have one label, we are a cocktail of many different things’.

The development of integrated approaches to service provision is not a panacea in which LGB people will have their interests respected and recognised alongside those of a host of other service users. There are indications from the research findings that integrated approaches may lose some of the more marginalised interests. The focus of service provision is necessarily on those perceived to be in most need, and whilst this will include some sections of the LGB population, it does not always address the interests of others. The following quote illustrates the ways that intersections between aging, ability, ill health and sexuality are dealt with by local authority actors, as well as the way in which such approaches can inadvertently construct notions of a universal, possibly heterosexual, citizen, masking the specificities of LGB identities:

*‘we don’t provide services because people are lesbian or gay or bisexual because there is a criteria under the government’s social care or community care designations, what we do is we provide all services...all of it is open to people who meet the criteria, if they are LGB and elderly and frail, or if they’re LGB and disabled, if they are LGB and learning difficulties then they will get those services’* (male local authority officer, North East)

Alternative approaches to service provision combine targeted and integrated approaches, for instance a local authority officer described the way in which a young person who has been made homeless because they came out to their parents might not then feel comfortable talking to an apparently heterosexual housing worker about being gay, necessitating some LGB-specific provision.

The development of integrated equalities work in local authorities is related to the debates in intersectionality studies about category-based versus interstice-related approaches, demonstrating the way in which local authorities are attempting to deal with multiple social characteristics, as well as potential difficulties with intersectional approaches. Developments concerning the equalities strands also foreground the difficulties associated with applying intersectionality to group levels, both in conceptual terms and in service planning and delivery terms. Analysis of the interstices is relatively easy at the level of individual service user, but harder at the group level, where people have diverse intersectional identities. Grouping people risks erasing difference, but is nevertheless necessary if policies are to be formulated and implemented. The concerns outlined in the literature, about the potentially individualising nature of intersectionality theory (Grabham et al., 2009), are arguably justified unless group, category-based approaches are also taken; partially foundational approaches are the only way in which analysis at the institutional level can be achieved.

### **The Spatial**

The role of space in structuring LGB people’s lives, and thus in shaping the policies and practices of the local authorities that service them, was strongly evident. The findings substantiated the assertion that ‘sexuality – its regulation, norms, institutions, pleasures and desires – cannot be understood without understanding the spaces through which it is constituted, practised, and lived’ (Brown et al., 2007: 4). The importance of space is reflected in the literature, with respect to for instance working class lesbians and spatiality; Taylor (2007), for example, found that a combination of low income and spatial barriers formed major impediments to some working class lesbians accessing lesbian-friendly spaces.

This section of the paper considers the spatial structuring of LGB equalities work in local government along two related axis; urban/rural, and spatially organised communities and cultures. The experiences of LGB people living in particular localities are key to understanding local government initiatives, given the commitment to community engagement that is part of local government modernisation, following the Local Government Act (2000). As I have noted above, the paper refers to developments in geographies of sexuality, including research concerning rural and small town sexualities (Bell and Valentine (1995), and Little, (2003)). The paper also speaks to the ‘undesirable others’ discussed by Casey (2007) in his examination of an urban commercial gay scene; Casey found that processes of exclusion of lesbians and gay men who are older, disabled, female, poor, or supposedly unattractive operate to construct the boundaries of urban gay spaces. Local authorities, in their focus on service provision, include such ‘unwanted’ people squarely within their remit, whilst also having responsibility for planning and licensing for the commercial gay areas within their localities.

Findings across the North East of England, and Wales showed a tendency for LGB communities, and local authority LGB equalities initiatives, to be concentrated in urban areas, with further differentiations being apparent across various cities. For instance the North Eastern Action Learning Set raised the issue of Newcastle having an active gay scene, in comparison to Durham, with a greater awareness concerning LGB issues in Newcastle, and a trend for gay people – as well as others – to go into Newcastle from the surrounding areas for socialising. This section of the paper focuses on findings from Wales, as a means of addressing the relative absence of scholarship on rural areas and small towns, however, it is important to note, firstly, that Welsh cities have active LGB scenes, and, secondly, that the interviews with national stakeholders indicated that some of the issues concerning rural and small town cultures are mirrored in England.

The Welsh case study and Action Learning Set indicated that the geographical dispersal of the Welsh population and attendant difficulties with communication and travel emerged as a major – in some instances a predominant – factor in the way that LGB people’s lives are structured and the local authority work that may (or may not) be taking place concerning LGB equalities within Wales. A number of Welsh contributors from the case study (both officers and community members) talked about the difficulties that LGB people have accessing LGB social spaces, due to geographical barriers. The spatial characteristics of the country also pose a barrier to community organisation, with the lesbian Welsh LGB community organisation representative discussing the obstacles to conducting community consultations in mid Wales: ‘it is very difficult because mid Wales is very spread out, and has a lot of mountains in between major towns’.

The way in which social forces are routed through each other to forge marginalised subject positions was very apparent when examining findings concerning LGB people in Wales. Many of the contributors to the research discussed the ways in which Welsh LGB people are socially excluded when they live in rural areas *and* are young, older, cannot drive or do not have access to private transport, or access to the internet, or are ill or disabled. For instance a lesbian officer in the case study local authority described the way in which a rural young man came out to his parents, who stopped him going to the gay venue in his local town, so that ‘his support network was cut off completely, em, then he will end up with mental health issues...everybody knew about it but nobody could do anything about it’. Discussion of illness and disability is beyond the remit of this paper, but the following quote, provided by a gay Welsh man, provides an indication of the ways in which illness and disability, as well as other factors, may impact on Welsh LBG people’s lives:

*'You have those who are probably on Sickness Benefit, live in a flat, so economically they're not well off, you know they can't afford, they don't have transport, so they may feel very lonely and isolated and excluded because they don't have the resources by which to access these places, and then you have some that, em, like me, em, are not particularly scene-orientated, so I don't particularly like going to places like Manchester and there are a lot of people like me.'*

This contributor's assertion that there are a lot of LGB people who are not oriented towards the urban gay scene was echoed by a lesbian housing worker based in Wales, who talked about the way in which one of her lesbian clients had moved to Manchester, had 'hated it' and had returned. Such findings lead into discussions concerning the role of community and space, which is the subject of the next section.

### **Community and prejudice**

The research findings indicated the importance of the social and cultural patterning of different spaces in shaping LGB people's lives. Prejudice against LGB people appeared to be heightened in rural or small town localities, with a number of both Welsh and English contributors making comparisons between these localities and large cities, where there is more diversity generally; this finding reflects the work of queer geographers such as Bell and Valentine (1995) and Binnie (2004). There was a considerable amount of evidence for overt homophobia in rural and small town Wales, including hate crime, for instance a community member said that the first stall ever dealing with LGB issues at a national Welsh cultural event was smeared with excrement. The Welsh Action Learning Set, which included representatives from a range of southern and mid Welsh authorities as well as two LGB community representatives, raised issues concerning the importance of local communities, and the church, in rural and small town settings in Wales, and the ways in which the heterosexism constrains the lives of LGB people who live in these localities. For instance, there was discussion of the way in which indigenous homophobia means that bisexual people feel pressurised to stay closeted and to get into heterosexual relationships<sup>x</sup>. A number of contributors to the research discussed the way in which the geographical dispersal of people, into small, close-knit communities, entails a lack of understanding of diversity. For instance:

*'...it can be a row of just a few old mining cottages, and you, it's difficult to be different, to be the one, it's difficult to be black in those areas, it's difficult to be disabled and those are considered to be things that you can't help, you know, but, you know, to be gay, I mean, "just be considered as being weird and you're outside the norm of what we can deal with here, therefore you need to go", if you're being shunned you're not being shunned as an individual, it will have an impact on your parents, your family and others (Welsh female local authority officer)*

These findings complement work by authors such as Moran and Skeggs (2004) on sexuality and violence, as well as work by Valentine, who, in her case study of a deaf lesbian's life, discusses the way that dominant groups construct and occupy specific spaces (home, work, the community) such that 'they develop hegemonic cultures through which power operates to systematically define ways of being, and to mark out those who are in place and out of place' (2007: 18). It appears that in rural and small town Wales, heteronormative cultures predominate, strongly shaping and constraining sexual identities in intersection with spatial forces. Such power dynamics were apparent in the small town setting in which the case study authority was located. This town was described by both community members and local authority officers as having a 'laddish', macho, and homophobic culture. A male local authority officer described the way in which:

Contributor: *'To be out late at night, on a Saturday night, and to be identified as being gay, or to be suspected of being gay, because it's a very powerful insult here'*

Interviewer: 'Yeah'.

Contributor: *'And it's not just a throwaway comment, people will get into a fight.'*

One of the gay male community members reported instances of violence against gay men, and said that '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...they've got prejudices on both sides really'. The young gay male contributors initially stated that there was little homophobia in their locality, but then described high levels of homophobic bullying in their (Catholic) school, including death threats. Prejudice was structured in particular ways in this locality, with homophobic violence and displays of machismo serving to performatively shape heteronormative space (see Brown et al., 2007). Perceived effeminacy and gay masculinities were utilised in marginalising ways, with gender as well as sexuality playing a central role in two ways: gay men appeared more visible and active in their communities than lesbians or bisexual women, and violence against men who transgressed sexual and gender norms seemed especially virulent.

Although there is clear evidence for the spatial structuring of prejudice in rural and small town Wales, and for the operation of heterosexist regulatory and normative forces, it is important to point out that there were also some counter-indications. As one national stakeholder said: 'you cannot assume that people will be narrow-minded, some are welcoming to everyone'. The findings indicated that there is a paradox concerning communities that are perhaps rather parochial, but are also experienced as a source of support for those (LGB) people who are part of them; a number of contributors discussed the inclusion of lesbian and gay people where these are local, although this inclusion appeared dependent on keeping their sexual identity fairly closeted.

Overall, findings demonstrated the importance of the spatial in shaping the cultures of the communities which local authorities represent. Geographical factors played a key role in shaping the lives of LGB people, and spatially-structured intersectional marginalisation was noticeable with respect to the LGB population. Cultures of homophobia and heterosexism were evident in the Welsh rural and small town locations where the research was conducted, but there were also some indications that spatially defined (primarily heterosexual) communities could be supportive of local LGB people.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has sought to clarify the remit of intersectionality studies, in particular the debate concerning whether intersectionality studies should focus on the interstices between social categories, or rather focus on interrogating particular social categories. It has done this by demonstrating that attention to the category of space is important in understanding the structuring of sexualities, within the context of UK local authority sexualities equalities work.

The paper sites its examination of the debate concerning intersections and categories partially at the institutional level, via its exploration of local authority equalities initiatives. Whilst the notion of intersectionality is absent from local authority discourse, strategies have been developed within the realm of sexualities equalities

policy making and practice in order to deal with the tensions between category-specific and interstice-oriented approaches to equalities. The strategies that are employed include equality policies that address different equality strands in tandem, recognising what is often termed ‘multiple disadvantage’, the use of impact assessments that assess intersectional disadvantages amongst service users, and trainings that encourage service providers to analyse identity complexity. These strategies enable large institutions to address complexity at the group level, rather than at the level of the individual subject sited at the intersection of particular social forces. However, it seems that local authorities tend to focus on individual equality strands, and that addressing multiple or intersecting strands takes work to a level of complexity which can be challenging, especially given the resource constraints that authorities face. This tendency illustrates the difficulties associated with intersectionality in the arena of local government policy making and practice. Analysis of the interstices between social characteristics is relatively straightforward at the level of the individual, but once group level conceptualisation is undertaken a category-based approach is required to a degree.

The importance of specific categories in structuring social life does not render a focus on the interstices between them (a focus that has more usually been associated with intersectionality theory) defunct. As Weldon (2008) states, it is possible to think of social characteristics<sup>xi</sup> as having some independent effects and some intersectional effects. In this paper I argue for an approach that combines interstice-based analysis with an examination of particular social categories, in this case sexuality and the spatial. Attention to specific categories, which can in some cases be seen as foundational, is important both as a means of achieving depth of analysis and as a way of developing intersectionality theory into something that can be applied at the institutional level. Attention to the interstices is also crucial, because it enables sensitivity to other social characteristics, such as the material, ability, faith and age. In this paper, the marginalising effects of poverty, disability, and youth were pronounced when viewed in intersection with LGB identities and spatial barriers. The paper concludes that a focus purely on foundational analysis, without concurrent sensitivity to the ways in which social forces are routed through each other, is insufficient in understanding the social construction of sexuality.

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<sup>i</sup> As well as other fields.

<sup>ii</sup> Except of course where trans people are also LGB.

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<sup>iv</sup> The data that was available at the time of writing.

<sup>v</sup> Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1998, since repealed), determined that Local Authorities could not intentionally promote, via published material or teaching, same-sex relationships or homosexuality as a 'pretended family relationship'.

<sup>vi</sup> The Adoption and Children Act (2002) allows unmarried couples (including same-sex couples) to apply for joint adoption of children. The Gender Recognition Act (2004) provides improved levels of legal recognition for transsexual people. The Civil Partnerships Act (2004) provides a number of rights for registered same-sex couples. The Equality Regulations (Sexual Orientation) 2007 bans employment discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation (see [www.stonewall.org.uk](http://www.stonewall.org.uk), [www.pfc.org.uk](http://www.pfc.org.uk), both accessed 18.08.2009).

<sup>vii</sup> The Equality Bill was before Parliament at the time of writing but was passed in April 2010.

<sup>viii</sup> These are the Equality Standard in England, which has been replaced by the Equality Framework for Local Government (I&DeA 2009), and the Equalities Improvement Framework for Wales, see <http://www.wlga.gov.uk/english/equality-improvement-framework-for-wales/> (accessed 10.08.2009).

<sup>ix</sup> Race, gender, disability, age, faith, sexual orientation and Welsh language.

<sup>x</sup> Although bisexuals are also more easily able to strategically assimilate and to pass as heterosexual than lesbians and gay men.

<sup>xi</sup> Weldon focuses on gender, race and class.