The status of diverse sexualities and genders in community psychology research and practice: Reflections from the Trans-Tasman context

Bróna Nic Giolla Easpaig
Macquarie University
Rachael Fox
Charles Sturt University
Sarah Bowman
Charles Sturt University

This paper offers analysis and reflection upon the status of working with LGBT communities in community psychology research and practice in the Trans-Tasman region. While the unique potential for community psychological principles and practices to promote wellbeing for this community have been discussed in US and UK community psychology contexts, we are only beginning this dialogue in the Trans-Tasman. This is different of course to proposing that impressive work is not already being undertaken, and here we draw upon three project examples to showcase just such work, including: research considering the provision of online mental health services for LGBT young people in regional, rural and remote communities; research that examined trans and gender diverse issues in primary education in South Australia; and a project committed to helping to build Rainbow communities free of sexual and partner violence in Aotearoa New Zealand. While not all of these projects may identify themselves as community psychology, each of these projects offers learnings for researchers and practitioners alike and facilitates insight into the connections between community psychology frameworks and LGBT knowledge and practice. The implications of this analysis are reflected upon with a view to promoting progressive and generative collaborative practice.

In June 2003 Gary Harper and Margaret Schneider edited a collection of papers that showcased community psychological research undertaken with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender communities (LGBT) for the American Journal of Community Psychology, constituting the first collection of its kind to be included within any of the major community psychology journals of the time. The special issue editors drew upon an analysis of the content of leading journals in the field from preceding years to illustrate the dearth of published work concerning LGBT communities, and they furthermore argued that existing literature tended to be male-centric and largely failed to engage with the strengths of LGBT populations. They concluded that “the relative inattention to LGBT issues within Community Psychology is a loss to the discipline” (Harper & Schneider, 2003, p.245).

This was not a novel argument, as Harper and Schneider (2003) acknowledged, and this shortcoming was also not limited to the field of community psychology. As a discipline and practice psychology remains an ongoing ‘work in progress’ in attempting to work in socially just and health-enabling ways for the benefit of LGBT communities (Ansara, 2010; Ansara & Hegarty, 2012; Hegarty & Massey, 2006; Kitzinger, 1987, 1996; Semp, 2011). However, as has been persuasively argued elsewhere, community psychology in its principles and application is uniquely positioned to work towards these ends (D’Augelli, 2006).

Now, almost fifteen years later, following the 13th Trans-Tasman Community Psychology Conference which brought together community activists, researchers and practitioners from across the Tasman (i.e. Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand)
and for that matter, the globe, there emerges an opportunity to reflect upon the status of diverse sexualities and genders in our shared field. This is in part prompted by participation in the conference, where discussion of concerns for LGBT communities was not confined to presentations that looked explicitly at work with these communities, but where there was a more embedded awareness of the plurality of gender and sexuality identities and practices threaded throughout discussions of a range of issues. This came to our attention in Professor Nicola Gavey’s keynote address concerning contemporary constructions of pornography, where the point was made that young people who do not identify as heterosexual may engage with pornography in differing ways. This opens up space for thinking about the implications of the ways through which versions of heterosexuality are constructed and normatively constituted as well as a lack of information and discussion about non-heteronormative sexual practices for young people. Further engagement with these issues became apparent in topics which do not tend to be associated with sexuality and gender. For example, in Marlee Bower’s presentation concerning homelessness and loneliness, consideration was made of the dimension of gender diversity in working with people who have experienced some form of homelessness, prompting the listener to consider the intersections of identity in social issues.

When discussing LGBT communities, it is important that we acknowledge how the language relating to the term “LGBT” has changed and the relevance that this has for community psychology. LGBT, along with its associated variations, is no longer just an acronym used to describe discrete groups of individuals; instead, in the current context we use it to refer to the domains which engage with diverse bodies, genders, sexualities and sex. While this shorthand offers a representation of groups who may experience the ill-effects of living in heteronormative and cisgendered societies, it is important to acknowledge that its usage risks the conflation of identities and experiences that are qualitatively different, as well as the erasure of identities that fall outside of the acronym. With these limitations in mind we will try to refer to specific communities where appropriate.

We begin by providing an overview of the contemporary conditions for working with LGBT communities in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, to foreground the presentation of three pieces of community research and practice that shared the aims of promoting the wellbeing of LGBT communities and groups within the Trans-Tasman region. Each of these projects speaks to a differing element of the deep connections between community psychology frameworks and LGBT community knowledge and practice, and through careful analysis we are able to move beyond identifying points of mutual commonality and towards engaging with the generative potential of this work. We conclude with a reflection upon the status of LGBT work in community psychology in the Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand contexts.

**Conditions for working with LGBT communities in the Trans-Tasman**

In the global North there have been campaigns and mounting political pressure concerning issues such as marriage equality with some success, reflected in the Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand contexts by some incremental (but limited) wider societal acceptance of diverse sexual identities. This has coincided with, to an extent, a broadening of understanding of gender identity, and in some cases legislative changes including protections and the de-pathologisation of certain sexual identities (although the pathologisation of some gender identities continues; see Irwin, 2007; McNair, Hegarty & Taft, 2015). Such shifts are also reflected in the ethos and public positions taken in professional health bodies including the Australian Psychological Society (APS) and the New Zealand Psychological Society (NZPsS). See for example, the statements of support made by the NZPsS and APS for the legislative changes to enable marriage equality for same
sex couples in the respective countries (APS, 2017a; NZPsS, 2012). Additionally there has been the establishment of a dedicated “Psychology of Diverse Bodies, Genders, and Sexualities Interest Group” within the APS (originally formed in 1996 as the Gay and Lesbian Issues in Psychology Interest Group) (APS, 2017b).

Progress made within psychology more broadly has required a critique and addressing of psychological practices which contribute to the marginalisation and derogation of LGBT communities, which include diagnosis, practices (e.g. APS Position Statement on the use of psychological practices that attempt to change sexual orientation; APS, 2015), as well as a fundamental rethinking of the ways in which we theorise and conceptualise, through our methods and the implications of this for LGBT communities (Nic Giolla Easpaig & Fox, 2017; Treharne & Beres, 2016). This has borne a generation of new ideas and theories (e.g. Riggs, Ansara & Treharne, 2015), active partnerships with communities and establishing presence in the discipline through visibility and voice (e.g., production of “Out in psychology: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer perspectives” textbook for psychology undergraduates edited by Clarke & Peel, 2007). This work is ongoing.

From the outset with its commitment to social justice, focus upon community building and effort to tackle issues which marginalise and disadvantage groups, community psychology is uniquely positioned to contribute to these efforts. While there has been explicit discussion of how community psychology can work with LGBT communities in the US and UK (D’Augelli, 2006; Harper & Schneider, 2003; Johnson, 2007; Johnson & Martínez Guzmán, 2013), there has been relatively little literature discussion in the Trans-Tasman region, which is different, of course, to saying there is relatively little work being undertaken.

Research and Action with/in LGBT Communities

In this section three recent projects undertaken across the Trans-Tasman are presented. The projects differ in terms of originating in academic institutional settings and/or community organisations, and largely do not refer to themselves as informed by community psychology. Nevertheless, each project works with LGBT communities and offers rich learnings through the principles and practices applied. The intention is to highlight the ways in which work with communities is being undertaken, and to note the community psychology concepts and tools active in the programs that will likely already be familiar to us. Finally, we aim to attend to considerations emerging from the specific needs of these communities that have implications for community psychology more broadly.

Project 1. Virtual healthcare: LGBT young adult perceptions of internet based mental health services in regional, rural and remote Australia (Bowman, 2016)

In the first research project to be discussed, Sarah Bowman (2016) attempted to better understand the role of online mental health services in supporting LGBT young people who reside in regional, rural and remote (RRR) areas of Australia. LGBT young adults are estimated to be three to five times more exposed to mental health risks than other young adults, which is compounded in regional areas by a lack of specialist mental health resources, long waiting times, problems with transport and a culture of self-reliance (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015; Farmer, Blosnich, Jabson, & Matthews 2015; Griffiths & Christensen, 2007; Leonard et al., 2012). In addition RRR areas are likely to contain a strong presence of prevailing heteronormative assumptions (Quinn, 2003) as well as beliefs that “homosexuality is immoral”, relative to metropolitan areas (Flood & Hamilton, 2008, p.26). The substantive increase in recent years in the number of online mental health services, and the type of service they offer, has potential benefits for this community, including the ability to reach those who cannot receive services, and to provide increased privacy, anonymity and easy access to a wide variety of information.

However, caution is advised as there are a number of critical issues to negotiate, such as: a lack of underlying coordination and coherence in the roll-out of online services; differences in the quality, consistency and purpose of services; and concerns about underlying cost saving rationales (Burns, Liacos, & Green, 2014; Hayes, Maughan, & Grant-Peterkin, 2016; Meurk, Leung, Hall, Head, & Whiteford, 2016). In addition, access to online services is not straightforward, and young people living in RRR Australia experience a lack of information, different preferences or needs in relation to internet based services, and financial barriers (Griffiths & Christensen, 2007; Handley et al., 2014). Amidst the shifting landscape of service provision, there has been little attention to date to understanding the needs of LGBT young people in these areas, and few opportunities for them to meaningfully contribute to improving services.

In attempting to better understand the role of online mental health services in supporting LGBT young people in RRR areas of Australia, this study used a constructivist design to interview nine LGBT young adults (average age of 20 years) in RRR areas and six providers of relevant online mental health services (including “mainstream” as well as LGBT community-specific organisations). With the young adults, interviews were exploratory but focussed on their experiences of online mental health services, their reflections on the needs of RRR LGBT young adults, and future directions for online services. Interviews with the service providers (including senior management and research advisers) focussed on their experiences of providing services to RRR LGBT young adults. Analysis of the accounts of all those interviewed suggested difficulties are experienced in finding the right care, with a variation in views about how online services should be delivered, in addition to a potentially critical role for parents/guardians to play in facilitating access to services for this community. These insights, as well as the process through which they were reached, offer two important points for consideration from our perspective.

First, the investigation of online mental health services required a contextualised understanding that could engage with the ways in which different groups and communities are impacted in diverse ways, which might be especially beneficial where groups are marginalised. Conceptualisation of the research began with a recognition that the experiences of those who develop and deliver services and those who rely upon these services are shaped differently, and thus a constructivist perspective that allowed for contextualised, subjective exploration, was used to frame this inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Indeed, many of the service providers noted that there was often a limited understanding of the needs of this community. As one mainstream service provider put it:

We don’t have a lot of information about the use of our services by LGBTI people and I guess we have a sense that perhaps our services are useful and perhaps at other times … are too mainstream, too generalist, to be considered to be safe and helpful.

Subsequently, young people raised additional important issues that were of particular concern for them. For example, despite the familiarity that young people have with the internet, a number of participants showed a preference for face to face services for more complex mental health needs. Many were worried that access to already scarce face-to-face resources will be further reduced by the introduction of more sophisticated online interventions; such concerns were underlined by one young person in saying “personal interaction which is something you need [for] mental health [support]”. Eliciting and engaging with such insights are crucial to any understanding of the implications of services for these communities.
Second, the inclusion of groups who are often excluded and face barriers to participation is a central concern for community psychologists. Core to community psychology is a deep level of commitment to the inclusion of community expertise and experience in guiding our work, and while there are any number of constraints and barriers we face, we continue to strive to work with communities in ways which enable authentic and meaningful participation. Such collaboration brings knowledge and experience which cannot be offered by external practitioners and researchers, and as a result enhances the relevance and potential benefits for communities (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Radermacher & Sonn, 2007). The inclusion of LGBT young people who reside in RRR areas in this process was very challenging and indeed many of the factors that contribute to potential experiences of disadvantage (such as concealment and an absence of visible LGBT communities and safe places) may have also produced barriers to participation. Indeed the principal investigator (third author) drove extensively over RRR Australia to connect with the participating young people. In this sense, through the research process, the work here gives ‘voice’ to some of the important concerns and insights where services are being provided and developed. As summarised by Rosenstreich (2010) when highlighting the importance of the inclusion of the LGBT community in the development of health policy and service planning: ‘The maxim “not about us without us” is not only appropriate as a principle of social participation and inclusion, but also sensible in order to ensure that work’ (p.14). As one service provider commented; “further collaboration with young people is needed in the development and implementation of these services”. Here, community psychology, in its principles and practice, has a range of tools useful to developing partnerships with groups who all too often are not for a range of reasons brought into the process.

Project 2. Exploring trans and gender diverse issues in primary education in South Australia (Bartholomaeus, Riggs, & Andrew, 2016).

The second project to be discussed examined trans and gender diverse issues, such as bullying, lack of understanding and support from school staff and exclusion, in primary education in South Australia. The work concerned children who identify and express their gender in a number of ways that may not adhere to strict male/female binary categories (often termed “gender diverse”), or who identify their gender in a way that varies from social expectations corresponding with the gender typically ascribed to a sex assigned at birth (Bartholomaeus, Riggs, & Andrew, 2017). The increasing numbers of children who identify in diverse ways has been observed in a range of settings (e.g. see Telfer, Tollit, & Feldman, 2015). Primary schools were the focus of the project as they constitute crucial social institutions which shape the lives of children and their communities. The authors noted that schools face barriers including a lack of support and educational training for professionals, and that fear and misunderstanding are often part of the contemporary socio-political context in which these issues play out.

The project comprised four main elements: a state-wide survey of school teachers and pre-service teachers that investigated attitudes towards trans and gender diverse students (i.e. inclusion, comfort, and confidence); an audit of available children’s picture books that featured trans or gender diverse characters; an exploration of the usefulness of using such materials in picture book reading sessions with primary school children; and the creation of online resources designed to support trans and gender diverse young people (for the full report see Bartholomaeus, Riggs, & Andrew, 2016).

There are a number of dimensions of community psychological research and practice that resonate here, and the work speaks in particular to critical scholarship in the field. Core to community psychology is a
deep understanding of the ways in which social, symbolic and material conditions of inequality are intricately implicated in the health and wellbeing of communities (Campbell & Jovchelovitch, 2000). For those who are part of the LGBT community, prevailing forms of heteronormativity and cisgenderism are ubiquitous and form part of the definitions of ‘normal’ and ‘standard’ for those who are privileged while rendering those outside of these dominant groups marginalised. The detrimental impacts of cisnormativity have in recent years begun to be conceptualised (Riggs et al., 2015) and the implications for wellbeing documented (Pitts, Couch, Mulcare, Croy, & Mitchell, 2009).

Such relations are enacted in the ‘standard practices’ and ‘normal’ expectations of everyday life. For example, many of the recommendations the authors make include items thought to be ‘mundane’, such as gender-affirming policies around uniforms and toilet facilities. Such practices, while often most noticeable in interpersonal interactions, operate at structural and institutional levels. Engaging with social institutions such as schools might increase the awareness of teachers and others in the school community in a manner that is beneficial for supporting young children and their families.

The focus in the research at the level of the primary school as a social institution is of particular note:

Rather than focusing on individual trans and gender diverse students, the research examines broader school cultures in relation to educator attitudes and knowledge and the usefulness of classroom resources in the form of picture books for creating inclusive schools (Bartholomaeus et al., 2016, p.6).

From a community psychology perspective, such settings form important sites for engagement and indeed some of the key community psychology work with LGBT communities derives from social institutional settings (e.g. D’Augelli, 2006; Harper, Jamil, & Wilson, 2007).

The research involved both tools for gaining more in-depth understanding of the issues and also the development of understanding to create a tangible online resource to support trans and gender diverse young people (which is not often a requirement of academic research). In addition, the research team developed the site Rainbow Owl (see www.the-rainbow-owl.com), containing sections for parents and families, for professionals including educators and mental health workers, for researchers and schools, with evidence that these target groups are accessing this information. This offers a rich resource to better equip people to address the challenges through dissemination and education of those in a position to support young people.

Project 3. The “Hohou Te Rongo Kahukura – Outing Violence” project report (Dickson, 2016)

The “Hohou Te Rongo Kahukura – Outing Violence” project was undertaken in Aotearoa New Zealand with a commitment to helping to build Rainbow communities free of sexual and partner violence. The work was supported by the “It’s Not OK Campaign” and hosted by Ara Taiohi (youth development sector peak body; Ministry of Social Development, 2017). The term “Rainbow community” is understood to include “all people Aotearoa New Zealand under the sex, sexuality, and gender diverse umbrellas, recognising that there is not a perfect umbrella term” (Dickson, 2016, p. 4). A number of elements were highlighted in the project report that are important to consider in order to contextualise these issues in Aotearoa New Zealand and are implicated in shaping ways forward. These included an acknowledgment that while there was a growing recognition of the risks of violence faced by members of Rainbow communities, there was a lack of knowledge about their experiences. The report suggested that potentially there may be limitations within mainstream violence services to support Rainbow communities, and noted that there was often a low recognition of partner and sexual violence within the
communities themselves (Dickson, 2016). Additionally, consideration was needed of the specific challenge of racism that may be faced within and outside of Rainbow communities by non-Pākehā community members, including those with Māori, Pacifica, asian backgrounds and/or identities. The project aimed to raise awareness of violence in Rainbow communities, as well as to gather an understanding of community members’ experiences of these issues, so as to inform the development of services and resources.

The project entailed the establishment of an advisory group comprised of members from Rainbow community groups, specialist services and organisations. A large number of community hui (gatherings) were undertaken with Rainbow community groups with a view to creating shared understandings of partner and sexual violence, and to seek community advice important for developing ways to address these issues. A national survey was undertaken to learn about experiences of violence within Rainbow communities and awareness raising occurred via media and the development of important resources such as factsheets and a website (see http://www.kahukura.co.nz/). While there are any number of important elements relevant to community psychology, here we draw attention to the way in which this project engaged with and harnessed community expertise and experiences in meaningful ways: a principle that resonates strongly with a community psychology ethos.

In this project the inclusion of this expertise was not only sought through community consultation efforts, but was harnessed to shape the direction of the project and guide the research process. As described in the report the Advisory Group helped in the development of the national survey, not only through promoting it but also in developing survey items. Moreover, the role of the Advisory Group in the co-creation of the factsheets was crucial as they were uniquely positioned to bring insight and expertise that specialist violence intervention groups could not offer. Critical community psychologists recognise that the standpoints from which we speak are socially located and thus our perspectives are partial (Code, 2006; Gavey, 1989; Parker, 1992). The input of community expertise into research components forms a valuable practice for community psychologists and characterises many community-based and participatory research approaches in the field (Bergold & Thomas, 2012).

It is important to note that this approach promotes a different type of research which can help to shift away from hierarchical research relationships (i.e. researcher and researched) by inviting a variety of perspectives into a realm often reserved only for academic or institutional expertise, and by facilitating shared knowledge-making processes (Buettgen et al., 2012; Cahill, 2007). Here we argue that such involvement may be of particular importance when working in relation to sexuality and gender identities and practices, as the discipline of psychology has a long-documented history of undertaking research which has excluded, delegitimised and mischaracterised such communities (e.g. see Ansara & Hegarty, 2014). Engaging in collaborative co-design in research, including the development of the scope and tools of the project, can potentially be a means of promoting reflexive and progressive practice (see Nic Giolla Easpaig & Fox, 2017 for an example as applied in survey research with young people).

What is offered to community psychologists is the application of the understanding of social identities as embedded in the contexts in which we work, shaping how we understand and engage with issues as well as how we may undertake their investigation. In engaging with the project documentation process, a resistance to promoting homogenising views of Rainbow communities is observed. For example, in defining who might be included within Rainbow communities, the project provided a sample of the diverse ways in which people may identify:

Rainbow seeks to include people who identify as aka’vaine, asexual,
bisexual, fa'afafine, fakafifine, fakaleiti, FtM, gay, gender fluid, gender-neutral, gender nonconforming, genderqueer, gender variant, hinehi, hinehua, intersex, lesbian, mahu, MtF, non-binary, palopa, pansexual, polysexual, queer, questioning, rae rae, tangata ira tane, takatāpui, 同志 (tongzhi), trans man, trans woman, transfeminine, transgender, transmasculine, transsexual, vaka sa lewa lewa, whakawahine and more (Dickson, 2016, p.4)

In community psychology there has often been a traditional distinction made between “communities of place” (geographical and spatially bound) and “communities of identity” (unitied by common delineation of identity; Campbell & Murray, 2004). Such a distinction is less useful here. While there are defining features of what might traditionally be thought of as “community”, in terms of shared representations and access to conditions of power (symbolic, material and structural; Campbell & Jovchelovitch, 2000), the recognition of a plurality of identities and practices is merited and this is attended to carefully in the project. For example in the context of the Community hui the report details “We did not attempt more demographic information than asking people to identify the pronouns they wished us to use, and parts of their identity they were willing to share” (Dickson, 2016, p.11).

From a community psychology perspective, effective collaboration involves the participation of traditionally marginalised groups in the process and valuing of their contributions (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Upon reflection, discussion of the project prompted consideration of the way in which intersecting dimensions of social identities and representations are also implicated within relations of power and privilege within communities. An example from the project report was the recognition that understanding and responding to the issues of partner and sexual violence necessitates engagement with racism:

Racism was raised as a key factor in partner and sexual violence in most hui. The overall context of colonisation in Aotearoa New Zealand disrupting Indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality, and hostility towards non-Pākehā ethnicities was discussed as creating climates in which discrimination towards Rainbow people of colour was normalised. This included in accessing services, where Māori and Pacifica participants reported culturally inappropriate responses when trying to get help which assumed violence was “normal” for them (Dickson, 2016, p.13).

Discussion

Extrapolating from community health psychology, we would regard the projects presented to be conducive to the principle that “research should be not only to understand the world, but also to develop understandings that point towards the possibility of changing it” (Campbell & Murray, 2004, pp.4-5). Each of the projects presented here sought involvement or engagement from stakeholder groups who were in a position to contribute to some aspect of transformation. The first project engaged with the views of those who design and deliver services to young people; the second project was inclusive of teachers, families and health professionals and involvement from a range of organisations, services and community expertise was facilitated and harnessed as part of the third project. Moreover, each piece of work gave voice, raised awareness and enhanced visibility of issues impacting LGBT communities. This is significant in socio-political contexts where groups may be constructed and positioned outside of dominant sexual and gender identities and practices.

It is not hard to make the case for the connections between community psychology and LGBT research and practice. Indeed LGBT activists have been ‘doing’ many of the principles we would recognise as part of
community psychology frameworks for a long time, if not in name, in action. Literature which seeks to increase collaboration between community psychologists and LGBT groups and organisations consistently notes that this necessitates an engagement with politics in contexts where legal, social and political frameworks disadvantage and marginalise LGBT communities. Where Harper and Schneider (2003) make this argument, in their now almost 15 year old seminal paper, they call for the joining of these groups towards political change, an argument they note they are reiterating from well over a decade prior to that (D’Augelli, 1989). Given some of the encouraging shifts in social and legislative contexts in the Trans-Tasman region in the last few decades, it is a pity that here too we are reiterating this same call and it must remain a recommendation of this paper.

The attention in the projects considered, especially the “Hohou Te Rongo Kahukura – Outing Violence”, to the diversity and complexity of social identities and practices implicated in the work undertaken, offered important learnings. For us, engagement with intersectionality has implications beyond research projects with a primary focus on LGBT communities and into our work more broadly wherever, for example we are prompted to consider conceptualisations of “community”. Consequently, we welcome the enhanced awareness and deeper engagement with non-heterosexual and non-cisnormative identities, practices and communities threaded throughout our work on a range of issues (possibly in similar ways to those examples from the conference highlighted in the introduction). As concepts and practices deeply embedded within our social fabric, constructions of sexualities, genders and normativity have far-reaching implications for communities and possibilities for practices. Thus a turn towards examining the ways in which LGBT communities come to be marginalised and disempowered through what are often ‘standard’, ‘everyday practices’ is important, or in other words, towards engaging with the ‘mundane’: that after all is where all the power lies.

References


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**Address for correspondence**

brona.nicgiollaespaig@mq.edu.au
Author biographies
Bróna Nic Giolla Easpaig PhD, is a Research Fellow with the NHMRC Centre for Research Excellence in Implementation Science in Oncology at Macquarie University. Bróna is passionate about promoting the wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer communities. ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6787-056X

Rachael Fox PhD, is a senior lecturer at Charles Sturt University (New South Wales, Australia) with an expertise in qualitative methods and critical community psychology. Rachael’s research interests include the social exclusion experiences of young people and collaborative, ethnographic methodologies.

Sarah Bowman, PhD Candidate, is a researcher and a Master of Clinical Psychology student at University of Technology Sydney (New South Wales, Australia). Sarah’s research and clinical practice focus on improving the mental health of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer.