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LGBT 'Communities' and the (Self-)regulation and Shaping of Intimacy

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Abstract

This article draws on UK research with over 600 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT+) people, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant AH/J011894/1), which explored understandings and experiences of LGBT 'community'. I examine the ways in which intimacy is regulated and shaped by and within social interaction, which was apparent in three main ways. First, the research identified how for some people the very concept of 'LGBT community' was linked to intimacy. Second, there was strong evidence to suggest that some LGBT+ people self-regulate their practices of intimacy (such as holding hands or kissing in public) so as not to be recognised as enacting a same-gender relationship. This was understood as a form of self-protection or hate crime prevention, though degrees of habit and professed concern for other people's feelings were also contributing factors. Third, experiences of intimate relations were shaped by intersectional dynamics, particularly relating to various forms of discrimination, including ageism, biphobia, classism, (dis)ableism, racism, and transphobia from and among LGBT+ people. Whilst LGBT 'communities' were thought to enable opportunities to seek sexual and/or intimate encounters, this is not without its complexities. Although there have been improvements in relation to legislation and wider social attitudes, there is, for some, persistent apprehension and self-regulation which, whether necessary or not, are significant. LGBT+ people's experiences thus suggest that intimacy can be shaped by multiple inequalities both within and without LGBT 'communities'.

Introduction

This article draws on UK research with over 600 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT+[1]) people that explored how they understood and experienced LGBT 'community' (Formby, 2019). As a sociologist, I set out to examine what LGBT 'community'

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means to LGBT+ people, rather than try to assess 'community attachment', a concept more commonly explored within psychological and public health research.

Within the social sciences, it has been argued that the concept of community is much discussed but little defined (Walkerdine and Studdert, 2011), and that it is an alluring yet 'slippery' concept (Day, 2006). However, several patterns emerge within how community has been understood. Largely, these revolve around spatial, cultural, imagined, and virtual conceptualisations, as well as those based on friendship and personal connections (Anderson, 2006; Castells, 1996; Day, 2006; Jenkins, 2014; Nardi, 1999; Pahl and Spencer, 2004; Weston, 1991). Perhaps in illustration of the concept's 'enduring appeal' (Fortier, 2002), the phrases 'LGBT community' and (to a lesser extent) 'LGBT communities' are often used when talking about LGBT+ people, particularly within the media and policy and practice arenas, though also within academia. Drawing on spatial understandings, early work on homosexuality (to use the term of the time) within geography and sociology tended to concentrate on specific geographical areas, frequently known as gay 'ghettos' or 'villages' (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Binnie, 1995; Levine, 1979; Valentine, 1993), often now focussing on 'the scene',[2] to which I will return. Nevertheless, the notion of community is also contested by LGBT+ people, who have drawn attention to problems related to assuming LGBT+ similarity, a lack of agency and ownership over the term, and potential 'othering' within any separation from wider groups of people or communities (Formby, 2019). Existing scholarship has also debated potential conflicts between 'community' and 'intimacy' (Jamieson, 2005), with Crow (2001) concluding that 'the two are not always compatible' (p. 122). However, I will show that, for at least some LGBT+ people, they can be intrinsically entwined.

According to Jamieson (2011), intimacy refers to close connection(s) between people: although 'there may be no universal definition, intimate relationships are a type of personal relationships that are subjectively experienced and may also be socially recognized as close'. These relationships might be expected to involve 'close association, familiarity and privileged knowledge, strong positive emotional attachments, such as love, and a very particular form of "closeness" and being "special" to another person' (Jamieson, 2005: 189). Umberson et al. (2015: 542) note that intimacy 'is widely recognized as contributing to relationship quality'. Moreover, drawing on Morgan's (1996) notion of 'family practices', Gabb (2008) and others have drawn attention to 'practices of intimacy', which 'refer to practices which enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness' (Jamieson, 2011). As research has highlighted, intimacy can be experienced as emotional and/or physical (Gabb, 2019). In this article, my focus tends to be on practices of intimacy that are (not) enacted within 'public' space, meaning my emphasis is more on face-to-face, physical acts than emotional feelings. I pay attention to the interplay between perceptions and experiences of intimacy and public space, grounded in people's everyday experiences. As Gabb and Fink (2015) assert, 'everyday experience . . . makes and remakes couple intimacies in dynamic and emotionally charged configurations' (p. 971). The concept of intimate citizenship is also relevant here, referring to 'decisions around the control (or not) over one's body, feelings, relationships; access (or not) to representations, relationships, public spaces, etc; and socially grounded choices (or not) about identities, gender experiences, erotic experiences' (Plummer, 1995: 151), themes to which I will return.

The article continues with some details about the research methods and participants, before turning to three substantive themes of the article, drawing on both research findings and existing literature to examine communities enabling intimacy, self-regulating practices of intimacy, and restrictions on intimacy. Finally, I draw some conclusions, arguing that intimacy is regulated and shaped by and within social interaction. Building on the contention that intimacy is differently enacted and experienced by men and women (Umberson et al., 2015), I show how LGBT+ people feel that they enact and experience intimacy differently to non-LGBT+ people, because of their social context. The article explores how forms of LGBT 'community' were thought to enable safe practices of intimacy for some LGBT+ people, while at the same time placing restrictions on other LGBT+ people's opportunities for intimacy. Outside LGBT 'community', LGBT+ people may self-regulate their practices of intimacy because of assumptions about/experiences of the practices of non-LGBT+ people. I thus expand our understanding of LGBT+ people's relationship practices, and extend existing thinking on practices of intimacy, demonstrating how they are spatially and temporally located, and closely linked to intersections of identities.

Research methods and participants

The research on which this article draws was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant AH/J011894/1). It utilised the following three methods of data collection: a short online survey to which there were 627 responses; an interactive project website to which people could post contributions, comments, and/or upload files (e.g. documents or photographs); and a qualitative stage which involved 10 individual in-depth interviews, two paired interviews and five group discussions, including a total of 44 people (some of whom chose to be involved in both an interview and a group discussion). The online survey was designed to be short and quick to complete. There were 12 questions: eight were closed (i.e. tick box); four were open. The first free text question invited people to provide more detail on their responses to closed questions; the second and third free text questions asked people to identify their gender and sexuality. The final free text question invited people to provide further detail on their identities.

Group discussions involved visits to existing LGBT+ groups and locations where 'one-off' participants were directly recruited to attend a discussion. Similar themes were explored in both the survey and in-depth methods. Question areas broadly centred on people's understandings of LGBT communities currently and historically; their experiences of LGBT communities and their perceived impacts; and views on LGBT communities of the future, though within this many participants also discussed their lives as LGBT+ people more broadly. Group discussions lasted 60–90 minutes, while individual and paired interviews lasted 30–120 minutes, with the majority taking around 75 minutes.

Participants were recruited through the distribution of an electronic open call for assistance, and through contact with specific LGBT+ groups. Information was sent to around 200 LGBT+ individuals/personal contacts, social groups and organisations, staff networks, publications, and websites. This was a deliberate strategy to try reach as diverse a range of participants as possible, including different sexualities, genders, ages, social class backgrounds, ethnicities, (dis)abilities, and faiths (obviously, there is no list

of UK-based LGBT+ people to sample from, hence the common use of purposive con-
venience sampling). The research included all four countries within the UK: England,
Northern Ireland (survey only), Scotland, and Wales. Although the self-selecting sample
might not be truly representative, the research did include people from 'ordinary' towns
and suburbs (Brown, 2008), and those from outside more 'obvious' (and thus more
widely researched) scene and Pride spaces. Ethical approval was granted by Sheffield
Hallam University's research ethics committee, and standard ethical protocols were fol-
lowed regarding informed consent, participants' right to withdraw, confidentiality, ano-
nymity, and secure storage of physical and electronic data. All qualitative data were
digitally recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically. This inductive process
involved identifying and categorising recurring themes arising throughout the data (there
was no a priori coding framework). Resultant themes related to the following: (1) the
LGBT acronym and the notion of LGBT 'community'; (2) diversities, inequalities, and
prejudices among LGBT+ people; (3) ways that LGBT+ people 'do' community; (4)
relationships to, within, and beyond physical spaces; (5) pleasures and pains associated
with scene spaces; (6) Pride events; (7) imagined communities and a sense of belonging;
(8) consequences for well-being (see Formby, 2019). Within these themes, there were
cross-cutting discussions about socialising, seeking intimacy and/or sexual encounters,
safeties and freedoms, friendships, self-regulation, and intersectional identities and
related discrimination. It is these issues that I bring together here, drawing together how
they relate to practices of intimacy. Views on/the desire for safety was a clear concern
throughout the research, and often linked to experiences of and/or access to intimacy.

   The project involved a range of participants. Among survey respondents, age ranges
were relatively evenly spread between 25 and 54 years, though there were fewer responses
from those below 24 years, and those 55 years and above (14% were aged 16–24, 24%
were aged 25–34, 26% were aged 35–44, 26% were aged 45–54, and 10% were aged
55+). Interview participants were aged from 15 to above 65. Although the research iden-
tified that ageing and other changes across the life course influenced people's experi-
ences of, and engagement with, communities, particularly with regard to patterns of
socialising (see Formby, 2019), there were no obvious generational divides with regard
to practices of intimacy. The data drawn on in this article are from people in their 20s
through to their 60s. The open question about current gender identity produced 31 differ-
ent responses. With caution, these were categorised into groups (where there were over
five responses), as a general rule taking the first word as a defining feature (see Formby
(2019) for further detail), resulting in 189 females/women, 167 males/men, 12 trans peo-
ple, and 11 people identifying as genderqueer, bigender, genderless or gender neutral.
The question about current sexual identity resulted in 44 different responses. Again, with
caution, these were amalgamated into larger groupings (where there were over five
responses), with the first word interpreted as a significant feature. Thus, 177 people iden-
tified as gay or homosexual, 114 as lesbian, 48 as bisexual, pansexual or polysexual, 24
as queer, and six as heterosexual or straight. Further demographic information was not
requested within the survey as more complex statistical analysis was not anticipated,
though some people did draw on and discuss multiple aspects of their identities within
their responses. Of those involved in the in-depth stage of the research, 21 self-identified
as female, 19 as male, and four did not identify as 'female' or 'male'. In total, 21 also

identified as gay, 12 as lesbian, three as bisexual, two as pansexual, one as straight, and five did not disclose their sexual identity. All quotes in the article refer to survey respondent number or interview participant pseudonym.

Communities enabling intimacy

Turning to research findings, I now examine the diverse ways in which 'community' was understood and experienced by LGBT+ people, and how this was linked to their experiences of intimacy. Some, however, questioned the assumption that LGBT+ people necessarily form or belong to particular communities, with some anger that this presumption was perpetuated by people identifying as heterosexual and cisgender.

The first way in which community was linked to intimacy was through facilitating contact between LGBT+ people, sexual or otherwise. As previous research has attested (Aggleton et al., 1999; Weeks et al., 2001), the scene, understood by some as a form of community, is somewhere people, particularly men, consciously seek when desiring sex or physical intimacy; indeed, participants thought this was a key reason to visit these spaces. Carl likened the sexual opportunities that the scene affords (some) to feeling like a 'kid in a sweet shop'. Scene spaces were thus contrasted with experiences of repression elsewhere:

> I'm [in my thirties] but really I'm kind of like [in my twenties] . . . in terms of my history of relationships and the window of opportunity that I've had . . . if you've repressed something for so long and then something's available and you're introduced to gay bars and gay clubs then . . . of course you are . . . You don't not give a kid sweets for a week and then take them to a sweet shop . . . they're going to want some sweets! (Carl)

However, a perceived emphasis on sex within scene spaces was problematic to others, who did not want these spaces/versions of community to be so closely linked to sex/physical intimacy:

> When I first moved [here]. . . A lot of the LGBT community seemed to be around hooking up and finding romantic or sexual encounters and I wasn't really looking for that (Liz)

> Some aspects of the commercial scene can be detrimental to my emotional wellbeing (the commercialisation of sex and the overemphasis on anonymous sex). (Survey respondent 226)

For such participants, a perceived focus on sex detracted from opportunities for friendship and other forms of community and/or intimacy. Similarly, research with ethnic minority gay men has suggested that sexualisation of the scene can override possibilities for community development, friendship building, and mutual support (Keogh et al., 2004). However, alternative views of LGBT community revolving around people, where friendship networks were understood as forming community, were still thought to enable intimate/sexual encounters:

> My 'communities' are my close gay friends where I live, and secondly, wider group(s) of men in London and elsewhere where I can socialise and have sex. (Survey respondent 480)

The backdrop to this linking of community with opportunities for intimacy was a widespread assumption that most people want to find a partner or relationship, necessitating meeting other LGBT+ people:

> There is always the inescapable demographic need to find, some way or somehow, whether it's online, whether it's kind of ridiculous things like hanky codes, or it's through going to a bar or a club . . . other people who have the same sexual orientation as you . . . Most people live in monogamous relationships and you've got to find them somehow. (Matt)

Matt's view here accords with Jamieson's (2005) suggestion that 'relatively exclusive and sexually monogamous couple relationships remain the dominant ideal sought by most people as their key source of intimacy in adult life' (p. 201).

A second, and interrelated, way in which community was linked to intimacy was through enabling safety during practices of intimacy. A common conceptualisation of LGBT community that was explicitly linked to intimacy was in relation to space, and the scene in particular, as this was thought to facilitate safe displays of physical affection – an example of a practice of intimacy. This is important because one of the ways in which people generate intimacy is by

> demonstrating affection physically . . . physical proximity and touch often indicate and complement other demonstrations of intimacy . . . for example, emotional intimacy is expressed in hugs of affection or more fleeting touches of comfort. Many emotionally charged relationships inevitably involve physical intimacy. (Jamieson, 2013: 19)

There may be a reciprocal relationship at work here: while the scene, understood by some as a form of community, facilitates practices of intimacy, it is – at least partly – the desire for intimacy that draws people to this 'community'/scene, thus helping to sustain these spaces.[3] This symbiosis clearly challenges 'the view that intimacy is incompatible with "'community''' (Jamieson, 2005: 199), and 'claim[s] that a shift to intimacy is to the detriment of "community"' (Jamieson, 2005: 202).

Fiona and Ben both talked about the advantage of being able to hold hands, kiss, and dance with their partners at ease, thus bolstering their sense of intimacy. Dilys also contrasted what she felt were safe scene spaces with other commercial venues elsewhere, of particular interest because she explicitly linked feeling safe with being able to show physical affection/intimacy:

> You need a safe space. If you go down the local pub and sit there holding your girlfriend's hand and kissing her you aren't going to stay there for very long . . . you need to know that you can be safe there. (Dilys)

Pride events are another form of 'community' space that were thought to enable physical affection/intimacy. In Browne's (2007: 76) research, many women suggested that they could show affection, express their sexuality, and 'be themselves' at Pride in ways that were not ordinarily possible, and these sentiments were also evident in my research, where participants were aware of a potential risk of violence or discomfort at other times of the year:

> It was much easier to hold hands [at Pride] . . . Much easier to be intimate and kiss . . . All the things we've been consciously trying to do here [where we live] but obviously still aware of who's watching, you know, you need to be mindful of being bashed by somebody. (Shourjo)

> On the Friday night I wouldn't have felt comfortable walking down Regent Street with my partner, kissing and holding hands, whereas on the Saturday [at Pride] it was more than acceptable and we relished every minute of it. (Timothy)

Although the majority of participants linking safety to intimacy focused on physical acts, some also sought out LGBT+ people because they enabled discussions about intimate relationships that they felt they could not have with non-LGBT+ friends, who might view their relationship(s) or attraction as 'abnormal':

> The reason why I enjoy lesbians' company, gay men's company, trans individuals' company, I really enjoy it, because I've got straight friends and I love them all to bits, but I still don't sit there and talk about my relationship or my sex life with them. I can't because they've grown up in a society where that's not normal. (Julie)

Of course intimacy does not only relate to physicality/sex (Jamieson, 2011), and the research identified several ways in which close LGBT+ relationships were compared to chosen families, supporting previous research in the field (e.g. Weeks et al., 2001, Weston, 1991). Families of choice were identified as particularly important at specific times of the year because of potential distance from other family members that might become more significant around, for example, Christmas. As Helen commented,

> A lot of people are closer than other friendship groups and I think that's because a lot of people maybe don't have that link, at least for a period of the time . . . with their families . . . I know friends . . . and they have 'gay Christmas' because they can't go home, or at least some of their friends can't go home, so they do something to really support each other in that way. So there is something in that bond that's perhaps needed to be a little bit stronger than . . . with other groups of friends because of family difficulties . . . it was much more than a 'house Christmas'. (Helen)

Woolwine (2000: 23) similarly identified the significance of friends spending Thanksgiving together in the US, suggesting that while his participants did not necessarily use the family metaphor, their 'relationships, and the functions performed by friends . . . were strikingly similar'. Linking this back to Jamieson's (2005) definition of intimacy, choosing to spend significant events or times of year (often associated with family gatherings) together may indicate the 'specialness' of those friendships.

LGBT communities (however they were conceptualised) were thought to facilitate connections between LGBT+ people, and thus enable practices of intimacy, but more than this; for some people, forms of LGBT community or space were understood as such *because* of the way they supported LGBT+ people safely enacting practices of intimacy.

Self-regulating practices of intimacy

In identifying the importance of particular spaces and/or being in the presence of particular (LGBT+) people, participants drew attention to how they consciously managed their

identities and their intimate relationships. I refer to this as self-regulation, though it could also be called self-censorship and/or self-surveillance, essentially referring to the ways in which people adapted their (often intimate) practices to their environments. A sense of safety was often linked to displaying physical affection/intimacy, rather than (only) the absence of hostility or violence. Participants often talked about the contrast between what they experienced as (safe) 'LGBT space', and how they operated elsewhere, because of their beliefs about/risk assessments of, these other public environments.

There is a long history of research documenting self-regulatory practices among same-gender couples, such as people avoiding holding hands or kissing in public (Binnie, 1995; Browne, 2007; Mason, 2001; Weeks et al., 2001), and evidence suggests these practices of curtailing physical intimacy continue, despite improvements in legislative rights (Coleman-Fountain, 2014; Formby, 2013; Simpson, 2012). In 2015, for example, a 'freedom to kiss' campaign was launched in London that drew attention to people's fears or discomfort (Buchanan, 2015), demonstrating that social attitudes are perceived to not always be in step with legislation. Similarly, in 2016, Pride in London launched their 'no filter' campaign (http://prideinlondon.org/campaigns/nofilter), calling on people to 'celebrate authenticity' and not filter their behaviour (i.e. self-regulate their practices of intimacy). Those who do display their relationship, for instance by holding hands while food shopping, may be chastised, as in the recent UK example of a gay couple being told by a supermarket security guard that their behaviour was 'inappropriate' (BBC, 2016).

Participants drew attention to self-regulatory practices in terms of how they regulated their intimate relationships in three main ways, which were not demonstrating physical affection with their partner in public, not going to certain geographical spaces, and not talking about their partner or aspects of their identity with, or in front of, certain people. While participants did not use the term self-regulation to describe these practices, this did not mean that they were unaware of what they were doing. Gerry, for instance, talked about how he 'edited' himself in the past, which he linked to survival and vulnerability, but more recently, he was consciously trying to become more accustomed to showing physical affection with his partner in public:

> Often being gay, you're sort of having to survive in a heterosexual world, you learn to not get noticed, to fit in, especially in situations where you might feel vulnerable . . . imagining how other people might react . . . [and] taking responsibility for other people's reactions . . . Us being able to be tactile in public has increased over time I think. (Gerry)

Although research suggests that self-regulatory practices may vary, for example by gender, age, and ethnic background (Mason, 2001), choosing not to hold hands with their partner was a commonly cited example across different age groups. It was discussed both in relation to current and historical social contexts, with an inference that some people have got used to not holding their partner's hand, even though they would like to:

> I fear it's too late for me, I would never feel comfortable walking down a street holding my partner's hand. I have missed out on so much of my life by having to hide a big part of myself during my formative years. (Website contributor)

This participant illustrates Cronin and King's (2014) suggestion that we should not overlook the socio-historical context in which older LGB people develop their identities and practices of intimacy, as this will influence their experiences later in life.

It was noticeable that self-regulation of practices of intimacy was sometimes explicitly contrasted with equalities legislation, particularly in relation to prominent campaigns for 'equal marriage' at the time. As one website contributor commented,

> I appreciate the fight for 'marriage' but more than this I want to be able to walk down the street holding my partner's hand without feeling this is a brave act or something that marks me out as 'different'.

Although the UK now has a legal framework allowing 'equal marriage',[4] the social framework surrounding these relationships is, for some, perceived to be lagging, making them feel they have to regulate their bodies, relationships, and/or access to public space, with inherent implications for intimate citizenship (Plummer, 1995). As Weeks et al. (2001) argued, citizenship is not just legal, political or academic, it is also a practice. By imposing restrictions on their practices of intimacy, (some) participants were regulating their own intimate citizenship (although not necessarily by 'choice'). This is perhaps a less optimistic take than Weeks et al. (2001) who suggested 'by reflexively living as non-heterosexuals and engaging in these practices of freedom, non-heterosexuals are continually experimenting with what citizenship could be and might mean in their everyday lives' (p. 199). More recently, Roseneil (2010) discussed the notion of 'full' intimate citizenship, involving 'the freedom and ability to construct and live selfhood and a wide range of close relationships – sexual/love relationships, friendships, parental and kin relations – safely, securely and according to personal choice . . . with respect, recognition and support from state and civil society' (p. 82). Taking this definition, it would seem that the UK's LGBT+ population has not yet reached this standard, despite a raft of 'protective' equalities legislation. Perhaps for this reason, hand-holding had been used as an educational exercise by Liz, who explained,

> On training I have challenged people to go out and hold hands with someone of the same gender and walk down the street and see what happens.

Many people in the research referred to not feeling comfortable or relaxed while holding their partner's hand, which some felt was only possible in the company of LGBT+ people. As Philippa commented,

> You see, me and my partner never really did that [showed affection in public] . . . we sort of held that back a bit I guess.

While many participants seemed to take self-regulation practices for granted, because of their assessments or assumptions about the external context, some did raise questions about why people engage in this practice. A website contributor suggested it could 'simply' be habit:

> I know what you mean about walking down the street holding your partner's hand. To me it's the most important barometer of social acceptance. Even in London or Manchester it's rare to

see this going on outside a few choice streets. I wonder if this is something the community has simply gotten used to doing? (Website contributor)

To draw on Roseneil and Stoilova (2011: 169), the conditions of intimate citizenship which exist within any nation (which they refer to as intimate citizenship 'regimes') 'comprise the laws, policies and cultures that regulate and construct everyday lived practices of intimate life'. It is perhaps UK cultures rather than its laws and policies that participants in my research were most concerned about. In another form of self-regulation, participants identified limiting their access to particular geographic locations, with Luce likening this to a form of crime prevention. By contrast, Jackie drew attention to places that she actively sought out for holidays, as she felt they offered a different sense of freedom from her everyday life:

> Places like Brighton, or you go to San Francisco, you feel as though you can walk down the street holding whoever's hand you want to hold because there's other people doing it . . . I don't have to think 'oh, I can't say that'.

In agreeing with Jackie, Luce added,

> Yeah, or 'what will they think?', or 'how will they interpret it?', or 'how do we have to package it to make it a bit palatable?'.

A sense of 'otherness' is palpable here, in Luce feeling she has to 'package' her identity/intimate relationship to make it more 'palatable'. In discussing their differing access to geographic locations, Luce and Jackie are drawing on perceived 'safety maps' that are personalised, but which can be shared (Mason, 2001). In constructing these 'maps', people draw on previous experiences as well as popular understandings of risk associated with particular areas, 'types' of people, and/or times of day, which they believe make them more or less vulnerable (Mason, 2001), and which offer varying opportunities for (safe) practices of intimacy. Megan similarly illustrated her sense of safety in relation to what practices of intimacy she felt possible:

> My partner and I live in [an area where] we can't be together in that we can't hold hands, so I'm looking to move, or we're looking to move, to [a different area], because it's a far more cosmopolitan area . . . it's only like five miles down the road, but it's a totally different culture there. (Megan)

For some people, such feelings and practices were linked to not being 'out', as a website contributor explained,

> I spent the first 30 years of my life avoiding chat about my emotions, desires etc for fear of outing myself. People used to compliment me on being such a good listener; in truth I was just a silenced talker.

However, others who regarded themselves as 'out' suggested that their self-regulation of intimacy was a form of self-protection or 'self-care' (Mason, 2001) in wanting to avoid hostility:

> Not wanting to offend people, make them uncomfortable, or bring on hostilities from people. (Liz)

Liz's comment identifies more than just her safety being at risk; in not wanting to offend or render others uncomfortable, she perhaps did not want to feel uncomfortable or the subject of surveillance herself. While same-gender relationships are legally recognised and 'allowed' (in the UK), there are still some who perceive an undercurrent that these relationships should perhaps, or not always, be visible. It is thus possible to view self-regulation as a form of resisting the regulation of others. In Mason's (2001: 35) view, 'attempts to camouflage homosexuality represent both an oppressive silencing and a resistance to the trap of visibility'. 'Taking responsibility for other people's reactions', in Gerry's words, and getting used to avoiding hand-holding, are therefore practices to avoid hostility and/or discomfort. This signals the agency involved, as participants literally control the visibility of their identities and intimate relationships, though levels or times of being 'out' do not only relate to habit or personal 'choice', which is inevitably mediated by personal circumstances.

What the research identified was that LGBT 'community', often conceptualised as 'LGBT space' and/or networks of LGBT+ people, can be understood as a means to avoid risk and ensure safety or comfort during practices of intimacy. As Moran et al. (2004) highlighted, the word comfort is often used to denote feelings of safety. Safety, then, is not only the absence of violence, but 'is far more nebulous than this and relates to broader societal "acceptances", feelings of safety, possibilities of enacting LGBT identities in taken for granted, indeed ordinary, ways' (Browne and Bakshi, 2013: 135–136). Participants identified feeling safe, 'at home', and more relaxed with other LGBT+ people, which was contrasted with feeling less at ease, or more anxious, elsewhere.

While Guibernau (2013) emphasised the importance of 'significant others' in people's constructions of identity through social interaction, and specifically interpretations of how we think others will view us, I would argue that it can be 'insignificant' (in the form of unknown), and sometimes arguably imagined, people that can influence LGBT+ practices of intimacy (although this is not to suggest that relationships and interactions with known/significant others are not also significant).

Restrictions on intimacy

While the earlier section focused on self-regulation of practices of intimacy, here I highlight the regulation of others, which can limit people's opportunities for intimacy. It was clear within the research that some people feel less 'welcomed' within the LGBT acronym and the related concept of community (Formby, 2019), and this has implications for intimacy. LGBT+ relationships and intimate encounters can be shaped by multiple intersecting inequalities, often relating to experiences of ageism, biphobia, classism, (dis) ableism, racism, and transphobia from and among LGBT+ people (Formby, 2019). As Jamieson (1999) noted over 20 years ago now, 'personal interactions . . . often reinforce gender, class and ethnic divisions' (p. 482). Drawing on the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), Sanger and Taylor (2013) have acknowledged the 'importance of considering overlapping aspects of identity and how these complicate individual identities

and interactional encounters' (p. 2), and this was evident in my research. Inequalities may relate to aspects of an individual's identity, or wider 'community' norms from which people are perceived to deviate (Weeks, 1996).

In this research, Colin thought that his 'older' age resulted in him feeling as if he was on a 'scrap heap', supporting existing evidence (Cant, 2008; Casey, 2007; Yip, 1996):

> There is more discrimination . . . because I'm kind of like an older guy, I'm plus 30, so therefore I'm kind of on the scrap heap, nobody will sort of entertain you, nobody will want to talk to you . . . It's purely about sexual attraction and if there is no sexual attraction, then they've got no interest in you whatsoever. (Colin)

It is noticeable that Colin links communication and 'interest' to sexual attraction, illustrating how intersections of identities (age and sexuality here) mediate practices of intimacy. Experiences such as Colin's often relate to the scene in particular. Simpson's (2012) research, for example, suggested that there are issues about dress, appearance, and ageism among gay men (both towards older and younger men), and Casey (2007) has argued that age can mark people out as 'undesirable'. The scene is thus deemed to focus only on youth, attractiveness, and sex, which can alienate older gay men and women (Casey 2007; Cronin and King, 2014; Yip, 1996), with implications for intimacy, particularly across social intersections.

Similarly, Rogers (2012) evidenced racism within 'gay' spaces, which meant that for some people the phrase 'coming into' more accurately reflected their experiences than the more widely used 'coming out'; that is, to come into, as one of his participants described, racism, sexism, and drug use, though Rogers is not alone in documenting racism among LGB people (Cant, 2008; Keogh et al., 2004; Lehavot et al., 2009). In my research, Gerry illustrated his experiences of racism when attending a 'gay night' at a club in his hometown, demonstrating how intersections of inequalities can impact on opportunities for intimacy. Understandably, Gerry's initial feelings of excitement had diminished as a result of what happened:

> Feeling, I suppose, a form of racism or prejudice from peers, it was a horrible feeling. It did leave a knot in my tummy . . . To get this from, I suppose, other minorities, that was what was stark about it . . . They too were going to the club, they were white . . . It was a criticism of me, that's what it was. It did feel, you know, a community that is allowing you space to be yourself, to discover yourself . . . is actually being critical of you as well. (Gerry)

Within the LGBT+ 'umbrella', sexual identity is still significant, and a range of research has identified biphobia among lesbian and gay people (e.g. Browne, 2010; Lehavot et al., 2009), with Barker et al. (2012) using the phrase 'double discrimination' to describe bisexual people's experiences of discrimination and/or 'suspicion' from both heterosexual and lesbian and gay people. In this research, participants did not find it easy to be bisexual on the scene, stressing misunderstandings and misperceptions around 'indecision', 'greed' or 'falsity' often thought to influence intimate relationships with bisexual people:

> Within the [LGBT+] community there is also often friction, particularly with biphobia. I identify as polysexual but often use bi as there is less explaining, even in the LGBT+

community. My fiancé is a lesbian. There is still a belief that a bisexual and lesbian cannot have a happy, long-term relationship. We have been together for five years . . . That's as much proof as I need. (Website contributor)

In addition to intersections of identities, the body is also subject to scrutiny within scene spaces, with common 'standards' of body image, particularly for gay men, experienced as off-putting (Cant, 2008). While this respondent identified instances of 'fatphobia', they also illustrated experiencing multiple strands of discrimination, which influenced their sense of belonging, and by extension their opportunities for intimacy:

There is so much racism, fatphobia, biphobia and hate towards people who follow a religion in various LGBT communities. I don't feel like I belong anywhere, and I won't unless I magically become a white, thin lesbian who's an atheist. (Survey respondent 535)

Fiona thought that norms and expectations about sexual desirability could also limit how people presented or performed their identity in order to ensure that they conformed to certain looks perceived to enable wider opportunities for intimacy:

You have to be pretty, or you've got to be big and hairy or muscley, and those are your options . . . If I'm like that then that group of people will want to have sex with me . . . It narrows people's options a lot. (Fiona)

Ben similarly suggested that 'gay' bars could be dominated by 'very hyper-masculine young men'. For those not conforming to this presentation of masculinity, the scene was a space in which they could feel uncomfortable as a result of this 'disciplinary gaze' (Taylor, 2007):

[I'm] not totally comfortable on the commercial gay scene . . . from being fat and therefore often feeling out of place. (Survey respondent 26)

Negative experiences can also relate to informal 'dress codes' that serve to deter or prevent some people from socialising in particular spaces where they might meet other LGBT+ people. As Gemma observed, 'standing out' on the scene (for having, in her words, 'a lot' of piercings) can lead to experiences of disdain. Drawing on Casey's (2007) idea that age can mark some people out as 'undesirable' on the scene, it seems that other factors – such as body shape or modification – can also be used to render some people 'undesirable', with clear implications for opportunities/for, and/or practices of, intimacy.

Aside from direct discrimination and other unwelcome experiences, inaccessibility of the scene can also place restrictions on some people's practices of intimacy. In my research, participants also identified a lack of money having an impact, which could result in them being excluded from venues on the basis of their limited financial resources:

Two weeks ago I was invited to go down to [a local gay pub]. They had a £10 door charge. I'm on benefits, and I'm not even on full benefits, I only get £57 a week so £10 for me . . . [is too much]. (Fin)

In addition to financial resources, previous research has suggested that the practices of door staff can restrict access to scene venues, for example, related to ethnicity (Rogers, 2012; Woolwine, 2000) or gendered expectations:

> I normally wear dresses and skirts and have long hair and I often don't get into clubs, or I won't get in if I'm not with my partner . . . There's this very strict stereotype . . . around who is and who isn't . . . in a very physical way . . . allowed in . . . That's part of the reason sometimes I can't be bothered to go out because I can't be bothered to argue with somebody on the door. (Helen)

Once inside, staff can still be influential; as Casey (2007) noted, venue staff refusing to turn up lighting and/or turn down music can restrict deaf people's ability to communicate. As I have shown, intersections of identities, physical appearance, access to financial resources, and the practices of scene venues can all be used as a basis to regulate and restrict some people's opportunities for 'community' and intimacy.

Conclusion

Overall, a social context that was assumed to be negative towards LGBT+ people was often the reason why people chose to engage with particular communities, which were understood in various different ways (see Formby, 2019). This echoes Jamieson's (1999) conclusion over two decades ago that 'if same-sex couples do manage to securely maintain a long-term relationship they do so despite a wider social fabric, which is relatively hostile' (p. 487). Although social attitudes towards same-sex relationships and transgender people have improved in recent decades (Curtice et al., 2019), there remains – for at least some people – tangible risks from, and/or persistent apprehension about, wider society, which prompts self-regulatory practices of intimacy. One of the perceived benefits of LGBT communities (however they were conceptualised) was that they were thought to facilitate opportunities to seek, experience, and support sexual and other intimate encounters. They were believed, for instance, to facilitate safer displays of physical affection away from potentially disapproving eyes. While LGBT communities were thus thought to enable practices of intimacy, they were more than just this, as forms of LGBT community or space could be understood as this *because* they supported LGBT+ intimacy, suggesting that for at least some people experiences of community and intimacy are intrinsically linked. This is not to suggest, however, that LGBT communities are not also associated with disappointments, for some people (explored further in Browne and Bakshi, 2013; Formby, 2019; Weston, 1995).

People contrasted particular communities, spaces or events with their practices elsewhere, serving to highlight levels of self-regulation of intimacy that some people employed. There was strong evidence to suggest that some people self-regulate their practices of intimacy (e.g. avoiding holding hands or kissing in public) so as not to be recognised as 'displaying' a same-gender relationship. Supporting Heaphy's (2011) notion of 'display as temporally and spatially located interaction' (p. 32), and Finch's (2011) observation about 'the significance of particular audiences' (p. 201), this suggests that some people perceive that they can only display their relationships in certain places,

and/or at certain times, for example, within commercial scenes and/or during Pride events. This could have implications for their ability to sustain a sense of closeness (Jamieson, 2011) with their partner, and potentially their relationship quality (Umberson et al., 2015). LGBT+ people's everyday experiences thus demonstrate how intimacy and use of public space interlink. In other words, practices of intimacy – embedded within social interaction – are inherently bound up with perceptions and particularities of time and space. LGBT+ people's intimate citizenship is thus intrinsically linked with the everyday (perceived) practices of non-LGBT+ people, as well as the laws and social policies of a country, suggesting that future research and advocacy should also pay attention to the everyday shaping of social interactions – and social intersections. Focusing attention on LGBT 'communities' demonstrates how they are constructed, at least in part, in relation to what they are not, as much as what they are (Formby, 2019). Equally, this research shows the distinctive patterns of LGBT+ practices of intimacy, grounded within everyday spaces, temporalities and interactions, which some people felt were regulated in inherently different ways to non-LGBT+ people's relationships.

As I have shown, self-regulatory practices were enacted for varied reasons, including a combination of fear or apprehension, self-protection or hate crime prevention, concern for other people's feelings, and habit. While not discounting improvements in legislation and wider social attitudes, there is still apprehension and self-regulation which, whether necessary or not, are significant. Perceptions of adversity are integral to notions of 'LGBT community' as it is this social context that many feel they need or want to retreat from in order to feel comfortable, avoid perceived risks, and be safe. It is here where LGBT+ people feel their experiences of intimacy and their wider relationship practices differ to non-LGBT+ people. This is not to argue that all LGBT+ people 'filter', 'edit' or regulate their behaviour, but to suggest that a notable way in which LGBT communities were understood and portrayed was in their ability to allow LGBT+ people to escape such practices; that is, that was the distinction often drawn between LGBT communities and other spaces or communities, and I have highlighted how this intersects with experiences of intimacy. Even for those who did hold hands or kiss in public, some still thought that certain scenes, spaces, and events enable other people to not worry about these practices. The prevalence of self-regulation of practices of intimacy among some LGBT+ people is therefore linked to the very concept of (desiring) LGBT community, with understandings of LGBT communities often predicated on dichotomous notions of safety and comfort among LGBT+ people, and a lack thereof elsewhere. Seeking out other LGBT+ people in particular spaces was therefore linked to looking for safety and avoiding risk during practices of intimacy.

While LGBT communities were thought to enable opportunities to seek sexual and/or intimate encounters, and avoid any risks or apprehension in doing so, spaces associated with LGBT+ people are not without considerable shortcomings, often related to intersections of identities, including experiences of ageism, biphobia, (dis)ableism, racism, and transphobia. More generally, particular norms and attitudes (often on the scene) could leave people feeling out of place, excluded, or 'other' related to their appearance or social practices such as not drinking alcohol, illustrating that marginalisation is not always, or only, related to intersections of identities (Browne and Bakshi, 2013), though such experiences can undermine people's identities. These experiences discredit

Mahdawi's (2016) contention that scene spaces offer 'unconditional acceptance', because they quite clearly do not to everyone. Various forms of LGBT space or community are sites of discrimination and exclusion which serve to limit and restrict opportunities for, and practices of, intimacy. Negative experiences of/within 'community' have implications for practices of intimacy and wider relationship practices if people do not feel welcomed (whether by staff or peers) in particular spaces ostensibly for LGBT+ people. Such spaces are therefore enabling for some, and at the same time restrictive for others. Although community is usually understood to be positive, with beneficial impacts on individual health and/or happiness (Day, 2006), this is obviously not the case for everyone. LGBT+ people's experiences of intimacy are thus very much shaped and restricted by multiple inequalities, both within and without LGBT 'communities'.

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Notes

1. LGBT+ is my preferred term to refer to people, to acknowledge the diversity of sexual and gender identities beyond only LGBT. However, when discussing 'LGBT community' I use the more limited acronym, as that is the term more widely used. When referring to existing literature and participant comments, I also replicate the acronyms employed within.
2. By using 'the scene' I refer to areas of commercial venues that cater for a 'gay' or LGBT+ clientele. As Browne and Bakshi (2013) have argued, scenes are 'heterogeneous assemblages of emotions, meaning, cultures and materialities that are produced through an illusion of homogeneity' (p. 66).
3. I acknowledge, however, a trend towards the closure of some scene venues (perhaps, as fewer people feel they 'need' these spaces), and there are of course current restrictions on all leisure spaces in the UK due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act passed in 2013, coming into force in England and Wales in 2014 (a similar law came into effect in Scotland the same year, and in Northern Ireland in 2020).

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