Understanding and responding to homophobia and bullying: contrasting staff and young people's views within community settings in England

FORMBY, Eleanor <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4137-6592>

Understanding and responding to homophobia and bullying: Contrasting staff and young people's views within community settings in England

Eleanor Formby

Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Abstract

Schools have been called the last bastion of homophobia; by comparison little research has been carried out on this subject in youth services. This article reports on qualitative findings from a recent mixed methods study of barriers and facilitators to schools and youth services addressing issues about (homo)sexuality, homophobia and transphobia in one English region. The research sought to more fully understand the contexts in which young people experience and manage their identities and/or the prejudices they may face. Findings are based on 146 self-completion survey responses from young people, and qualitative data drawn from 74 participants involved in in-depth methods (interviews and discussion groups) in nine different settings. This included teachers, youth service workers and young people (aged 11-20) who self-identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual, or heterosexual. The study adds to existing literature by taking a broader view of the social contexts in which young people learn about, make sense of, and practice, identities. In doing so, it suggests ways in which sociological perspectives can add to and expand the current (often psychology-based) body of work on bullying.

The article documents six key themes emerging from the data: curriculum inclusion/exclusion; understandings of homophobia and bullying; experiences and impacts of bullying and homophobia; professional responses and support services; issues underlying professional practice; implications for identity management. Drawing on these findings and supporting evidence, the article concludes with a critique of the limiting constraints of individualised anti-bullying discourses, and argues that these risk minimising understandings of the complex social contexts for homophobia and transphobia.

Keywords

Bullying; exclusion; homophobia; identity; inclusion; LGBT; sexuality; schools; wellbeing; youth

Introduction

Schools have been dubbed the last bastion of homophobia (Beadle, 2009; Grew, 2008); by comparison, there has been little research into homophobia within youth services, where youth work professionals (from here on referred to as youth service workers) work with young people to provide informal education, social activities and/or specialist support. In the UK this can occur in designated youth centres (in either the statutory or voluntary sectors), or on an outreach basis, sometimes known as detached or street-based youth work.

The last fifteen years or so has seen growing acknowledgement of the prevalence of homophobic bullying and broader discomfort with, and invisibility of, same-sex relationships and identities in (UK) education contexts (Douglas et al, 1999; Formby, 2011a; Greenland and Nunney, 2008). Existing research has identified discriminatory attitudes among some staff, and poor or inadequate responses to homophobic bullying from some schools (McNamee, Lloyd and Schubotz, 2008; Warwick, Aggleton and Douglas, 2001). Studies have suggested that lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) young people are rarely included in the (formal) school curriculum, with some staff uncomfortable or fearful about including LGB issues within their teaching, particularly regarding sex and relationships education (SRE) (DePalma and Atkinson, 2006; Ellis, 2007; Formby, 2011a). It has been suggested that sexual orientation is viewed as a taboo subject, at risk of exclusion for concerns about tackling it incorrectly by unconfident staff, perhaps (still) related to the legacy of Section 28[1] which forbade UK local authorities

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[1] Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 was a controversial piece of legislation which stated that a local authority "shall not promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality" (HMSO, 1988). After vigorous campaigning, it was repealed in Scotland in 2000 and in England and Wales in 2003.

(although ironically not schools) from promoting homosexuality as a 'pretended family relationship' (DePalma and Atkinson, 2006; Ellis, 2007). It has been argued that this legislation created a climate of fear around teaching about LGB identities or relationships, the legacy of which still remains (Greenland and Nunney, 2008). By contrast, UK and international research indicates that where schools are more supportive environments, they can lessen the potential for negative outcomes for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) pupils (Espelage et al, 2008; Rivers and Cowie, 2006; Russell, 2005).

Research from the UK and the US has demonstrated the potential impact that homophobic bullying can have on young LGB people's mental health and wellbeing, including higher incidences of self-harm, depression and/or attempted suicide compared with their heterosexual counterparts (Almeida et al, 2008; McNamee, Lloyd and Schubotz, 2008; Robinson and Espelage, 2011). LGB youth are similarly said to be more likely to suffer poorer physical health arising from higher incidences of alcohol, drug and/or tobacco use, related to their experiences of broader society (Espelage et al, 2008; Rivers and Noret, 2008), though there is also evidence to the contrary (Russell et al, 2011). Recent large-scale research by Stonewall[2] suggested that 55% of LGB young people experience homophobic bullying in UK secondary schools and colleges, and that three in five pupils who experience homophobic bullying say that teachers who witness it do not intervene (Guasp, 2012). Evidence suggests that negative experiences in adolescence can impact upon educational attainment and mental health/emotional wellbeing (Rivers, 2000; Robinson and Espelage, 2011). Caution is needed, however, to not over-state these risks, or portray LGBT people as inherent 'victims' (for further discussion critiquing conceptions of queer suicide see Cover, 2012, and see Russell, 2005 regarding resilience). As Cover notes (2012: 3), "the 'vulnerabilisation' of queer youth is not uncommon in research on queer sexuality". He critiques explanations of queer suicide based on internalised factors and/or minority stress by arguing that these artificially separate the subject from the social. Like Cover, whilst drawing on some psychology research, this article deliberately draws on wider literature from other disciplines, such as those that critique notions of 'at risk' or 'victimised' LGBT youth, and places itself within this broader canon of

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[2] Stonewall is the UK's leading charity "working for equality and justice for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals" (Stonewall, 2012).

social science work. The article also highlights international literature, as much existing work in this area focuses on America alone.

This article builds on existing literature on experiences of homophobic bullying by taking a broader sociological look at understandings of, and responses to, the issue. It also extends existing evidence by including youth service practice, less often explored in bullying literature (Horn, Kosciw and Russell, 2009). The research is therefore able to point to some of the (different) ways in which school teachers and youth service workers approach the issues of homophobia and/or bullying, and the potential implications for young people. It is hoped that the insights documented below, together with further work in this area, could improve our overall understanding, and therefore inform future policy and practice in this field.

Having given an overview of some of the existing work in the field, the article continues by outlining the study methods. In the research findings section I then present the dominant themes which emerged from the data, documented in six interlinking sub-sections: curriculum inclusion/exclusion; understandings of homophobia and bullying; experiences and impacts of bullying and homophobia; professional responses and support services; issues underlying professional practice, and implications for identity management. This data is contextualised alongside existing literature where appropriate, highlighting supporting evidence to expand and strengthen the analysis. The section is then followed by a discussion and conclusion, which critiques the growing (individualist) anti-bullying agenda and argues that it risks minimising (sociological) understandings of homophobia and transphobia.

Whilst acknowledging that the term homophobia is rooted in psychology (Adam, 1998) and is not without its problems (see Herek, 2004 for a more thorough review), it was nevertheless the word used by participants to denote prejudice towards LGB (and sometimes trans) individuals or groups. The terms heterosexism, heteronormativity and sexual stigma (Herek, 2004) imply a broader or more sociological analysis, but they are not widely understood or used in common parlance in the way that homophobia is (Hillier and Harrison, 2004). I therefore use the term homophobia throughout this article

as shorthand for opposition to same-sex relationships and identities that is embedded within social structures and processes. I do not mean for prejudice towards LGBT people to be understood as individualised phenomena, but as a "broad social and institutional problem" (Bryant and Vidal-Ortiz, 2008: 389). As O'Brien (2008: 497) notes, "homophobia differs from the common definition of 'phobia' in that the fear is not rooted in individual experience, but rather in culturally learned prejudices".

Research methods and participants

The study from which this article is drawn examined barriers and facilitators to (homo)sexuality, homophobia, (trans)gender identities and/or transphobia being included and/or addressed within schools and youth services. It was based in a metropolitan county in the North of England.

The study employed a two-stage methodology. First, a self-completion survey of young people was electronically advertised and physically distributed via schools, youth services and other local authority, National Health Service and voluntary sector contacts. Participants could respond online via a secure website or use freepost return envelopes. The questionnaire primarily consisted of closed questions, though there were a small number of open questions. Quantitative data, not reported here, provided an overview of current practice regarding the inclusion/exclusion of issues about (homo)sexuality and or (trans)gender identity in schools and youth services, and was used to inform the subsequent in-depth stage. This second stage involved individual semi-structured interviews with youth service workers and teachers with a responsibility for personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) and/or LGBT issues; and group discussions with young people in a range of community settings (see detail below). Broad topic areas explored included curriculum content and delivery; understandings of prejudice and/or bullying; professional responses and related issues; support services available, and suggestions for how things could/should be different. These areas were chosen to address the overall research question, i.e. how and why formal and informal curricula/settings did, or did not, include issues about sexuality and/or gender identity, and the potential impact for LGBT young people.

Informed by social constructionist and interactionist perspectives, the research approach was taken to gather a range of perspectives, whilst at the same time allowing young people a degree of 'safety' or reduced 'pressure' by being interviewed in group rather than individual encounters. Discussions also enabled observations of youth group interactions in their contexts. The qualitative methods used enabled more flexibility and participant input than quantitative approaches allow, suited to a study designed to explore (subjective) understandings and perspectives on bullying, rather than for example measure prevalence or form. This fits within bodies of qualitative work documenting "everyday lived experiences" (Plummer, 2003: 521) that seek to understand the complexity of LGBT lives, and inform appropriate policy and practice (McDermott, Roen and Piela, 2013).

Where possible, the research encounters with staff and young people were conducted within the same settings, to allow triangulation of data and a more 'holistic' view of the nine case sites, though different perspectives and experiences from staff and young people are acknowledged and considered within the article. The nine sites from which participants, both staff members and young people attending them, were drawn consisted of three secondary schools, three locality-based youth services (i.e. generic youth provision), and three LGBT-specific youth services (see Table 1 for a breakdown of the sites and their corresponding participants). The six youth services involved provided a range of activities, including group activities and events, social networking, professional advice or support should it be required, and facilities such as pool table(s), television and video game equipment. All of the locality-based youth services and the three schools were run by local government. Of the LGBT-specific youth services, one was provided by local government, and two were run by (different) charities.

In total, there were 146 responses to the survey[3] and 74 participants involved in qualitative methods. This included nine one-to-one interviews with staff (of whom four were teachers and five were youth

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[3] It is not possible to establish how many young people received invitations to participate in the research, and therefore to calculate a response rate. Nor is it possible to know (because it was anonymous) whether any of the survey respondents also participated in qualitative data collection methods.

service workers), and eight discussion groups with young people (involving sixty-five individuals): two groups took place in schools, two in LGBT-specific youth services, and four in mainstream youth services. One group was single sex (though not by design); the rest were mixed. Interviews and group discussions lasted between half an hour and just over two hours, partly reflecting practical constraints on participants' time, though the majority were an hour or more.

Table 1: Settings and corresponding participants

Settings	Participants		Total participants
	Staff members	Young people	
Secondary school 1	2 teachers	1 group = 8	**30 participants within secondary schools**
Secondary school 2	1 teacher	1 group = 18	
Secondary school 3	1 teacher	0*	
Locality-based youth service 1	1 youth service worker**	2 groups = 7	**22 participants within locality-based youth services**
Locality-based youth service 2		2 groups = 13	
Locality-based youth service 3	1 youth service worker	0*	
LGBT youth service 1	1 youth service worker	1 group = 10	**22 participants within LGBT youth services**
LGBT youth service 2	1 youth service worker	1 group = 9	
LGBT youth service 3	1 youth service worker	0*	
Total participants	**9 staff (4 teachers, 5 youth service workers)**	**8 groups = 65 young people**	**74**

* Due to funding cuts or other logistical factors (e.g. exams) young people from these settings were subsequently not able to be included within the research.

** This staff member worked across two youth services in different locations.

All interviews and discussions were digitally recorded, written up and analysed thematically by identifying/categorising recurring themes as they arose throughout the data. Open text survey data was also analysed thematically and synthesised with face-to-face data. This approach was informed by

framework analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994), identifying themes within question areas for each research encounter, and then synthesised as a whole dataset, whilst ensuring data was not taken out of context. This article draws on the qualitative data, using illustrative extracts from participant comments (anonymised throughout), which were chosen as those that most clearly demonstrated or typified the themes. Where they first appear, some demographic information is provided about participants. All names are pseudonyms. The study was approved by the university's research ethics committee, and adhered to guidelines of the British Sociological Association, and the National Children's Bureau. Ethical protocols about anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent, rights to withdraw, and secure data storage were followed at all times.

Participants

The region in which this study took place is relatively urban. Most participants were drawn from two specific locales; the first being a socio-economically mixed/divided city, and the second being a far smaller, relatively deprived town (according to England's Index of Multiple Deprivation). Young people taking part in the research were aged 11-20 inclusive. The (mean) average age was 14. Teachers involved were all employed within secondary level education (i.e. young people aged 11+).

As the study focussed on staff and young people's perspectives of professional practice, rather than personal experiences per se (though these were raised by some participants), individuals were not asked to identify their own sexuality (so a sample breakdown on this is not available), however some participants did so voluntarily (including 19 young people, three youth service workers and two teachers all identifying as LGB). The sample therefore included both staff and young people who identified as LGB and heterosexual, although this article does draw more heavily on data from LGB young people who had more to say about their (sometimes former) schools. Overall there were slightly more young males (36) involved in the research than young females (29). No participants self-identified as trans. Most young people were engaged in compulsory schooling, though a minority were in some form of further education or employment, and a small number were not involved in any education, training or employment. The majority of participants were 'white' (70), broadly reflective of the local

population. Other identities (4) were Asian, Black and Chinese; these identities have not been assigned to individual quotes to protect anonymity.

Combining (complex and fluid) issues about sexuality and gender identity together can be problematic (Formby, 2012; Richardson and Monro, 2012), yet much UK policy and practice does so; this article does therefore include LGBT as a combined acronym. Whilst the research sought to include trans participants and issues about transphobia, unfortunately this material is limited, but for clarity care has been taken throughout to use the specific acronyms of LGB or LGBT where appropriate. Where potential implications for trans young people can be drawn out from the data, these have been included.

Whilst acknowledging recent debates concerning intersectionality (Taylor, Hines and Casey, 2010), and recognising that issues other than/in addition to sexuality (e.g. ethnicity, social class) are likely to impact upon experiences of homophobia and/or health and wellbeing (Fish, 2008; Phoenix, Frosh and Pattman, 2003; Poteat et al, 2011), an in-depth analysis of these factors was beyond the scope of this study. Further limitations are that participants (because the study sought to explore these very contexts) were only drawn from those young people accessing youth services or engaged in compulsory schooling, in only one geographical area. Future research could continue to examine young people's context-bound experiences, but drawn from a wider range of settings and/or localities. Findings are not presented as universal or representative, but as a relatively small study to begin to contextualise homophobia and bullying in schools and youth services, from the perspectives of a range of staff and young people.

Research findings

Findings drawn on here, derived from both perceptional and experiential data, are provided to illustrate contexts of homophobia and/or bullying in schools and youth services, and their implications for young people, whether LGB or heterosexual.

1. *Curriculum inclusion/exclusion*

This first theme highlights the content and delivery of both informal and formal curricula, suggesting that LGB invisibility is significant to subsequent understandings and experiences of homophobia in these settings.

All participants identified variable inclusion of issues about same-sex relationships and identities within schools, ranging from no mention at all, to being restricted to homophobic comments from staff (see below), to those that were seen (by other staff) as good practice. LGB issues were most likely to be included within PSHE lessons, though this did not always include SRE within that, which has been explored specifically in other research (Formby, 2011a, b; Hillier and Mitchell, 2008). Not only was inclusion variable, but there was low usage of potential whole-school/cross-curricular resources, such as LGBT history month (see http://lgbthistorymonth.org.uk).

The majority of young people suggested that (homo)sexuality was a taboo subject, largely rendered invisible within the formal curriculum within schools, which contrasted with its visibility amongst their peers. Whether through "natural curiosity" or the use of sexuality as a potential source of prejudice, the presence of (homo)sexuality in young people's lives (see also Green, 2011; Redman, 2000) served to emphasise its omission from schooling. This in itself sent a message, with young people aware of silences about (homo)sexuality in their school, and the potential impact on the prevalence of homophobia:

> *"Just talk about it, sexuality nowadays is part of everyday life and you shouldn't judge it, so if schools actually spoke about it then the kids wouldn't respond how they do now"* (Gemma, female LGBT youth group member aged 18).

The research suggested that, on the whole, young people are willing to discuss (homo)sexuality in school and/or youth services, but they need staff to also be willing to do so, which in many cases was identified as the issue. As Rofes (2000: 459) argued, silences teach: "what [teachers] say and what

[they] don't say, what is voiced and what is silenced, create knowledges for students which contain tremendous implications". In other words, young people can become aware of taboos because of professional secrecy, or silence, around certain areas, which contrast with other dominant discourses, for example about heterosexual sex(uality) and the importance of (teenage) pregnancy prevention (Alldred and David, 2007; Allen, 2007).

The picture of youth services was slightly different to schools. Whilst there were LGBT-specific services in operation (in different locales), there was greater uncertainty about the subject area, from a worker's perspective, within mainstream youth services, where staff were supportive in principle, but unclear what they were permitted to say or do within their job. One mainstream youth service worker, for example, remembered a colleague talking about gay adoption during a group session with young people saying "I don't think it's right because [adopted] kids have to have some sort of normality". The youth service worker interviewed knew that there were some LGB young people in the group at the time, and as a result was "fuming" that they had heard that from another worker, but was uncertain how much she could challenge her colleague about the comment.

Such uncertainty was not present for teachers with a responsibility for PSHE and/or SRE. Whether or not they delivered any information about LGB issues, none of the teaching participants said they were unsure about their remit, rather that they were sometimes unsure how to deliver it.

2. Defining the issue: Homophobia or bullying?

Turning now to contrasting understandings of homophobia and bullying, whilst professionals and institutions often constructed homophobia as an individual problem of bullying, rather than a social problem (Bryant and Vidal-Ortiz, 2008), some young people recognised that it could be culturally learned (O'Brien, 2008) or facilitated through curriculum invisibility:

> *"Overall, LGBT issues are pretty much not talked about at all at my school... but I think that*

facilitates for homophobia to happen and nobody to question it" (Female heterosexual survey

respondent aged 16).

Though complex, language use was also identified as important in relation to homophobia and/or bullying, with discussions about language that some might define as homophobic, but which often young people did not, and definitely felt that it did not constitute a form of bullying. Many young people argued that the word gay has "changed meaning" and "evolved" from meaning "happy" to meaning "homosexual" to meaning "stupid" or "rubbish". Importantly, these second and third meanings were not seen to be linked in any way, including by young people identifying as LGB themselves. In other words, calling something gay was said to be "slang", and therefore not meant to be "offensive" to gay people.

Nevertheless, at the same time as the word was said to have changed meaning, it could also still be used in two different ways. Some young people, for example, were aware of the potential for offense. For them, it was acceptable to use the word to describe an object, such as a computer game they did not rate, but it was also understood to be potential bullying if used negatively to describe a person. In this usage, the distinction between "banter" or "joking between friends" and bullying was often related to existing relationships between the young people involved. However it was meant, some LGB young people did find the term offensive, and said it made them "more nervous" about coming out about their sexuality.

As with young people, there were differing professional opinions about potential links between language use and homophobia. Some teaching staff demonstrated assumptions of (intended) humour in relation to particular language (see also Phoenix, Frosh and Pattman, 2003), which was not always an assumption shared by LGB young people who felt bullied. It was the minority of staff that explicitly linked language to (perceived rather than perhaps intended) bullying:

"I think for us it is the isolation that people feel when people make comments that makes them
feel bullied*, and it is a constant problem that yes* [young people] *do use the word gay as a*
putdown" (Teacher A, female PSHE lead, emphasis added).

3. *Experiences of bullying, homophobia and their impacts*

Though the research did not seek to gather experiences of bullying directly, these were nevertheless
provided, either by those that experienced them, or their peers. Knowledge of these incidents or
behaviours clearly formed the backdrop against which most young people understood homophobia.
Young people, both LGB and heterosexual, articulated that homophobia could also be facilitated by
broader curriculum invisibility and lack of open discussion of diversity and/or prejudice, as evidenced
above.

Reports of homophobic bullying were most often about those identifying as LGB, but also included
those with lesbian or gay parents, and those perceived to be 'different' in some way (see also Davies,
2011; Thornberg, 2011). To a certain extent, LGB participants appeared to expect and/or accept this
bullying, because they were aware of their 'deviant' status (Goffman, 1963; Thornberg, 2011):

"There's going to be people out there that are going to be horrible about it, you've just got to
learn to deal with it... it's something that comes along with the territory... it's the society we
live in" (Matt, male LGBT youth group member aged 16).

Whilst comments such as this could demonstrate degrees of resignation and powerlessness, they could
also indicate forms of resilience within which young people learn to judge when to accept behaviours,
and when not to. This included deciding when to keep their "mouth shut" about their identity:

"If you tell a teacher something, you can't trust them, you tell a student something, you can't
trust them because it'll just get spread everywhere, so I feel like if you don't want people to find
out about your sexuality because you're gonna get bullied about it, then you've either got to

keep your mouth shut, or you've gotta deal with the effects of everyone knowing" (Cassie, female LGBT youth group member aged 15).

Learning when to keep quiet, speak out, and/or access support was an important lesson that those in touch with LGBT youth services were familiar with. Whilst these decisions could be read as forms of resilience, they are different to those noted in Scourfield, Roen and McDermott's study (2008), which instead highlighted fighting back and/or escaping to different locations.

Though LGB participants hearing language understood to be homophobic was relatively routine, other incidences of homophobia were more stark. Illustrative examples were provided by a number of young people from different schools, including one person who had a 'water bomb' of urine thrown at them whilst at school, and another who had acid thrown at them within a science lesson. Whilst these might be viewed as 'extreme' examples, and they were evident in only the minority of cases, because they were public knowledge amongst groups of young people, they nevertheless played a significant role in forming the contexts in which young people developed views about minority identities.

Whilst most experiences of homophobia among LGB participants related to other pupils (as above), there was also evidence of teachers at a range of schools in the region (publicly) demonstrating discriminatory attitudes towards LGB pupils, which could leave them feeling isolated and/or vulnerable. A discourse of bullying does not readily capture these experiences. Young people recalled teachers saying:

"No wonder you get bullied because you act so gay" (Mark, male LGBT youth group member aged 15)

"If my son or my daughter was ever gay I'd take them into the back of my garden, tie them to the wall and shoot them with a shotgun" (Becky, female LGBT youth group member aged 16).

Policies and practices within schools could also be experienced negatively by LGB pupils. Examples include several schools that made (known) lesbian/gay pupils change for physical education (PE) away from other students, making some feel singled out and excluded, and contributing to them not attending PE and/or school. In one case a student complaining about this practice was said to be "causing a fuss", but elsewhere a student had co-operated:

> *"At the end of the day it was partly my decision to do it 'coz I was scared of stuff that would get said or done"* (Mark).

Irregular attendance at school related to homophobia has implications for health and educational outcomes, which several staff noted. The impacts of bullying and/or wider homophobia were often stressed by staff specifically in relation to mental health and emotional wellbeing:

> *"The impact being gay and being out and being bullied has on young people's mental health is colossal... the amount of mental health issues in that group that we know about is immense, the ones we don't know about makes me shudder"* (Male youth service worker A, LGBT youth service).

In addition, this youth service worker reported cases of young people he supported who had become homeless linked to adverse reactions to their sexual and/or gender identities from parents and other family members, also documented elsewhere (Hillier and Harrison, 2004; Willis, 2009). These potential impacts were not always thought to be understood by other professionals, whether or not they worked with young people:

> *"I get kids who self-harm, who have eating disorders, who run away from home because it* [homophobia] *is not challenged...* [but] *some other professionals don't see it* [as] *being a massive deal"* (Youth service worker A).

4.   Professional responses and other support services

School staff were important in creating and maintaining, or challenging, a homophobic climate in which young people could, or could not, report bullying. General reluctance to report bullying was articulated by the majority of young people (see also Thornberg, 2011), perhaps unsurprising given some contexts where schools or individual staff were felt to contribute to homophobic environments (as above). Illustrations of what were felt to be (other) inappropriate or inadequate responses to bullying by school professionals were provided. These included the student who had the urine-filled 'water bomb' thrown at them but was not allowed home to change, and the student who had acid thrown at them who was told by the teacher they were "too busy" to discuss it. Often there was a sense from young people that bullying was left unaddressed and/or that complaints were not believed.

Whilst some young people felt silenced, others believed that the only way to resolve their issue(s) was to respond with physical violence. If pupils did react to bullying in this way they were often punished or put into isolation for "starting trouble" or "trouble causing" (see also Jones and Clarke, 2008). This made them feel that the original bullying was left unaddressed and/or that their complaints were not believed or taken seriously, and therefore that school(s) were implicitly supporting homophobia. One person said that they had been told they were trying to get out of lessons for reporting their bullying and had to argue that they wanted to learn but could not because they kept "getting abused" in lessons.

Generally, there was a consensus among young people, both LGB and heterosexual, that schools did not respond to homophobic bullying or language use as "seriously" as they did in relation to other forms of prejudice, with racism always the example cited (see also Hillier and Harrison, 2004), for instance:

> *"Using the term 'gay' in a derogatory way should be punishable in the same way using racist*
> *language is"* (Female heterosexual survey respondent aged 15).

Among LGB participants, there tended to be greater disapproval of what they perceived to be schools' lack of action:

"People still get away with it in school, it's a bit disgusting really because the school don't really do anything about it" (Gareth, male LGBT youth group member aged 14).

The pervasiveness of homophobia (whether from staff or students) and reluctance to report was acknowledged by some professionals, who stressed the importance of not reproducing homophobia:

"It makes me sad that young people don't feel they can report it, but I also think that if they are getting it every day at school, they just want a quiet life, they just want to come here, somewhere they can just sit and just be safe... and just be themselves, and I don't think they get that at school or college... If we [as professionals] *don't challenge it we are letting people teach others to be homophobic… we are teaching young people to be homophobic if it's not challenged"* (Youth service worker A).

A particular response to bullying, in supporting LGB pupils via counselling, was viewed as problematic by some young people and staff, whether that concerned an implicit assumption of 'blame', or its perceived usefulness:

"I was kind of like, hang on a minute, 'coz it kind of made me feel like, 'oh is this my fault now, is there something wrong with me?' ...you've referred me to this person because you think she'll be able to help me but you didn't bother to check that she was going to be able to help me or not, so you've wasted my time taking me out of lessons" (Becky).

A number of (LGB) young people felt that instead of providing counselling referrals, the schools should have challenged the perpetrators of the bullying, with referral to counselling seen by some young people as teachers absolving their responsibility. There are links here to broader work about counsellors too, who have previously been reported to identify themselves as less competent with/about supporting LGB clients (Bidell, 2012; Farmer, 2011).

Young LGB people seemed to more often value support which they did not equate with an 'at fault' or 'victim' identity. Many appreciated the LGBT-specific services they were involved with locally, which facilitated access to specialist and/or peer support:

> *"You're meeting other young people who have been in the same shoes as you... and if you need help you can get it, and you can just talk to people and make new friends who are in the same boat"* (Gemma).

For more than one participant, these services were seen as making the difference between life and death (see also Juetten and O'Loan, 2007):

> *"This is gonna sound really dramatic but I'd probably be dead if I never came here... because of the amount of bullying that you get and the way that people talk to you, the way that people react, you know, you just, you feel like crap, it's either someone's gonna end everything for you, or you're gonna end it for yourself"* (Becky).

The safety, confidentiality and/or identity validation that these environments provided were often said to be crucial because young people reported fearing coming out to parents and/or other staff. Specialist professionals and services were therefore important in supporting wellbeing. However, whilst specialist provision was often viewed as necessary, some staff expressed caution in case it was assumed that young LGBT people automatically need support. This may be a hard balance to strike for professionals: to offer or provide young (LGBT) people support, at the same time as not assuming or implying their need for it.

5. *Exploring professional practice*

This section examines some of the issues underlying professional practice. There was a clear subtext in some of the data, for example, that LGBT (young) people are thought to be marked by their visibility, also evidenced elsewhere (Formby et al, 2011). This enabled some staff to say that this area was "not

relevant" to them because they "didn't have any" LGBT young people in their school or using their service. This also suggests that addressing homophobia or transphobia is only relevant in situations where there are (known to be) LGBT young people, rather than desirable in its own right. By contrast, young people were more likely to see the relevance of discussions about sexuality, regardless of their own sexual identity. Some argued that greater discussion about LGB issues would lead to greater familiarity, and therefore greater 'acceptance':

> *"Being more open about it so it is not seen as something unusual or funny"* (Female heterosexual survey respondent aged 16)

> *"Opening people's eyes that being gay isn't wrong and that there are gay people around you and that you shouldn't be scared of them"* (Gemma).

Teachers, however, were more cautious, even in schools where there were explicit attempts to include LGB issues within the formal curriculum:

> *"I think for here it has to be slow and steady… I think I'm always careful because I know the Head* [teacher] *would expect me to be"* (Teacher A).

This caution on the part of teachers talking about homosexuality has been noted previously (Epstein, 2000), but it is interesting that it continues, given the wider context of increasing equalities legislation in the UK.

Where incidences of homophobia were conceptualised as bullying, particularly in relation to language use, this was likely to determine the approach schools might take. Whilst some were more likely to respond to the victim than the perpetrator (e.g. through counselling), others were keen to frame their response within a zero tolerance approach. This meant silencing or stopping all 'inappropriate' language use within an anti-bullying strategy. Whilst this met with some teacher support, youth service

workers were more likely to want to give young people the permission to voice potential homophobia, in order to generate discussion, and hopefully in the long-run greater awareness and/or changed attitudes.

In practice terms, it depended whether voicing particular opinions was interpreted as bullying, and therefore punishable, or whether those opinions were interpreted as a right for those young people, albeit perhaps something to be worked on or worked with. This latter approach arguably requires more complex input and time commitment from staff, and explicitly means giving young people the space to voice potential disapproval of LGB identities and relationships, which may not be compatible with the power dynamics or resources available within schools. Schools were therefore more likely to view (homophobic) bullying as individual acts perpetrated against other individuals, with little relationship to broader social structures or processes. This tended to present individualised 'punishment' and/or 'treatment' responses, rather than whole-class awareness-raising sessions. By comparison, group and/or open, discursive responses were more likely within youth services. This reflects different pedagogical traditions, with (at least some) youth service work drawing on a history of explicitly challenging oppression and/or seeking social justice (Green, 2011; NYA, 2004). Schooling, by contrast, is often characterised by 'right' and 'wrong', and teacher as authority figure (Phoenix, Frosh and Pattman, 2003; Wallis and VanEvery, 2000). Ellis (2007: 13-14) has argued that "attention to homophobia must be combined with a pedagogic focus on heteronormativity [but] this poses a challenge... [where] neo-liberal educational reforms seek to define certain disruptive identities as 'at risk'".

This 'at risk' approach is not without problems in that it could imply all LGBT youth need support by definition. Quinlivan (2002: 22) also pointed to lesbian and gay youth being understood as needing help, which means "heteronormative discourses are reinforced while representations of same-sex desire are abnormalized". In this study, some young people received unnecessary referral to support services; whilst some said "no thanks", in some schools this resulted in counselling referrals being understood as indicating "fault" (see above). A youth service worker was also concerned about the sector increasingly focussing on one-to-one work at the expense of group work and an analysis of "the social":

> *"We're introducing... a medical model... there is something wrong with the individual, you've got to fix it"* (Male youth service worker B, mainstream setting).

Recent moves to increase the numbers of positive gay role models in schools (Muir, 2011), which has received UK governmental support, whilst undeniably a step forward, may miss the bigger picture. That is, that formal and informal (education) environments have the potential to examine and challenge the social structures and processes within which homophobia operates, rather than reducing the issue exclusively to individuals, whether they be bullies or role models. The difficulty here might be how to move the debate on from individual bullying to examine social structures and processes within the commonly understood discourse of homophobia that has at its roots a suggestion of individual fears or phobias (Adam, 1998; Bryant and Vidal-Ortiz, 2008).

Moving to interrogate this broader picture would mean looking at (young people's) sexuality as a whole, wherein may lie the difficulty. This research identified a widespread discomfort about sex(uality) among professionals, summed up by one interviewee citing the adage "no sex please, we're British" (Male teacher B, LGBT lead). Sexual activity was also explicitly related to, or confused with, sexual and gender identity (see also Clarke, 1996; DePalma and Atkinson, 2006):

> *"It's basically sex isn't it? ...the majority of people think LGBT = sex ...so people naturally tend to shy away from that"* (Male teacher B).

Discomfort about sex(uality) was associated with embarrassment and potentially thinking they could 'turn' young people gay or be promoting sexual activity (see also DePalma and Atkinson, 2006; Quinlivan, 2002):

> *"In terms of teachers delivering the gay thing in school, I think it's still* [intakes breath] *'can't do that, 'coz we're encouraging kids to be gay'"* (Youth service worker A).

The idea that to discuss (homo)sexuality with young people is to promote it, or make it visible, appears to deny that (homo)sexuality is already present in young people's lives (DePalma and Atkinson, 2006; Moran, 2001). In trying or hoping to make (homo)sexuality invisible, workers have the potential to harm young (LGB) people's emerging identities and self-esteem by implying that certain (minority) sexual identities are something to be hidden and/or ashamed of:

> "[Invisibility] *makes you feel like... should you be ashamed about it?"* (Becky).

Participants (both staff and young people) said they were aware of staff avoiding the subjects of sexuality, sexual health and sex education within their work. Shying away from sex therefore may mean shying away from addressing homophobia. In this sense, it is easier or 'safer' to deal with individual cases of bullying than it is to deal with this bigger picture in (some) school environments because bullying and at risk agendas fundamentally desexualise and depoliticise the subject (Ellis, 2007; Monk, 2011; Quinlivan, 2002).

Ambivalence about sex also operated at an institutional level, with implications for supporting and/or teaching about LGBT equality, where some organisations blocked access to websites deemed inappropriate. This included websites targeted at including or supporting LGBT issues within the curriculum (e.g. see www.schools-out.org.uk). One teacher was clearly concerned about the message blocking content sent to pupils who may have been trying to access information or support.

Desire to maintain innocence and/or protect young people from sex or 'inappropriate' teaching/delivery (Ellis, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002) may therefore result in a context which contributes to homophobia, and in doing so can influence the wellbeing of LGB young people. One worker, for instance, described his satisfaction in taking a group to a Pride event and what he felt that had achieved in raising self-esteem, but his subsequent disappointment the following year:

> *"[I was]* somewhat disturbed the next time... it was deemed as not being appropriate to take young people down to gay Pride *[yet]* I thought that was probably one of the most powerful things I've ever managed to do for a group of young people"* (Youth service worker B).

This clearly raises questions about what is perceived to be appropriate support for young people, but also how settings can enable or constrain young people's ability to construct and manage their (sexual) identities.

6. Implications for identity management

Hostility towards, and/or invisibility of, LGB identities and relationships had implications for how staff and young people managed their (personal and professional) identities in differing contexts. In highlighting these interactions, I draw on understandings of identities as performative (Butler, 1990), as well as socially informed in that the identities or selves we construct are influenced by differing experiences and challenges (Mackintosh, 1968; Weeks, 1995). Callero (2003: 118-121), for example, has noted "the self is constituted within relations of control and is deeply embedded within systems of knowledge and discourse... the self is assumed to be a product of social interaction".

Generally, LGB young people reported wanting their sexual identities to be accepted, respected, and understood, but often felt that they were not taken seriously by the numbers of professionals or adults seeming to dismiss their sexual identity as a "phase", a "fad", as "confusion" or "youth", and even "greed" for those identifying as bisexual (see also Hillier and Harrison, 2004).

For young people negotiating their identities, these were clearly managed or presented differently in different situations, including within the research itself. One example relates to a small group discussion in which two participants shared their bi-curiosity feelings. The conversation took place (in private) within a mainstream youth service, but participants' awareness of their setting was made very clear when a group of young men entered the room. Whilst the research discussion paused, one of the (male) interview participants immediately joined in what could be termed homophobic banter, having been

discussing feelings about bi-curiosity only a moment before. Whilst this action may have secured his place among his peers, the disappointment on the face of his fellow (female) interviewee was evident, illustrating the different decisions young people make in managing or performing their (public) identities. In doing so, they draw on different sexual scripts and tell different sexual stories to construct different selves or identities with different people, at different times and/or in different contexts (Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Plummer, 1995).

Coming out about one's sexual identity is not a single moment in time, or an elongated single process, but part of an ongoing project of the self (Giddens, 1991). People's identities-in-process (Redman, 2000), or presentation of self, varies in different contexts, or on different stages (Goffman, 1959). Young people are therefore capable of constructing and asserting, or leaving 'hidden', multiple (aspects of) identities, depending on the situation. This has recently been described as strategic outness (Orne, 2011). Like Orne, I see coming out as a form of identity management, rather than the traditional (psychological) view of coming out as a stage of identity development. Orne (2011: 688) stresses that "few people are 'out to everyone regardless of circumstances or location'... [but] use practices, tools, and strategies... on a daily basis to manage not only who knows, but how and why others learn it". Young people (and staff) are able to choose which identity, or aspect of identity, they present, which has been interpreted as passing for heterosexual and/or covering LGB identities (O'Brien, 2008; Ward and Winstanley, 2005), which for some may be beneficial, at times:

> *"The worst thing to do is admit it"* (Mel, female attendee at mainstream youth service aged 15).

Young LGB people in this research were generally unlikely to demonstrate pride in their identities. The language they used to describe themselves, for example in "owning up to" or "admitting" they were gay, often appeared informed by a sense of shame or stigma, also documented elsewhere (Hillier and Harrison, 2004; McDermott, Roen and Scourfield, 2008). However, Cover (2012: 51, original emphasis) notes that "there is a need for the notion of coming out to be understood as beneficial *variably*", so we should not assume that to not be 'out' is necessarily a negative subject position.

Whilst homophobia as a social phenomenon was rarely acknowledged by professionals, young people illustrated the importance of social context in continually managing their identities. Within the research, for instance, one young man voiced some views widely held and deemed acceptable within a particular (single sex) group discussion, but on later joining a different (mixed) group, those same views were labelled as homophobic. The young man therefore went from expressing unremarkable views to being described as homophobic within the course of an evening. This highlights the potential for young people to police their own or others' views, and also has implications for how they manage/police their identities, recognising that some identities might be more or less acceptable in different contexts (DePalma and Atkinson, 2006; Phoenix, Frosh and Pattman, 2003).

The (sexual) identity of staff members may also become important in professional contexts, drawing on a tradition of youth service and community workers using the self within their practice (Green, 2011). There were young (LGB) people in the research who were clear they would prefer gay workers, which required youth service workers to present or perform a 'gay identity'. Some youth service workers were able to do this and consciously used their own sexual identity, drawing on personal experiences, within their work:

> *"I felt I ran the* [LGBT youth] *service better because I'd been there... you don't know what it's truly like until you've actually experienced it... you're constantly outing yourself but if it's making that young person feel more safe knowing..."* (Female youth service worker C, LGBT youth service).

Other gay workers, however, felt that their sexuality was not necessarily crucial to the service they provided, though some (heterosexual) teaching staff felt that gay workers being able to draw on personal experience within their work elicited more "powerful" responses from young people, which might make them more likely to challenge their own views. This desire to use "real" life stories within formal provision contrasts with traditional views of professional boundaries, particularly within schools

(DePalma and Atkinson, 2006; Rofes, 2000), where staff are expected to manage their identities through presenting only their 'professional' selves.

Possibly as part of their own identity management, some staff members were keen for issues about LGB identities to be covered by external specialists (see also Ellis, 2007), thereby potentially distancing themselves from the area:

> *"The more people we have from outside I think helping support staff is perhaps our best way forward"* (Teacher A).

This was not always thought to be the best way forward by those external specialists, however:

> *"The teacher does the condom stuff and that's fine, but the gay stuff they have to get somebody in, and it's like 'no you don't, you can do it yourself'... but it's having the confidence to do it"* (Youth service worker A).

It was not clear how much the desire to use external specialists or "real gay people" from some staff was an 'excuse' or way to avoid that aspect of delivery themselves, given the discomfort and/or lack of certainty described earlier. However, there was a strong perception among a number of participants (staff and young people) that some staff avoided this area in their work for fear of assumptions being made by other people that they might be gay themselves.

Drawing on Goffman (1963), I have called this issue stigma by association (see also Jones and Clarke, 2008; Redman, 2000). Some young people, for example, appeared reluctant to disclose their parents' or other relative's sexual identity with their peers. The issue was most often related to teachers, however, who were reported (by other staff and young people) to be reluctant to face the 'risk' or stigma of calling into question their own (assumed) heterosexuality if supporting LGB areas of work and/or young people. This could prevent challenges to homophobic language use or bullying; whilst

overhearing homophobic comments in school corridors was common for all participants, hearing teachers challenging this was far rarer, with some young people suggesting that teachers do not challenge this language because they "want to stay neutral" and do not want to be presumed to be gay. The issue of working or specialising in the field being understood as a 'clue' to individuals' sexual identity has been noted elsewhere (Orne, 2011). Whilst heterosexual staff members' identity management may become more apparent when their sexual identities are perceived to be under threat by association, LGB staff constantly manage their identities, choosing what to present or share at work and/or with young people.

Concerns about identity might come from heterosexual workers, but could also come from gay workers' fears of being 'outed' within the workplace. This is an issue for many gay workers, as evidenced previously, though space here does not allow a full review of this literature (Connell, 2012; Valentine, Wood and Plummer, 2009; Ward and Winstanley, 2005). However, I contend it is particularly significant for those working with young people because of fears concerning historical and ongoing prejudicial associations made about (particularly) gay men and paedophilia - what one participant referred to as potential "malicious allegations" from students (see also Redman, 2000; Willis, 2009). A body of work has evidenced issues about teacher disclosure in relation to sexuality, which has suggested widespread fears about being out in a work environment, potentially contributing to self-silencing, ill-health and/or departure from teaching altogether (Clarke, 1996; Connell, 2012). At the same time, guilt at remaining in the 'closet' has also been reported (Ferfolja, 2009). Whilst this shows the importance of providing a safe context in which staff can manage their identities, it also has implications for the health and wellbeing of young people who therefore may not see (positive) LGB identities in the (school) world around them which could support and/or validate their own identities.

Though there is less comparable literature regarding youth service workers specifically, in this study they appeared to find it easier than teachers to be or remain out at work, but even here it was reportedly rare to find an out worker in a mainstream, rather than an LGBT-specific, youth service.

Discussion and conclusion: Making the case for moving beyond bullying

Findings from this study support earlier research evidence, but also extend it to include youth services as well as schools. The data points to the prevalence of homophobia in some young people's lives, suggesting that contexts may not have changed markedly for some young people and/or the staff working with them, despite legal equalities changes (in the UK) in recent years. There were strong views in both schools and youth services from a variety of staff and young people about the 'unnaturalness' of same-sex relationships and/or the 'appropriateness' or relevance of talking about these and related issues within professional practice. This is broader than the legacy of Section 28, which in itself was linked to broader attitudes to sexuality, and the perceived need to protect young people from the threat of sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular (Clarke, 1996; Greenland and Nunney, 2008).

To conclude, this section will draw together some of the key findings from the research in order to highlight the importance of examining different perspectives alongside each other to more fully understand the complex contexts in which young people experience and manage their identities, and/or the prejudices they may face.

LGB invisibility within the curriculum, which could be described as institutionalised heterosexism, contributed to a broader context of prejudice, whether tied to school policies, professional practices and/or bullying amongst peers. Individual settings and community contexts did make a difference, however, with mainstream youth service workers uncertain about what they were allowed to talk about and/or what resources they were allowed to use in their settings. Whilst the teachers were more sure of their curriculum, some seemed uncertain about their own skills or confidence levels. There was also discernible variation in how different staff groups approached young people and/or the subjects of (homo)sexuality, homophobia and/or bullying, most clearly evident in how much they were willing to discuss issues, or disallow them as inappropriate and/or offensive. Broader issues about enduring

discomfort with, and/or ambivalence towards, sex and young people were clearly implicated in professional practice, and young people's experiences.

Whilst there were clear experiences of, and acceptance/resignation towards, bullying among young people, there was also (more) anger about schools' inadequate or inappropriate responses, and their broader policies and practices that were felt to contribute to homophobia. The influence of differing pedagogical traditions was evident in varying emphases placed upon social or individual/biomedical models of understanding and/or responding to what was identified as homophobia or bullying, with counselling services one of the most contested forms of support.

Some staff may draw on a history of anti-oppressive practice (Green, 2011) and/or the view that to not be out is to be part of the oppression (Jennings and MacGillivray, 2007), but others may not be prepared to face the (personal or professional) 'risk' this entails. As Orne (2011: 693) commented, "one cannot come out to just anyone, because that decision has repercussions". How individuals manage these decisions intersects with how they manage their wider identities and/or homophobia within what may be hostile or unsupportive contexts. For some staff and young people, approaches to (challenging) homophobia are intimately connected with approaches to their own identity, safety and personal and/or professional wellbeing. I acknowledge the (often emotional) debates about disclosure in teaching environments (and more broadly), but support Ferfolja's (2009: 389) contention that "even teachers who remain closeted and silenced or who 'pass' as heterosexual have power and choice... such silences do not necessarily equate to failure or oppression... individuals do not need to be 'out' to have agency". However, I would go further and argue that this research illustrates that there is not necessarily a polarised 'in' or 'out' (of the 'closet'), as workers' and young people's ongoing identity management possesses contextual fluidity (see also Connell, 2012). In this sense, 'coming out' can be a misnomer. This is not to suggest that LGB young people or workers are not "constrained and limited by relations of power" (Weeks, 1995: 31). Rather, I want to also acknowledge and highlight the agentic power of individuals in dealing with and living within these relations of power.

Young LGB people are not passive victims, but "strategic actors capable of making complex decisions and balancing several competing interests" (Orne, 2011: 685). However, their identity management may be constrained by dominant narrative frameworks on which they can draw (Woodiwiss, 2009). Currently, some settings are reinforcing an at risk agenda which has been dubbed the "Martyr-Target-Victim syndrome" (Rofes, 2004: 47) and the "deficit model" (Quinlivan, 2002: 25), with the influence of historical discourses about LGB identities being forms of mental illness still evident (Clarke, 1996; Ferfolja, 2009). As Ellis (2007: 19-20) argued, "those who identify/are identified as different are positioned as patients, victims, sufferers, or as being somehow 'at risk'". This article highlights the importance of examining social actors and interactions in their differing social environments, in order to understand the implications for curriculum delivery, and identity management, within these settings, whether among LGB or heterosexual staff and young people. We should acknowledge the links between young people's attitudes towards identities and the delivery and experience of professional practice. In reflecting on both school and youth services this research has identified the potential for differing professional capabilities, responses and understandings - an important area for further research.

In future policy and practice, thought needs to be given to how we support LGBT young people without creating an environment that suggests or assumes all LGBT young people need support, because they are LGBT, rather than they may need support, because of the social context in which they are living and managing their identities. In focusing on individualised anti-bullying and LGBT support agendas we may be (inadvertently) implying that being LGBT is part of the problem, and therefore the solution, rather than looking at how society and individuals respond to people being LGBT. It has been argued, for instance, that bullies are merely "over-zealous" guardians of the normative or dominant position (Davies, 2011), i.e. the assumed superiority of heterosexuality in the case of homophobic bullying. This dominant position therefore needs to be examined and addressed, as much as, if not more than, its individual guardians (defined as bullies). Bullying discourses also fundamentally neglect or divert attention away from the home environment, which this and other research suggests can be problematic (Monk, 2011; Valentine, Skelton and Butler, 2003). Schools and youth services focussing on

homophobia and transphobia, rather than bullying, would enable broader discussions and challenges to young people's (and staff members') understandings and practices. This would move beyond punishing the perpetrator and/or counselling the victim. Embedding explicit equalities and human rights approaches within education and youth services may achieve more, in the long-run (which is not to say that support and anti-bullying measures should not also be in place). Looking at the issues this way may also enable staff and organisations to see the relevance to all young people, and to move beyond 'tolerance' or 'acceptance' of particular people and/or groups, which was often the implicit subtext. Though recent UK public sector equality duties mean that schools, like other public bodies, must consider the equality of LGBT pupils (and staff) (GEO, 2011), evidence presented here suggests that this may take a while to impact upon practice.

Whilst limitations to this study are acknowledged in relation to size and potential for generalisation, it adds to existing literature by taking a broader view of the complex social contexts (including youth services) in which young people learn about, make sense of, and practice, identities. It thus indicates ways in which sociological perspectives can add to and expand the current (often psychology-based) body of work on bullying, specifically how broader social policy responses could be developed to improve experiences of youth-centred contexts that some people (whether staff or young people) find homophobic and/or constraining.

Acknowledgements

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