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Creating LGBT+ Identities and Well-being: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Subjective well-being is characterised as an important aspect of life. How one feels about themselves is essential when understanding their experiences. Previous literature states that LGBT+ people have lower levels of well-being than their heterosexual, cisgender counterparts. While there are many possible explanations for this, there is a distinct lack in studies exploring positive aspects of LGBT+ identities and wellbeing. This study consisted for semi-structured interviews with six LGBT+ participants, and focused on positive aspects of being LGBT+. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data and four main themes were identified: living authentically, importance of community, families of choice, and negative experiences. Negative experiences included three sub-themes: hiding oneself, homophobic/transphobic abuse, and stigma. The findings support those of past research and allow for further research to build upon in future.

KEY WORDS:	LGBT WELL-BEING	SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING	LGBT	LGBT IDENTITY	IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

Subjective Wellbeing

Subjective well-being (SWB) refers to a "persons cognitive and affective evaluations of [their own] life" (Diener et al., 2002: 63), encompassing thoughts about life, emotions, and feelings; made up of life satisfaction, positive affect and negative affect (Diener et al., 2002). Diener et al., (2003) state that SWB includes aspects which lay-people call happiness, fulfilment, life satisfaction, and peace. Research surrounding subjective wellbeing focuses on life satisfaction, happiness and psychological well-being (Office for National Statistics; ONS, 2011).

SWB is one of many measures of an individual and societies' quality of life; it is necessary for a good and healthy life, along with a good and healthy society (Diener et al., 2003). SWB is not a singular factor; rather, it is several separable but related variables (Diener et al., 2009). Early research by DeNeve and Cooper (1998) found traits most commonly associated with SBW were trust, emotional stability, desire for control, positive affect, self-esteem and tension.

SWB is of key importance; how others think and feel about themselves and their own lives is essential to understanding their experiences and feelings (Diener et al., 2003).

LGBT Identity

Sexual orientation refers to emotional, romantic, and sexual attractions to whomever; including the identity formulated based on these attractions and behaviours (American Psychological Association, 2008). Gender identity refers to ones' own experience of ones' own gender (Stonewall, 2015). It can remain the same as assigned sex at birth, or it can differ; it is ones' own internal sense of self as being female, male, both, or neither (Stonewall, 2015). Sexual orientation and gender identity inherently define and express relationships; therefore, defining our friendships and romantic relationships (American Psychological Association, 2008).

Identity development is often argued as a critical developmental factor in ones' life (Cramer, 2017); it often argued that identity is developed and formulated in adolescence (Marcia, 1980; Erikson, 1963), however, it can occur at any stage of life. Cass (1979) and D'Augelli (1994) developed models of identity development for homosexuality and lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) respectively.

Cass' (1979) homosexual identity formation model argues that there are six stages: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. While identity is present throughout the whole model, the formation of a LGB identity occurs from the tolerance stage onwards. Identity tolerance occurs when LGB identity is acknowledged, even if not yet accepted (Cass, 1979). Identity acceptance occurs when individuals make more LGB friends, which increases self-esteem and decreases alienation (Cass, 1979). Identity pride involves LGB individuals feeling proud of their identities, consuming LGB media, and promoting equality (Cass, 1979). Finally, identity synthesis involves the coming together of personal and

public identities. That is, their LGB identity is combined with all aspects of the self (Cass, 1979).

While these models have been very influential, they have been criticised for ignoring intersections of gender and sexuality (Clarke et al., 2010). The development of bisexual or transgender identities is absent (Clarke et al., 2010). Weinberg et al., (1994) developed a model of bisexual identity development and Clifford and Orford (2007) developed a model of trans identity development.

Weinberg et al's., (1994) model of bisexual identity development has four stages: initial confusion, finding and applying a label, settling into bisexual identity, and continued uncertainty. While some stages overlap with those of Cass and D'Augelli, the latter are new. Continued uncertainty may be present for some who adopt a bisexual label, however, this is not always the case (Clarke et al., 2010).

Clifford and Orford's (2010) model of trans identity development has three phases which differ to other models. These revolve around developing an awareness difference in gender, starting to change gender presentation, and acclimatising to a new life (Clifford and Orford, 2010).

Many stage theories attempt to categorise stages of developing healthy LGBT+ identities (Klein et al., 2015). Eliason and Schope (2007) reviewed stage theories of LGBT+ identity development, finding that these models varied only subtly. Five common themes were found: feelings of differentness, identity formation as a developmental process, the need for disclosure, the need for a stage of pride or cultural immersion, and the need for identity integration and synthesis (Eliason and Schope, 2007).

It is important when researching sexual and gender identity to remain critical. Stage theories, as proposed above, have been heavily criticised (Clarke, 2010). Stage theories conceptualising sexuality and gender assumes that these identities are fixed, and does not account for fluidity (Clarke, 2010). Throughout history, LGBT+ people have challenged heteronormativity, particularly in relation to gender norms; it is therefore imperative to account for this fluidity when conducting research (Clarke, 2010).

There is also the assumption that coming out is the final goal in developing LGBT+ identities, when often this is not the case (Klein et al., 2015). Coming out is not a linear process; LGBT+ people continuously come out throughout the lifetime, and stage theories do not allow for this fluid process (Klein et al., 2015).

Subjective Wellbeing and LGBT Identity

Well-being exists in both positive and negative factions, however, when referring to the LGBT+ community, the focus often remains negative (Ceatha, 2016). With suicide rates soaring within the LGBT+ community, it is unsurprising that this is the case (Bryan and Mayock, 2017). Prior research for the Supporting LGBT Lives study (Mayock et al., 2009) found a multi-faceted portrayal of issues within LGBT+ life, comprising of bullying, depression, homophobic and transphobic violence, along with alcohol and drug misuse. Several reviews conclude that LGBT+ people report lower levels of psychological wellbeing than their heterosexual counterparts (Warren et al., 2016; Rieger and Savin-Williams, 2012; King et al., 2008). While the methodology of studies pertaining SWB and

LGBT+ individuals has been criticised (Savin-Williams, 2012), it is generally accepted that an association between homosexuality and increased mental health risk (King et al., 2008).

It is therefore generally accepted that well-being of LGBT+ identified people is worse, with LGBT+ individuals more susceptible than the general population to mental illness (Habarth, 2008). LGBT+ people are at risk of mental disorders due to institutionalised prejudice, social exclusion, familial exclusion, social stress, and homophobia (King et al., 2008). These factors can lead to a sense of shame and internalised homophobic thoughts (King et al., 2003).

Riggle et al., (2016) state that when living in a heteronormative culture, which stigmatizes LGBT+ identities, those with these identities face a higher risk of stress and reduced well-being. It can be argued that this is to be expected when the social influence from a heteronormative culture results in dominant media surrounding heterosexuality (Paul and Frieden, 2008). This dominating media presence can affect the way that LGBT+ people struggle to deal with their sexual minority identity (Paul and Frieden, 2008).

As stated above, suicidality, depression, mental illness, and self-harm tend to be the main areas of focus (Ceatha, 2016) meaning it is becoming increasingly important to focus on more positive aspects of being LGBT+ (Formby, 2017), especially with the emergence of positive psychology. Due to this, some studies have begun to explore positive aspects of LGBT+ identity, with Riggle et al. (2008) exploring the positive aspects of being a lesbian or gay man. This study, along with Higa et al. (2014), Dickinson and Adams (2014), and Vaughan et al. (2014) focus on positive well-being, finding various themes present.

Riggle et al., (2008)'s study focused on the positive aspects of being a lesbian or gay man. While this study did not focus on the whole community, they found three main themes: creative and authentic living, empathy and social activity, and connection and belonging (Riggle et al., 2008). These recur in later research. Vaccaro and Newman (2017) found that group belonging and authentic friendships were important to first year LGBPQ students. Higa et al., (2014) found that LGBT+ identities were positive within LGBT+ youth in terms of peer networks, community involvement, and authenticity. Self-care and social connections were key themes of resilience in the LGBT+ community (Dickinson and Adams, 2014). Further, positive representation, fairness, and positive subjective experiences were consistent themes in LGBT-themed positive psychology articles (Vaughan et al., 2014).

While it is apparent that identity development is important; Halpin and Allen (2004) identified a shortage in studies which focus on positive impacts of LGBT+ identities. However, the authors used a population of only gay and bisexual males. To show this issue, Frost and Meyer (2012) state that many studies exploring the LGBT+ community focus primarily on the experiences of White gay and bisexual males. Consequently, it becomes virtually impossible to understand the experiences of the wider LGBT+ community. In a research setting, and real-life setting, a large part of the LGBT+ community is actively ignored (Frost and Meyer, 2012).

Ramirez et al., (2017) showed how BAME individuals were ignored when a Latinx LGBT+ night was targeted in the Orlando mass shooting. Hayfield et al. (2014) interviewed bisexual women, with participants stating they felt excluded from the LGBT+ community. These studies particularly highlight the ways that subgroups can be excluded. To combat this, the present research is aiming to be as intersectional and inclusive as possible to give voice to the more marginalised subgroups within the community, including BAME individuals, bisexual, pansexual and transgender individuals. This research aims to actively explore these identities; while many face similar experiences and difficulties, it is critical to remember that they are not the same (Meezan and Martin, 2003).

The present study aims to therefore build upon the suggestions provided in previous research, by exploring the well-being of self-identified members of the LGBT+ community. Building upon Riggle et al., (2008), the present study is hoping to frame well-being in a positive light and explore the positive aspects of being LGBT+ and creating LGBT+ identity.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was utilised as the topic focused on a specific group of people. According to Clarke et al., (2010), qualitative designs are particularly useful when studying LGBT+ populations as it allows for an exploration of the meanings which are attached to experiences. They further argue that qualitative designs are suited to 'giving voice' (Clarke et al., 2010:53) to marginalised communities, and therefore should be employed when studying LGBT+ communities.

Epistemology

The experiential approach within qualitative methodology will be used in this research. The experiential approach aims to identify and explore the meanings that people attach to their experiences and the way these meanings can be affected by culture and society (Clarke et al., 2010).

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used with seven participants, consisting of ten open-ended questions; all questions were related to the topic of LGBT+ identity development, and well-being. Semi-structured interviewing was used as the topic at hand is one which requires in-depth discussion, to fully understand each participants feelings of well-being, belonging, and identity development. The use of semi-structured interviews allows for in-depth data to be collected (Clarke et al., 2010) about the lives of the participants, (Willig., 2013). The interview was conducted with an interview schedule (*appendix 8)*. With LGBT+ identities being so varied and fluid, a flexible framework was required. Semi-structured interviews allow for such flexibility (Willig, 2013).

Procedure

Participants were recruited online via the MMU LGBT+ society page. They were asked to e-mail the researcher if interested in taking part. Following the e-mail, the researcher sent potential participants an information sheet (*appendix 5*) outlining the rationale for the study.

When participants were willing to take part in the interview, they were sent an invitation letter (*appendix 4).* They were given an information sheet and consent form (*appendix 2)*. When consent was obtained, participants took part in the semi-structured interview. After the interview, the participant was debriefed and created a unique code for their data (*both of which can be found in appendix 3)* and reminded they could withdraw at any point up until the February 28th, 2018.

Participants

An issue present was defining the population. Sexuality and gender have differing meanings in different contexts to different people (Clarke et al., 2010). Participants who self-identified as LGBT+ were recruited, to respect the meanings participants gave their identities (Clarke et al., 2010). Multiple and inclusive definitions of sexuality and gender are required to gain intersectional samples (Fish, 2008).

Sampling can be difficult with hard to reach populations (Sullivan and Losberg, 2003). Members of the LGBT+ community may be hard to reach, especially those who are: BAME, bisexual, or transgender, older, or not out (Meezan and Martin, 2003). Therefore, it is important to choose appropriate sampling methods. Meezan and Martin (2003) suggest that snowball sampling can overcome these problems.

Six participants were recruited by use of volunteer and snowball sampling. The researcher posted advertisements to advertise the research, including contact details, and participants volunteered. Whilst volunteer sampling was the primary method, snowball sampling was used when participants identified others who may be interested. The researcher also used their own networks, consisting of friends and acquaintances, to find suitable participants. Only those who identified as LGBT+ and over the age of 18 could participate.

Participants chose a pseudonym and their gender identity and sexuality will be briefly summarised in Table 1.

Pseudonym	**Age**	**Ethnic background**	**Gender identity**	**Sexuality**
Terry	22	White British	Trans man	Pansexual
Katie	22	White British	Cis-woman	Lesbian
Hannah			Cis-woman	Lesbian
Jake	21	White British	Queer	Queer
Ellie	25	White British	Cis-woman	Pansexual
Sam	22	White British	Cis-woman	Lesbian

Table 1.: Summary of participants' gender identity, sexuality and age.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was the chosen to analyse transcripts (*an excerpt can be found in appendix 6)* and is described as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting pattern within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 6). Thematic analysis includes searching for themes important to the phenomenon being researched (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). A theme captures important aspects about the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006), and are recurring features of accounts, characterising relevant experiences (King and Horrocks, 2010).

Braun and Clarke (2006) identified five main steps for conducting thematic analysis: familiarisation, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and naming themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It is essential to familiarise oneself within the data and note areas of interest, which will be used when coding the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Generating of initial codes consists of a list of interesting points to be explored (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Initial codes are the most basic aspect of the data collected, capturing key ideas (Lyons and Coyle, 2016). Developing initial codes involves organising data into meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005). In the present study, data-driven coding was used, meaning that themes and codes depend on the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Searching for themes allows for the analysis to be refocused; broader themes instead of individualised codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Different codes combine to create larger themes, become their own, or become a sub-theme. Reviewing themes involves refining themes. The final stage of defining and naming themes involves further refinement of themes and analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that when conducting thematic analysis, it's important to acknowledge the influence from the researcher. It is important to acknowledge that themes do not simply emerge from the data itself (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Ethics

The research was conducted within accordance to the ethical guidelines set forth by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2009). A completed ethical approval form can be found in *appendix 1.* The ethics code by the BPS (2009) outlines four key ethical principles: respect, competence, responsibility and integrity. In the present study, participants were given a brief and information sheet pertaining the study, and if happy to take part, were given a consent form to read and sign. Participants were assured for their right to withdraw at any point at the start and end of the interview process. All participants were debriefed, and the anonymity of participants was assured via the use of pseudonyms. As the research could be a sensitive area for some, participants were given a list of resources suited to LGBT+ issues and sensitivities.

Quality Criteria

Having quality criteria in qualitative data ensures that research is of a high quality (Sullivan et al., 2014). The quality criteria in qualitative research embodies intersubjective

agreement and reasoning (Lincoln et al., 2011). Lincoln et al., (2011) summarise quality criteria in qualitative research as being trustworthy and authentic. Henwood and Pidgeon (1992, cited in Willig, 2013) proposed seven attributes to good quality research: the importance of fit, integration of theory, reflexivity, documentation, theoretical sampling and negative case analysis, sensitivity to negotiated realities, and transferability.

Analysis and Discussion

When conducting the thematic analysis, four key themes were identified out of thirty-eight nodes. These nodes included closeness, defiance, education, pride and stigma. The codes were grouped into four main themes: living authentically, importance of community, families of choice, and negative experiences. Negative experiences has three identified subthemes: hiding oneself, homophobic/transphobic abuse, and stigma. The themes identified will be discussed, and a thematic table can be found in *appendix 7* with further quotations.

Living Authentically

Vannini and Franzese (2008:1621) state that authenticity is a complex concept referring to truthfulness, originality, sincerity, and "the feeling and practice of being true to oneself". In the present study, participants stated being able to live true to themselves was important in terms of their own well-being. Riggle et al., (2008) found that living authentically was integral with the lesbians and gay men interviewed. Also, similarly to Riggle et al., (2008), participants spoke of being able to be themselves.

"Just being yourself, and not having to pretend to be something or someone else"
(Hannah: line 70)

The above quote from Hannah demonstrates being able to live honestly and authentically. Similarly to Hannah, Sam also spoke about being an out lesbian, and how that allowed her "*that freedom […] of [her] truth" (41)* by *"being whoever you wanted to be and doing what you wanted to do*" (13-14). A participant in Vaccaro and Newman's (2017) study states that being authentic meant being out and having the freedom to be themselves, while finding belonging in friendships, which is a similar statement to the quotations displayed.

Authenticity varies across different contexts and experiences, and are subject to individual differences (Peets and Hodges, 2017); yet, the present research demonstrates how living authentically is a singular concept that many members of the LGBT+ community strive for.

Authenticity is an important aspect of psychological well-being (Riggle et al., 2016). LGBT+ people often express the importance of being themselves, feeling at comfort with their identity, and being able to share their identity with others (Riggle et al., 2016). In a sample of 145 LGBTQ people, Graham et al., (2016) found that LGBTQ-specific authenticity was significantly associated with an increased level of emotional-wellbeing. Earlier research by Goldman and Kerins (2002) also found a higher score of authenticity

was positively related to self-esteem levels and psychological wellbeing. This importance can be seen in the quote below by Ellie:

"It's meant I can be me! It's meant that I've felt comfortable being myself, not only in a relationship, but in my parents' homes" (Ellie: 81-82)

Shilo and Savaya (2011) state that LGBT+ people, when coming out, are highly concerned with the reactions their parents have. Parental acceptance and support further psychological well-being of LGBT+ individuals (Goldfried and Goldfried, 2001). This explains why it is important for Ellie to feel that she can comfortably exist in her parents' homes. Feelings of authenticity with parents was associated with less depressive symptoms (Peets and Hodges, 2017), which can explain the importance it has to Ellie. Goldner and Berenshtein-Dagan (2016) found similar results; 'true-self', authentic behaviour with parents was linked to fewer emotional issues and behavioural problems.

Importance of community

Participants spoke of how important it is to have deep and meaningful communities after coming out. Shared experiences allow for more supportive and close friendships (Peets and Hodges, 2017). Sharing sexual or gender identities with others is argued to contribute to well-being and belonging (Formby, 2017). These similarities often lead to mutual understanding (Formby, 2017), which is illustrated below.

"there is a better understanding amongst the community so you're more likely to form closer connections to likeminded people" (Jake: 95-96)

"I've had the chance to make my own community of like-minded people" (Terry: 286)

Both Jake and Terry discuss having communities of like-minded people. These communities often foster feelings of belonging (Formby, 2017). It is generally accepted that feelings of belonging are important in relation to well-being, particularly in terms of transgender community belonging (Barr et al., 2016). Roffey (2013) argues that belonging is a protective factor for those who experience hardships or adversity. To those within the LGBT+ community, it is clear why belongingness is so important.

Similarly to belonging, an important part of community is argued to be finding other people like themselves (Formby, 2017). This is a search that many LGBT+ have throughout their lives; finding others who are like them is important and leads to feelings of validity (Formby, 2017).

"When I moved to university […] and met people who were similar to me, I think I started to solidify what it means for me to be gay and that identity" (Sam: 81-82)

The above illustrates how meeting other people who identified as LGBT+ allowed Sam to explore her identity.

LGBT+ people who can see themselves in others who were confident and happy in their identities, is beneficial to well-being and happiness (Formby, 2017). Vaccaro and Newman (2017), in their research surrounding belonging in LGBPQ students, found that belonging to the wider university community, and smaller LGBT+ communities on campus was a highly positive factor for well-being.

Families of choice

A family of choice stems from the idea that LGBT+ people create their own families, made up of other members of the LGBT+ community, because of hostility from their families of origin (Heaphy, 2016). Families of choice refer to the ways which all relationships can be included as a family, and are argued to be underpinned by friendship, autonomy, mutuality and patterns of relating. (Heaphy, 2016).

"I love the 'family' and friends I have because of being LGBT, it's wonderful thing to have people accept you as you just because they are in a similar position" (Ellie: 98-99)

Heaphy (2016) states that when creating families of choice, LGBT+ people are not mimicking 'real' families, but are instead consciously creating an alternative family which can provide the unconditional support and respect commonly associated with biological or legal families.

"I think you do make families of choice, when I came out as trans I was rejected by all of my family, I had nobody so I created my own family out of others like me" (Jake: 93-95)

Jake highlights here the importance of shared experiences within families of choice. Heaphy (2016) states that within an LGBT+ family of choice, all opt to participate in 'family' practices with one another; they do not exist to copy mainstream cultural guidelines that surround families, and are more likely to promote creativity and equality. Barr et al., (2016) found that transgender belongingness is important in the wellbeing and mental health of transgender people. Further, participants being able to express their transgender identities was positively related to well-being through community belongingness (Barr et al., 2016).

"there's a thing in the queer community where, obviously it's sad, but there's a lot of queer people in the community who've been rejected from their family, so you like, make your own family with the queers that you find in your life" (Terry: 287-288)

Negative experiences

While the research set out to explore positive areas of well-being in LGBT+ people, negatives codes were identified in all transcripts. Three further subthemes were identified within: hiding oneself, homophobic/transphobic abuse, and stigma.

Hiding oneself

Having to hide ones' identity can be argued to be the opposite of authenticity, however, Riggle et al., (2016) argue that LGBT+ people can still maintain authenticity while actively hiding their identity in situations which may be threatening. The hiding of ones' sexuality or gender identity is common within the LGBT+ community for various reasons (Klein et al., 2015), which has also gained attention in the media (BBC News, 2016).

King and Cortina (2010) state that LGBT+ people who fear disclosing their identity, do so due to perceived negative consequences. These could range from physical consequences, to psychological consequences (King and Cortina, 2010), which is shown in the following:

"I don't want to have to answer questions I don't want to answer, or be in a situation that's uncomfortable. So, it's just to make my life easier, I hide bits of it. I shouldn't have to, but I do" (Terry: 394-395)

Terry states that he occasionally hides his identity to avoid uncomfortable situations. Newheiser and Barreto (2014) state that those who possess any stigmatised identities tend to hide this from others to avoid such uncomfortable situations or judgement. They argue that hiding identity leads to lowered sense of belonging and well-being (Newheiser and Barreto, 2014).

"I feel like if I do get to fully come out, I'll feel happier. Having to hide it does make me sad." (Hannah: 92-93)

The above from Hannah confirms assumptions made in previous literature that being unable to come out leads to lower levels of well-being (Meyer, 2013) and potentially impair cognitive effect (Madera, 2010). McLean (2007) found that, when researching self-disclosure with bisexual people, that hiding specifics about their LGBT+ identity was a preferable option than being ostracised.

In another quotation from Hannah, found in the thematic table, she discusses how she will be disowned by her family if she comes out. McLean's (2007) explanation fits well with Hannah's circumstances by providing a "safety net that protects [her] from being […] rejected by loved ones" (McLean, 2007: 164). With rejection a possible consequence, it is not surprising that some LGBT+ people chose to hide their identities (Mohr and Sarno, 2016).

Many LGBT+ people create dual identities (Paul and Frieden, 2008) in relation to their LGBT+ and non-LGBT+ worlds. These worlds for Hannah are her friends who know of her identity, and her family who do not. This dual identity can cause strain on well-being (Paul and Frieden, 2008)

Coming out is an important aspect of both Cass (1979) and D'Augelli's (1994) stage models of developing an LGBT+ identity. Both argue that coming out is key to authenticity and being an LGBT+ person; Cass' (1979) in the identity tolerance stage onwards, and D'Augelli (1994) in becoming an LGB offspring. Both theories seem to argue that without coming out, one cannot have an LGBT+ identity. As previously noted, coming out is not a linear process (Klein et al., 2015), and it is argued that coming out is needed for a healthy lifestyle, when this is not the case (Klein et al., 2015).

Hiding oneself can often be used as a form of protection, for unprovoked abuse and attacks, which are discussed in the following subtheme.

Homophobic/transphobic Abuse

Prior research suggests that homophobia and transphobia contribute negatively to the well-being of LGBT+ people (Richards et al., 2018). The pervasive nature of homophobia and transphobia is illustrated below:

"you hear of a lot of trans people who have gone to the bathroom on a night out and ended up in hospital and stuff, so, I guess it has […] created a sense of fear." (Terry: 283-284)

Bell and Perry (2015) explored the extent to which LGBT hate crime can impact victims and nonvictims, finding that LGBT+ hate crimes have profound negative effects on the psychological and emotional well-being of nonvictims. While Terry stated in the interview that he had personally not experienced transphobic hate crimes, Bell and Perry (2014) found that hate crimes tended to result in a dramatic behaviour change, even in nonvictims. This highlights the fear that Terry describes from hearing about others' experiences.

Experiences of homophobic and transphobic abuse or bullying has been found to contribute directly to poor well-being (Ward, 2017). Those who have LGBT+ identities are likely to experience abuse in various forms, such as written, cyber, physical or the use of homophobic language amongst friends (Ward, 2017).

Hate crimes refer to acts of violence, aggression, or destruction in which the perpetrator's sole motivator is due to prejudice against social group, identity, or background (Duncan and Hatzenburhier, 2014). Some will argue that hate crimes against the LGBT+ community have decreased; however, numerous articles show that this is not the case (Butcher, 2018; Bulman, 2017). Stonewall (2017) found that hate crime against LGBT people in Britain has increased by 78% since 2013, which is something that Jake noted during the interview.

"I would say hate crime has increased, rather than decreased" (Jake: 132-133)

Knowledge of hate crime may help prepare the community, however, it can also lead to anxiety and changed behaviours (Bell and Perry, 2014).

Stigma

Stigma and hate crime coexist. Writing after the Pulse massacre in Orlando, Bialer and McIntosh (2016) state that although acceptance for LGBT+ people has increased, stigma is still present. Stigma can exist in many ways, microaggressions and biphobia will be focused on in this section.

This stigma can be presented overtly in the form of microaggressions (Nadal et al., 2011). These subtle forms of discrimination, communicating hostile messages, may be unintentional; yet, in relation to the LGBT+ community, the main microaggression is staring (Nadal et al., 2016; Nadal et al., 2011).

"Sometimes the odd person will give you a look" (Kate: 42)

Kate state that people give 'a look'; this could range anywhere from disgust, to lack of understanding (Nadal et al., 2011). Yet, one thing remains common from microaggressions, which is feeling uncomfortable, unsafe (Nadal et al., 2011), and vulnerable (Nadal et al., 2016) in public spaces.

Within the wider LGBT+ community, there is stigma which exists towards bisexual people. Hayfield et al., (2014) state that the mainstream media often frames those who come out as bisexual as attention seeking. Further, the idea that bisexual people are confused and undecided is rife in the LGBT+ community (Hayfield et al., 2014), leading to a complex relationship with the wider community. The quote below from Ellie illustrates this and shows how a label can lead to uncertainty or being shunned.

"the term bisexual has a so much stigma attached to it, and I've instantly regretted sometimes calling myself bisexual as it can lead to judgement, or sometimes even slut shaming, which can make me feel worse about not being straight or gay" (Ellie: 4-6)

Similarly to the feelings described above, a participant in Hayfield et al., (2014) stated feeling judgement from others in the LGBT+ community, especially from lesbians. It is argued that bisexual people aren't accepted by most lesbians or gay men, due to a lack of understanding and a lack of shared experience (Hayfield et al., 2014).

Also discussed in Hayfield et al., (2014) is the notion that bisexuality is a hypersexual identity, which ties in to Ellie describing instances of being 'slut shamed'. Hayfield et al., (2014) states that this notion of hypersexuality is the consequence of assumptions that bisexual people are attention seeking. It has been found that the notion of bisexual people as highly promiscuous and flirtatious is media driven and does not reflect upon lives experiences (Hayfield et al., 2014). It is therefore no surprise that people assume bisexual people are unfairly judged, due to the tropes displayed in the media.

While these negative experiences all differ in their manifestations, they coexist to present a prevalent issue in the LGBT community.

Overall discussion

The research conducted was able to explore positive aspects of being LGBT and relate this to well-being. In doing so, similar themes were identified to those in past research. Riggle et al., (2008) identified a theme of creative and authentic living. Higa et al., (2014) identified peers and involvement in the LGBT+ community as a positive factor. Riggle et al., (2008) also identified the importance of involvement in the LGBT+ community, while highlighting the notion of families of choice. The present research has been able to support the findings of previous studies, in the present time.

The research identified interrelated positive aspects of being LGBT+ and how these can affect well-being, with findings that can be further built upon. Further research may focus on exploring specific themes identified, such as authenticity and families of choice, or the sub-themes identified. Previous literature concludes that positive relationships, belonging, and meaning in life are important factors in life (Riggle et al., 2008), and the present study explored these areas in relation to LGBT+ identities. The participants in the study could appreciate how being LGBT+ provided them with families, authenticity and communities, while also disclosing more negative areas. Even with negative aspects present and identified, participants viewed their identity as more of a positive factor than a negative factor, similar to those in Higa et al., (2014)'s study.

Although the present research was intended to solely explore positive aspects of being LGBT+, it is virtually impossible to separate the negatives which occur (Mohr and Sarno, 2016; Bell and Perry, 2015). Higa et al., (2014) were unable to separate the positives and negatives of being LGBT+, and Halpin and Allen (2004) found that while happiness, self-esteem and life satisfaction were present in identity development, sadness and loneliness was also present.

Quality criteria were outlined and set; however, trustworthiness and credibility cannot be fully assumed. Each transcript was coded and analysed by the sole researcher, which may have led to potential bias and could not allow for triangulation of data (Vaccaro and Newman, 2017). The research can be transferred to other, similar areas, such as community involvement or feelings of belonging.

While the present research solidifies and contributes to existing literature regarding positive aspects of LGBT+ identities and well-being, there are limitations. The research aimed to be as intersectional as possible, with this need being identified by Frost and Meyer (2012); however, the sample obtained does not show intersectionality. In future, the use of stratified sampling may allow for a more intersectional sample (Robinson, 2014), as this would allow for stratified categories regarding gender, sexuality, ethnicity or age. Though, the use of stratified sampling would present issues as there is not a register of LGBT+ people in which this sample can be obtained (Clarke et al., 2010). Volunteer sampling was used in the present study, and while this allows for participants who want to share their experiences, there is a volunteer bias present (Bogaert, 1996).

Future research could focus on specific ethnic groups, or religious groups to allow for a non-White and diverse sample (Meezan and Martin, 2003). However, this could be difficult, with many religions having negative attitudes towards homosexuality (Gibbs, 2015). Those who grow up in religious families experience increased discrimination and internalised homophobia (Gibbs, 2015), as do ethnic minorities (Balsam et al., 2011).

Similarly to Vaccaro and Newman (2017), the present research may have yielded differing and more complex results with a more diverse sample. Participants had their own, different identities, yet identities which are further minoritized, such as asexual individuals, amongst others, were not present (Vaccaro and Newman, 2017). Individuals with these minoritized identities may have had different experiences and perspectives, as would LGBT+ people who had not come out (Higa et al., 2014). Perhaps research of this nature focusing on individuals not out may have found different positive aspects and more negative aspects (Higa et al., 2014).

The present study focused on those who identify as being LGBT+; however, some participants preferred describing their identities as queer. Further research in the area could be done with queer identities. There has been an increase in recent years of under 30-year-olds identifying as queer (Public Religion Research Institute, 2015). Being queer and being LGBT+ are often thought of synonymous, yet, they are not; a queer identity is focused on being free and fluid, against more structured LGBT+ identities. A participant in the present research described himself as queer in terms of gender and sexuality, also stating that LGBT+ identities required him to fit himself into a box which he did not identify with.

Despite the limitations of the sample and study, the findings from this research supports previous literature. While challenges are present when creating LGBT+ identities, from coming out to rejection, participants talked about accepting themselves and gaining understanding. Positives are present in the lives of LGBT+ people (Riggle et al., 2008), and should be further explored in future.

Reflexive Analysis

Reflexivity has been defined as “the project of examining how the researcher and intersubjective elements impact on and transform research” (Finlay and Gough, 2008:4). Horsburgh (2003, cited in Berger, 2015:221) states that reflexivity within qualitative research is essential “given that the researcher is intimately involved in both the processes and product of the research”. Having a reflexive position meant that the researcher could explore how personal experience of being a member of the LGBT+ community could have impacted the research.

Positioning reflexivity considers the role of the researchers’ values and assumptions, and how they can be informed by her background. Upon reflection, it is clear that the researcher was not neutral within the research as she had prior experience within the community, and her own beliefs and assumptions surrounding the community.

While researching the LGBT+ community, it is important for the researcher to maintain appropriate boundaries and avoid dual relationships with participants. LaSala (2003) suggests that this maintenance is vital to protecting participants and keeping a professional nature. With the area being sensitive to some participants it was important for the researcher to remain neutral when interviewing, and accepting that experiences differ (Willig, 2013)

It is also important to reflect on a potential ‘insider perspective’ (Meezan and Martin, 2003: p11) that researcher may have as an LGBT+ person. This perspective can be beneficial, but may also hinder the research (LaSala, 2003); therefore, it is important to continuously reflect upon this perspective. LGBT+ researchers may be more able to enter LGBT+ settings along with deeper knowledge about where and how to find participants, however, it is important not to exploit this knowledge (LaSala, 2003). Further, variation between LGBT+ subgroups leads to differing experiences and definitions (LaSala, 2003). Therefore, it is vital for the researcher to avoid generalising terms, constructs, meanings, and experiences.

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