

Working Paper 5

Lesbians, Bisexuals, Gay Men and Transgendered People ¹

John Vincent

Abstract

The paper argues that although writings on social exclusion have largely ignored “lesbigays” (lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered people), they can be socially excluded. It begins by contrasting the cultural acceptance of lesbigay images with the reality of discrimination and homophobia. It then gives instances of this discrimination, such as criminal attacks, harassment and legal discrimination, including “Clause 28”. The next section of the paper looks at developments in the US and Canada and emphasises progress made within the US library profession. The paper then turns to UK public library services, referring to past research, including the (presently unpublished) Burning Issues Group survey of public library provision in London. It also comments on the general lack of research on lesbigays and public libraries. The effect of “Clause 28” is considered. The paper also suggests that libraries could learn from developments in the field of museums. It is concluded that overall provision for lesbigays is still patchy, with little attention having been paid to the needs of lesbigay communities. Recommendations for action are made (April, 1999).

Introduction

Whilst much current writing about social exclusion has concentrated on its relationship to poverty, it is also clear that it is a much wider and more complex issue. Drawing on the work of Duffy [1995], Clive Miller² [1999] is working to produce a definition to encompass these wider issues:

“Duffy’s definition points to three factors that undermine the ability of socially excluded people to participate effectively. They often lack the material resources, i.e. they are living in poverty, and the skills and knowledge, that enable others to participate. They suffer direct and indirect discrimination by those who control access to economic, political, social and cultural life. They become distanced, and can become alienated, from mainstream society ... Hence the three groups of factors, the ability and resources of excluded individuals and groups, organisational and social attitudes and actions towards them, and some of the alienated

¹ In this paper, I have used the US term, lesbigay, to cover lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people

² The Office for Public Management is developing a framework and collaborative management model to support those public service managers who are trying to combat social exclusion/promote social inclusion. For further information, contact the Office at 252B Gray’s Inn Road, London WC1X 8JT (tel 0171-837 9600).

reactions combine to produce exclusion. Duffy's definition also shows that social exclusion is very closely bound up, but not totally synonymous, with poverty. It takes poverty into account in terms of lack of material resources but then goes further to define the social impact that it must have to be socially excluding." (p3)

Miller then goes on to argue, using people with disabilities and black people as examples, that people who may not be on or below the poverty line are still socially excluded:

"through direct and indirect discrimination, they are, regardless of their abilities and resources, denied access to jobs, career advancement, goods and services, and may be socially shunned or verbally and physically abused." (p4)

So far, writings on social exclusion have generally ignored lesbians, but, using these definitions, lesbians can clearly be socially excluded - if anyone doubts this, they have only to read the next section.

Background

We are living in strange times, with what seems to be a widening gap between the acceptance of cultural images and the reality of discrimination.

Lesbian images are everywhere: Hayley, the transgendered character in Granada Television's long-running "soap", *Coronation Street*; the adventures of Stuart, Vince and Nathan in Channel 4's ground-breaking series, *Queer as Folk* [1999]; lesbian poet U (Ursula) A Fanthorpe in the running to be Poet Laureate; Ian McKellen's well-reviewed performance as the gay film director, James Whale, in *Gods and Monsters* [1999]; Lily Savage not only has her own show but is also starring in the musical, *Annie*, on the London stage; Pam St Clement out as a star of BBC-TV's *EastEnders*; Waheed Alli ennobled; Dana International winning the Eurovision Song Contest in 1998.

Yet, at the same time, famous lesbians are still frightened of, or extremely cautious about, coming out - for example, according to Terry Sanderson [1999]:

"... there was the case of James Dreyfus [sic], who is ... making a tidy living out of playing the Nancy, firstly as PC Goodie in *The Thin Blue Line* and, more recently, in *Gimme, Gimme, Gimme* on BBC2. Over at *Elle* magazine, he was described as 'the straight-in-real-life actor'. Could it possibly be the same James Dreyfus who gave a coming-out interview a week earlier in the *Pink Paper*? ..." (p59).

although, in some cases, this may be because of fears over their future careers: after she came out, Ellen DeGeneres's series was cancelled (although the network deny it was because of her sexuality) [*Gay Times*, 1998a], and being thought lesbian still leaves people open to mockery and worse, for example as described in this article by Richard Williams [1999] following an incident between footballers Graeme Le Saux and Robbie Fowler:

"According to (a friend), Fowler had been taunting Le Saux throughout the match, calling him a 'poof' and a 'faggot'. While Le Saux was preparing to take a free kick in the second

half, Fowler turned his back, stuck out his bottom, and shouted ‘Come on, come on, give it to me up the arse.’ The friend said that Le Saux had complained to the referee and the linesman, who took no action against Fowler but booked Le Saux for time-wasting. When the Chelsea man further remonstrated with his opponent, telling him that he was a disgrace and that he had insulted his family, Fowler allegedly responded: ‘Fuck your family.’”

Williams contrasts this with the way in which the French media have treated the lesbian tennis star, Amélie Mauresmo - and thereby highlights another element of the UK scene, the readiness of the UK media to treat lesbigay issues as though they are scandalous: for example, the “Get this filth off our screens: outrage at gay kiss on *EastEnders*” [Wood, 1996].

The Le Saux/Fowler incident has at least focused some attention on this issue [*The Guardian*, 1999]:

“Sports Minister Tony Banks said yesterday that there was ‘an enormous amount of homophobia’ in sport at the same time as ‘probably a significant number of gay footballers and gay spectators’.”

The tragic later life of Justin Fashanu shows just what can happen to an out sportsman.

Just one further example [Wockner, 1999]:

“Gold medal swimmer Mark Tewksbury decided to reveal his gay sexuality during a public appearance at Toronto’s Buddies in Bad Times Theatre after losing a six-figure contract as a motivational speaker for an unnamed financial institution. The company had complained that the three-time Olympic medalist (sic), who set seven world records during his sporting career, was already ‘too openly gay’.”

Discrimination against lesbigays in the UK

Discrimination is everywhere. Before examining some examples in a little more detail, here are two powerful statements:

“Terri and I are fully aware that, as Black lesbians, raising Black children in a white, racist, sexist and homophobic society, we are fighting against a system that threatens to devour us and ‘our’ children. The dominant white culture impresses upon our children, from an early age, values that are alien to their experiences at home.” [Akanke, 1994, p102]

“Teacher: I don’t think a teacher is going to think an Asian or black kid is a homosexual, they just wouldn’t. They’ve got enough problems dealing with being black. Like you wouldn’t think of a handicapped person as a homosexual, would you? No, you just wouldn’t, would you?” [Mac an Ghail, 1994, p167]

Murder

the clear-up rate of lesbigay murders consistently falls behind that for other murders, and much criticism has been made of the police handling of cases [eg Richardson, 1997; Powell and Richardson, 1997b]; in the case of the murder of Michael Boothe in 1990, the police failed to follow up a number of leads, and, to date, have not charged anyone with this killing [Powell and Richardson, 1999] - indeed, it has been suggested that he was the “gay Stephen

Lawrence” [*Gay Times*, 1999e]. Vicky Powell and Colin Richardson’s analysis of 220 cases of murder of gay men since 1986 [Powell and Richardson, 1999]:

“suggests that almost two-thirds of gay murder victims are not acquainted in any way with their killer ... This means that gay murders are not so easy to solve, and goes some way to explaining why, according to our figures, the clear-up rate for murders of gay men is significantly lower than for that for murder as a whole.

In 1990 ... we have records of 28 murders of gay men in this country, of which nine were committed in Greater London. Nationally, six cases are still outstanding, representing a clear-up rate of less than 80 per cent. Of the London murders, three, all of which took place in west London, remain unsolved to this day, representing a clear-up rate of only 67 per cent. The clear-up rate for all murders in London that year was more than 80 per cent.” (p42)

People convicted of the murder of lesbigays are often given light sentences by their use of the ‘homosexual panic’ defence:

“Research by *Gay Times* shows that the ‘homosexual panic’ defence has been used successfully in at least ten cases in this country in the past nine years. In each of these cases, the courts accepted that the killer had been provoked when their victim made unwanted ‘homosexual advances’.” [Richardson, 1995].

This obviously is not just an UK problem. According to a report in *Gay Times* [1999c], “A lesbian, gay or transvestite person was murdered, on average, every three days in Brazil last year, according to statistics released by Grupo Gai da Bahia” and Matthew Shepard’s brutal murder in the US has focused attention on the extent of homophobia there.

Violent attacks, harassment and verbal abuse

a recent survey [Mason and Palmer, 1996] of over 4000 lesbians, bisexuals and gay men found that, in the last 5 years:

- a third of men and a quarter of women had experienced violent attacks
- 32% had been harassed
- 73% had suffered verbal abuse.

Bullying of young lesbigays

bullying of young lesbigays is very common, often having tragic consequences [see for example Rivers, 1995]. At the end of 1998, the Family Planning Association launched a training course aimed at those working with young people, in a bid to help professionals combat homophobic bullying of young lesbians and gay men. This issue had been given a high profile, following the death of a 15-year-old boy who committed suicide after years of bullying at school by pupils who thought he was gay [*Gay Times*, 1999a].

As Ken Livingstone [1998] states:

“The Millbank Tendency has developed the interesting line that it was ‘GLC excesses’ over lesbian and gay rights that prompted the Thatcher government to bring in clause 28. I make no apology for tackling this issue. The GLC funded a study which showed that amongst young lesbians and gays, half had experienced problems at school, many had been beaten up

because of their sexuality, some had been evicted from their homes and some had tried to commit suicide.”

The *Pink Paper* has launched a “Learn the Lesson” appeal which asked readers to write to the head-teachers of their old schools, telling them that they are gay, as part of a campaign to make life easier for lesbigays at school, and described the sort of harassment young lesbigays face [Reay-Smith, 1999].

The harassment and outing of politicians and other prominent people by the media

during the preparation of this paper, Nick Brown MP preempted being outed by *News of the world* by coming out, Ron Davies MP was dealing with the flood of rumours about his sexuality, following an attack on Clapham Common, and MEP Tom Spencer was outed following his ‘problems’ in Customs [Murphy and Moss, 1999]. Whilst there are obviously strong arguments for public figures to come out voluntarily - and there is also an argument for confronting closeted lesbigay politicians who vote against lesbigay issues - nevertheless the media still create unnecessary “news” about the lesbigay famous.

Discrimination at work

there is still no legislation to protect lesbian/gay employment rights. For example, a lesbian employee of South West Trains took her employer to court for refusing to allow her partner travel concessions awarded to non-married heterosexual partners of employees [Palmer, 1996]. In the event, her rights were not recognised by the UK Government or the European courts.

Discrimination by Health Authorities

a recent study has shown that, in 1997/98, English Health Authorities were spending only an average 20% of their HIV-prevention budgets on gay men, despite the fact that gay men account for over 60% of all new HIV cases each year [National AIDS Trust, 1999].

Life insurance/pension companies

life-insurance companies frequently discriminate against gay/bisexual men by refusing to allow them to take out policies: in some cases, they will allow a policy only if the man concerned has a test for HIV. Most company pension schemes do not recognise same-sex partners [Wood, 1998].

The continuing bar on out lesbigays being employed in the armed forces

whatever one’s view of wanting to serve in the armed forces, it is illegal to be out and to do so, and, following from this, discrimination is rife. Between 1978 and 1998, nearly 1,500 service personnel have been discharged by the Ministry of Defence because of being lesbigay; the organisation of lesbigay military personnel, Rank Outsider, reckons that another 600 staff were dismissed via other procedures, and that some 2,000 have left ‘voluntarily’ because of stress and persecution [Tatchell, 1998].

Lesbigays and religion

during the 1998 Lambeth Conference’s discussion of homosexuality (which they decided to condemn), the Archbishop of Canterbury “joined African and Asian bishops in opposing

more acceptance of lesbians and gay men. And in early October, he said he would continue to oppose attempts to reduce the age of consent for gay men.” [Powell, 1998b].

Age of consent

although the age of consent for gay men has been lowered to 18, it is still illegal for sexual activity to take place other than between “consenting” adults, and other than in private - it is, of course, entirely illegal for men under the age of 18 to have gay sexual activity.

Public displays of same-sex affection

commenting on the dangers of being attacked by passers-by, Robert Wintemute [1995] also says pithily:

“two men or two women can be fined simply for kissing in the street” (p501).

Privacy law

it is unlawful for gay sex to take place if more than two people are present: in January 1998, seven men were convicted for their part in a consensual sex party held in a private home [Tatchell, 1998b; *Gay Times*, 1999d].

Parenting

in relation to existing parents, for example, Wintemute [1995] identifies discrimination by the courts:

“Where a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person is already a biological and legal parent of a child, usually because of a dissolved heterosexual marriage, the courts frequently discriminate against them on the ground of the sexual orientation in deciding whether they, their former husband or wife, a relative, or a local authority should have custody or care and control of, or access to, the child.” [p512].

The continuing harassment of cottagers via the gross indecency laws

despite criticisms of this use of police time and public money - for example “Cottaging raid ‘a waste of public funds’ says judge” [*Gay Times*, 1998] - it continues - “60 men arrested in national sex crackdown” [Powell, 1995]. According to a recent article [Tatchell, 1998c]:

“The last time gross indecency prosecutions were lower than the 1996 figure (283) was 50 years earlier, in 1946, when the number of men proceeded against totalled 281. From 1946, prosecutions rose relentlessly for the next four decades ... the 1,717 prosecutions for gross indecency in 1989 were nearly double the number during the anti-gay witch-hunts of 1952-55 and four times the level in 1966, the year *before* law reform” [emphasis his].

The results are often tragic: “Two men die after Scottish cottaging crackdown” [Powell and Richardson, 1997a].

The continuing refusal by the Government to repeal “Clause 28”

(see below)

Discrimination against lesbian publications

the most famous recent example was the successful case brought against *Gay News* for blasphemous libel for its publication of an erotic poem about Jesus, but there have also been regular seizures by the Customs and Excise of lesbian publications entering the country; in 1995, the police and Customs raided the lesbian shop, Clone Zone, in London and seized magazines and videos [Hamilton, 1995]; and, in 1998, the police seized the book, *Mapplethorpe*, belonging to the Library of the University of Central England [Powell, 1998a].

Discrimination by omission

just as with all socially excluded groups, we are often omitted from history: for example, mainstream television can still show programmes of significance to lesbians without mentioning us (such as *The day Britain turned disco* [1999]).

“Clause 28”

What exactly is “Clause 28”? “Clause 28” was put on the statute books after a spate of anti-gay coverage in the media and high-profile controversy around some children’s books and education: for some background to this, as well as a critique of attempts by local authorities to deal with lesbian issues, see Davina Cooper [1994].

It was introduced into the Local Government Act [1988], and states:

“28 (1) The following section shall be inserted after section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986 (prohibition of political publicity) -

2A - (1) A local authority shall not -

(a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality;

(b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.”

It is, in my view, a highly discriminatory piece of legislation (I could not imagine anything similar being written about other socially excluded groups) which applies only to activities funded by local authorities, but does include public libraries. The present Government has made commitments to repeal this legislation, but these appear to be becoming less firm as time passes.

For further discussion of its effects on public libraries in the UK, please see below.

Fears of a further backlash

It is clear that any gains are fragile. For example, even a mainstream commentator has noted:

“Gay discos would do better to revive [the 1970s] sense of resistance, rather than its music ... despite the advances, equality is still a long way off, especially for working-class gays outside the major cities. And with the guard down, there’s no guarantee that the situation can’t go into reverse.” [Steel, 1999]

and, in the second volume of his monumental three-volume work on “The Information Age”, Manuel Castells [1997] also seems to see the potential for a gloomy future. He suggests that the lesbian movements are part of the last stages of patriarchalism, but that:

“there is no predetermined directionality in history ... A fundamental restoration, bringing patriarchalism back under the protection of divine law, may well reverse the process of undermining the patriarchal family, unwillingly induced by informational capitalism, and willingly pursued by cultural social movements.” (p242)

Lesbigays and public libraries in the US and Canada

In 1986, I wrote:

“Librarians are a key resource in helping to overcome some of these areas. Yet, very little has been done in the way of providing services to lesbians and gay men, and, indeed, there are still battles in some authorities over providing magazines. Those authorities which have developed services such as the provision of booklists and exhibitions are themselves often under attack ...” [Vincent, 1986b]

So, what has changed in the last 13 years? Before examining the state of public librarianship in the UK, it is salutary to look at the progress made in the US and Canada.

US society has similar (if not worse) discrimination towards lesbigays. Some current examples include the horrendous murder of Matthew Shepard (the 21-year-old student was lured from a bar in Laramie, Wyoming, in October 1998, driven out of town, beaten, robbed, and left tied to a fence in sub-zero temperatures) [Rodgerson, 1998], and, according to *Gay Times* [1998c),

“In the days following Matthew’s death, according to the gay Internet news service Wired Strategies, a lesbian was attacked in Minnesota after attending a vigil in his memory and suffered bruises and cuts; four men were beaten up in San Francisco by a gang yelling ‘fags’; two gay men were shot dead in California after being harassed repeatedly by a stranger; and a bisexual man in Cincinnati was found beaten and strangled in his home.”

in 13 states, homosexual and heterosexual oral and anal sex are banned [*Gay Times*, 1999b]; the general attacks on sexual freedom and the moral panic stirred up by the media in response

to men cruising in toilets, parks and truck stops [Rofes, 1999]; and Keith Boykin graphically describes the extent of homophobia and racism as a black gay man in the US [Boykin, 1998].

However, public libraries (and librarians generally) seem to be continuing to make real progress, despite vitriolic comments by some of our colleagues:

“I still find it reprehensible that an association I am a member of chooses to glorify homosexuals. The vast majority of the American people do not support such a lifestyle that flies in the face of sound family values and a healthy physical and mental well-being.” [Hartwell, 1992]

Via its Social Responsibilities Round Table, the American Library Association has established a network³ for examining and keeping up-to-date with major policy areas - these include the Feminist and the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Task Force (GLBTF) [SSRT, 1998]. The GLBTF was founded in 1970 (as the Task Force on Gay Liberation). Their activities include: making two annual book awards; presenting programmes at the ALA’s annual conference; publishing a quarterly newsletter; maintaining a clearinghouse of gay, lesbian and bisexual related bibliographies, directories and reading lists; holding “Read-Alouds” and social hours at ALA conferences [ALA, 1998].

The following quote from a New York newspaper makes a telling point: could we imagine the same being written about a central London library, for example?

“The music spans gay generations, from Judy Garland’s ‘The Man that Got Away’ to k.d. lang’s ‘Big-Boned Gal’ to the ‘We Shall Overcome’ of Broadway show tunes, ‘I Am What I Am.’ But this is not some eclectic circus of the disco mind. It’s the New York Public Library on 42d Street. And the songs bouncing off the library’s stately marble walls are not coming from some transgressive gay ghetto blaster, but from the library’s own speaker system, part of its epic exhibition of lesbian and gay history, ‘Becoming Visible: The Legacy of Stonewall.’” [Botello, 1994]

The US library profession also recognises the importance of listening to our own stories [Neely and Abif, 1996; Kester, 1997], and these two important publications emphasise how necessary it is for us to make our voices heard.

Significant articles about the library needs of gay and lesbian teenagers have also appeared in the US library press, which, for example, stress the importance of maintaining a fiction collection to “assuage the fears of young homosexuals” [Cockett, 1995]; emphasise the need to provide public library services for gay, lesbian, and bisexual teens [Hawkins, 1994]; and guide the librarian towards selecting positive materials - “Library materials that offer support to gay and lesbian teens can save lives” [Caywood, 1993].

³ in October 1998, these Task Forces, Committees and other Affiliates were: Alternatives in Print; Coretta Scott King Award (for Black authors and illustrators of children’s books who have promoted “better understanding and appreciation of the culture and contribution of all peoples to the realization of the American dream”); Environment; Feminist; Gay, lesbian and bisexual; Hunger, homelessness and poverty; International responsibilities.

A recent article on collection development included a valuable guide to “Evaluation of fiction literature for homophobia” [Stearns, 1996].

Yet it is also worth noting that, despite these advances, there are still major problems in terms of access to lesbian and gay materials, the result of what has been described as the insidious nature of heterosexism [Gough and Greenblatt, 1992]⁴. A national survey [Bryant, 1995] of 250 public and college libraries in the US found that 14% of respondents said that their libraries carried no books “with gay and lesbian themes or characters”. Eric Bryant observed that:

“Libraries across the country continue to downplay gay and lesbian issues in their collections and public service efforts”

and concluded that:

“A firm belief in outreach to all communities characterised most of the libraries with larger gay collections and organised services [however] ... the most frequent reply was that there were no gays in the respondents’ area, making outreach impossible.”

One notable exception was the San Francisco Public Library which had a stock of over 6,000 lesbian materials.

A more recent survey of 19 large urban US and Canadian library systems examined their catalogues to determine their holdings of 222 gay-related titles. Amongst other findings, a key one was that, in general, the Canadian libraries in the survey carried fewer titles and fewer copies per head than the US libraries did [Spence, 1998].

A recent small-scale survey [Joyce and Schrader, 1997] of 46 gay male users of one Canadian public library found that the public library was their most significant resource for information, and yet, despite considerable work to develop stock provision by the staff, the gay men surveyed were not aware of the stock.

Lesbians and public libraries in the UK

So, what progress has been made in the UK? What services can lesbians expect from their public libraries? And how are lesbian, bisexual, and gay workers treated - are our voices heard?

In a key (but, sadly, little-publicised) piece of research carried out in three London boroughs, Phil Brett [1992] came to some important conclusions. These included that:

“1. The results obtained from the questionnaire suggested that people thought lesbians and gay men should be treated as a target group for service provision ...”

⁴ This article also includes a useful framework for assessing service delivery, “Test your gay/lesbian service quotient”.

“2. People clearly felt that homosexuals were discriminated against in society and that libraries should not support such prejudice. This included the sample of the public which might have been perceived to have the opposite view. This opinion did, however, have limitations. For example, whilst the public survey indicated a desire that libraries should be non-homophobic there was opposition to libraries being anti-homophobic. The public were against libraries being used to fight discrimination as this was seen as political interference in the neutrality of the library. The library staff ... were in favour of an interventionist role ... The results of the survey suggest that in certain areas libraries might follow policies of which the public disapprove. Such as in the issue of gay titles in junior collections and the implementation of a ‘positive images’ policy. In both cases library staff were in favour, whilst the public were against (although in each case there was an important minority taking the opposite view). The acceptance of this indicates that those connected with libraries feel that whilst libraries should respond to the wishes of the general public there should be care taken to take into account the wishes of minorities. The balance between the two is not an easy one. There did however appear to be a consensus view that the library role is not just one of mirroring the lowest common denominator but educational. One could ask what the librarian’s response should be if the majority were against black authors being stocked ...”

“3. How far minorities are catered for again raises the question of whether a library should be merely non-discriminatory or be anti-discriminatory. The majority of answers from the broad based questionnaire were in favour of the latter, however, in practice this did not appear to be the case ... It would appear logical that for a library to be truly non-homophobic it cannot avoid taking a more active stance ... Stocking material which is available is a good first step, but what if that which is made available by publishers is minimal, as is the case with children’s books, reference material and large print? The material available is not balanced, the respondents agree that, so to merely replicate the publishers[‘] decisions is to replicate the bias. Therefore, a balanced stock is impossible. To achieve a balance libraries need to influence publishers to publish a wider choice.”

“4. ... The data collected in this paper appears to show that where libraries are involved in [operating equal opportunity] policies ... the service is improved ...”

“5. The lack of a written stock policy could be the reason for the identified gaps in provision. The reliance [on] provision by demand could, in the case of homosexuals[‘] position in society, mean a demand not articulated and therefore not provided for ... A written policy with guidelines on stock selection would help in diminishing the negative aspects of ‘censorship’ and promote the positive ones of ‘selection’ ...”

“6. ... In general the respondents felt that appropriate books about homosexuality should be stocked in the junior libraries ...”

“7. There were only a few concrete examples of Section 28 having any effect. A number of the respondents indicated that they felt that financial restrictions due to cuts have had a greater impact ...”

“8. The findings would seem to suggest that the majority of those questioned believed that a public library should attempt to provide a balanced stock. In attempting to do so it is necessary to acknowledge that it is not a balanced world. Libraries can not cure society’s failings but they can play a subjective role in attempting to provide material by or for people who either question society or are themselves questioned by society. In doing so a public library can make a contribution to humanity ...”

In her survey of the attitudes of library directors⁵ in Canada and the UK, Ann Curry [Curry, 1997] uncovered some interesting, and ultimately horrifying, attitudes:

“It is a dangerous political situation to say that the library promotes social change. If you say that with a hung council ... the library will get short shrift and funding reductions down the road” (UK director) (p42)

“[A] factor noted only by the British directors involves a different kind of ‘high’ demand: that of special interest groups and council politicians for ‘politically correct literature on politically correct themes’. Material dealing with women’s and gay/lesbian issues was mentioned specifically in this context. Four directors felt that their libraries were being exploited in a power struggle when they purchased widely and deeply in these areas, only to discover that the people who had demanded specific items were not reading them.” (p51)

“Most directors, while agreeing or strongly agreeing that ‘positive’ homosexual literature should be included in public library collections, feel that positive images should be provided for *all* groups in society and that negative images of homosexuals should also be provided.” [emphasis author’s own] (p69)

Curry concludes, worryingly, that “Overall, the British appear to be reluctantly compromising services to gays/lesbians to avoid Section 28 prosecution ...”, although she is also clear that personal views may have an effect:

“Sex, politics and religion are things which one keeps to oneself. I have no objection to homosexuality, provided it is kept quiet and out of sight as that sort of thing should be. I object to it being paraded.” (UK director) (p224)

This view appears to be prevalent, in that a recent report [Pluse and Prytherch, 1996] of a survey of some 500 pieces of research in progress (and which also included 433 suggestions from respondents for further research) included no mention of any research either in hand or required in relation to lesbian and gay issues.

In a recent article, Judy Hendry [Hendry, 1997] produced a valuable outline of the key ways in which lesbians are discriminated against, and, particularly, the effects of “Clause 28”, and concludes with a highly pertinent question:

“Can we, as librarians, justify ignoring and thereby condoning this contravention of democracy?”

A recent issue of *Community librarian* included two feature articles. In the first, Peter Fairbrother suggests “It’s now 1998, but sadly some prejudices still remain ... it often remains the case that titles with positive gay identities are rarely included in the materials collected by library and Information Centres” and he urges that “as with materials for other usually ignored [sic] groups, a positive effort needs to be made to ensure library stocks comprehensively reflect society as it is today.” [Fairbrother, 1998]

⁵ the views of 30 UK and 30 Canadian directors were surveyed

In a 'back to basics' article in the same issue, John Warburton [Warburton, 1998] suggests that we still need to look at ourselves (as service-providers), and consider establishing staff training programmes; consider lists of examples of materials which we could purchase and make available; look at catalogue access to lesbian/gay materials; and consider that "adverts encouraging gays to use their local libraries could be placed in the gay press." He also raises the thorny issue about the best arrangement of stock - in separate sections or amongst the rest?

This debate is continued in a letter in response to John Warburton's article by Evelyn Healy of Glasgow City Libraries and Archives, which sets out Glasgow's position [Healy, 1998]. She states (and, incidentally, gives some indication of the volume of stock held):

"Glasgow City Council believes that lesbians and gay men are entitled to the same rights as any other Glasgow resident ... our department liaises with representative organisations such as PHACE West and the Glasgow Women's Library ... After discussion, it was decided not to have separate sections for lesbians and gay men in our libraries for the following reasons. Highlighting lesbian and gay men [sic] material may act as a deterrent for those who do not wish to be identified as such but who have an interest in such material. *In most of our service points there would be insufficient material to sustain a separate section.* We do not highlight other areas of stock, and highlighting lesbian and gay men [sic] stock could be misconstrued as a form of discrimination. Highlighting such stock may lead to homophobic vandalism, which is counterproductive." [italics mine]

In October 1995, the Community Services Group of the Library Association put on a well-attended course, "Less equal than others", a course on library services for lesbians/gays; what was remarkable about this was that it was the first time that a Library Association group had organised a course on this topic⁶, and that, even in 1995, some attendees were nervous of being there, for fear that their employers might find out. (This concern on the part of library workers about discrimination seems to have been borne out by the small-scale survey undertaken by Philip Abbott [1998] who found that "discrimination exists on a corporate level", and the testimonies he incorporates highlight this).

This course was followed by two highly-successful courses organised by Southwark, "Burning Issues 1" and "Burning Issues 2". Participants from these courses were invited to attend a follow-up meeting, and, in 1996, the Burning Issues Group⁷ (BIG) was formed as a network for library workers interested or involved in service delivery to lesbians/gays.

In 1997, the BIG carried out a survey of public library provision in London, and the results (as yet unpublished) show just how patchy services are. Of the 33 library authorities surveyed, 12 did not reply. Of the remainder, only 2 indicated that they stocked music of

⁶ although the Association of Assistant Librarians, South-East Division, had organised sexuality awareness training for their committee [Montgomery and Behr, 1988], and Alison Behr had also organised a course for the Association of Assistant Librarians, South-East Division in 1990 on "Section 28: 2 years on" [Behr, 1990].

⁷ the Burning Issues Group (BIG) is now an Organisation in Liaison with the Library Association. BIG can be contacted by e-mail: <bissues@yahoo.com> or via Richard Pearce, Senior Librarian, Croydon Central Library, Katharine Street, Croydon CR9 1ET. e-mail address: <rpearce@library.croydon.gov.uk>

interest to lesbians, none stocked relevant talking books, and five did not take any specific periodicals or newspapers. Asked about the management of resources and services, only one authority had specific funding identified, only 5 had special sections, and only 9 organised any events, for example to tie in with Gay Pride (and one authority responded specifically that they did not have any events because there was a lack of political support). Asked about performance indicators or other ways in which they assessed the needs for and take-up of the services, most used only their issue figures, although 2 included users' comments, 2 looked at their stock turnover, one monitored periodicals usage, and two used quality assessment visits. This important survey showed the disparities in service provision, and, interestingly, indicated that provision is not just being made by the so-called "loony left" authorities. Many authorities were making every effort to develop service provision, despite lack of resources, yet, at the same time, there were clear indications of authorities treating their library users as all being the same or invisible: as so little surveying of the needs of lesbian users had been carried out, it is hardly surprising that these authorities could not say why a service was required. There was also a suggestion that those authorities which, in the past, had established services specifically targeted towards women, the Black communities, people with disabilities, and lesbians had largely abandoned these, either for budgetary reasons or for fear of being labelled "politically correct".

At a major Arts Council Conference held in April 1998⁸, one of the seminars, "Bigger issues - promoting literature with lesbians and gay men" led by Michael Clarke, Head of Libraries and Information Services, Leicester City Council, focused on the queer contribution to literature, the effects of "Clause 28" (the most insidious of which he identified as self-censorship), and strategies for inclusion. The key points to come out of the seminar [Arts Council, 1998] included:

- not all lesbians will identify themselves, so the audience is difficult to identify;
- "Section 28" has become an alibi for self-censorship and inactivity, and it needs to be repealed;
- technology could provide valuable developments, such as virtual readers groups;
- the National Year of Reading needs a lesbian and gay focus;
- a literary award for lesbian and gay writing (parallel to those awarded in the US) is needed;
- libraries must be proactive in contacting lesbian and gay groups in the community;
- there was a very small take-up at the Conference of this seminar (and one on disability issues)
- was this because librarians have not yet started to address these topics?

⁸ *Reading for Life*, 22-23 April 1998.

“Clause 28”

So, is the “Clause” having any real effect⁹?

Certainly, at the time, it did affect the services provided by some public libraries: for example, Calderdale, West Yorkshire, had refused to stock *Pink paper* after advice from their solicitors [*Library Association Record*, 1995a]; there were protests in Glasgow, after claims by the *Pink Paper* that it had been banned from all libraries in Glasgow [*Library Association Record*, 1995b]. Alison Behr [1990], who has regularly commented on the development of “Clause 28” for the Library Association, identified the key issues as the law’s lack of clarity and the dangers of self-censorship, and showed how it was being used to carry out a number of political moves, such as the disbanding of Ealing’s Lesbian and Gay Unit.

Gabrielle Bourn, in her study of museums’ provision [Bourn, 1994], says that:

“it seems that lesbian and gay exhibitions are not held and projects not planned because of real or imagined local authority pressure. This is particularly so since the introduction of Section 28 of the Local Government Act [1988], making the promotion of homosexuality illegal within local government. Despite the fact that no one has been prosecuted under this clause it is a convenient tool used by certain councillors, who are often already prejudiced against lesbians and gay men.”

Gabrielle Bourn then says that some museum professionals saw putting on lesbigay-related exhibitions as putting the museum at risk, and that:

“Other people spoke of timing exhibitions so that they did not coincide with the run up to local elections and thus be used to attack funding for arts and museums by conservative elements within a council. There were fears too of alienating a traditional museum audience and of local taxpayers complaining of exhibitions they considered unsuitable.”

Even the Library Association guidelines [Library Association, 1996] state that the wording of the legislation has led to “hesitation in promoting **services** for lesbians and gay men” [their emphasis].

Given the vagueness of this legislation, their advice in relation to the publishing of booklists is necessarily guarded:

“To publish such a list as part of a series with the intention of promoting the stock of the library is more likely to be considered legal” [their emphasis]
and their advice about community contacts seems to me to be confusing:

“... if a local authority intends to promote homosexuality by using its libraries to support homosexual community contacts, that is illegal. A public library is acting legally if it contacts

⁹ one area where “Clause 28” is having an impact is on the ability of social workers and other support people to assist gay men with learning difficulties to discover their sexuality, which could be interpreted as “promoting” homosexuality [Davidson-Paine and Corbett, 1995].

such groups as part of its normal business of making contacts within the local community with the intention of promoting the library service.” [their emphasis]

In terms of library stock, the guidelines have a positive stance, apart from the notion that materials “should be bought as part of a balanced library stock”: this raises the old chestnut about what constitutes “balance” - in the 1990s, do we really need to buy some positive material to “balance” the negative? Should we not be concerned to use our skills as librarians to select materials, thereby rejecting negative materials? (This issue has been widely discussed, for example by Jean Rogers of National Council for Civil Liberties (now Liberty), who differentiated between “censorship, which is a negative process of exclusion, and selection, which implies a more positive approach” [Atkins, 1988], and by the present author [Vincent, 1986].)

Despite previous attempts to provide guidance to library users, for example booklists produced by individual library authorities¹⁰ (or groups of authorities to tie into Gay Pride), there is currently very little available, and, at present, certainly nothing of the calibre of *Out on the shelves*¹¹ [Allen et al, 1989]. Could this be one effect of “Clause 28”?

Yet there are public library services which are providing high levels of service to lesbigays, but their work is very little reported (could this too be for fear of “Clause 28” and of being seen to “promote”?) One leading authority is Brighton and Hove which has provided not only successful collections of materials but also has a high level of user involvement in the provision. Mark Norman has recently studied the service [Norman, 1998], and concluded that:

“This study shows that the [lesbigay] Collection is an important information resource in Brighton & Hove for the [lesbigay] community ... the Collection appears to be successful because it attempts to fulfil gay men and lesbians’ different information needs ... Respondents’ reasons for use suggest the [lesbigay] Collection has important educational, cultural and economic roles, providing access to resources that may be difficult to find or expensive ... Respondents were aware [that lesbigay] services are poor in the UK and praise the Collection for being better than other library authorities. Their comments suggest some have high expectations of the Collection, requiring closer liaison with them to prevent expectations from greatly exceeding library capabilities.”

So, despite some exciting initiatives by particular library services (or individual library workers), overall provision is still extremely patchy.

It is salutary to reflect on this lack of real development in the light of Richard Ashby’s pioneering article [Ashby, 1987], in which he said that the library profession was ignoring gay and lesbian issues, and that, whilst there were some developments in provision - particularly in urban communities - there was lack of recognition of the isolation of many lesbigays. Richard Ashby called for attention to the following:

¹⁰ such as those produced by Lambeth Library Service, *Creative writing by and about gay men* and *Stories and poems by and about lesbian women* (both June 1987)

¹¹ A revised edition is due to be published shortly.

- staff training
- the development of materials selection policies, leading to effective selection practice
- greater assistance to lesbian and gay users to find their way around libraries
- the urgent need to talk to lesbians and their organisations in the community.

It is interesting to note that parallel debates are taking place within the field of museums, especially over the dilemma of visibility versus inclusion. There has recently been a number of major initiatives, including the exhibition of gay men's art at the Open Museum in Glasgow; exhibitions to mark Gay Pride at Croydon Museum; a Science Museum exhibition on health, which included AIDS and gay men¹², and perhaps public libraries could learn something from this.

Conclusions

Judging by the results of the BIG survey, it is salutary to think that we still rely on the goodwill of particular individuals for a key public service, rather than expecting such a service to be provided as a matter of course - this could not be the case in 1999 with regard to services for the black community, for example, and it is an indictment of the UK public library scene that this should still be the case for lesbians.

Despite occasional flurries of activity in the librarianship press, no real, concentrated attention is being paid to the needs of the lesbian communities, nor are many library workers relating their services to the wider (inter)national picture of discrimination and social exclusion.

As indicated in the recommendations which follow, we need to take some action now.

To quote Steven Joyce:

“I am not saying that one need to take a stand on every social issue, but those that sit on the fence ought to think about who built that fence. By adopting a voice librarians can give voice to others who would not normally have one. The fence will never go away, but socially responsible librarians can help to construct a few gates.” (p13)

Recommendations

¹² my thanks to Rachel Hasted at Croydon Museum for this information

1. further research into the library needs of lesbians to produce a report parallel to that by Patrick Roach and Marlene Morrison [1998]
2. public library authorities produce and implement long-term strategies for tackling social exclusion, to involve: targeting priority needs; secure, sustainable funding; advocacy and innovation; monitoring and evaluation
3. the establishment of a national group as a fully-constituted part of the Library Association (parallel to the American Library Association SRRT)
4. training, both in areas of service delivery and stock awareness (one useful approach would be to incorporate this in the programme for “Branching out”¹³), including the development of staff training to gain awareness of lesbian needs and to combat heterosexism
5. the Library Association and its branches and groups should draw attention to the iniquities of “Clause 28” and continue to press at the highest levels for its repeal
6. research needs to be carried out into IT developments, such as virtual readers groups (as suggested at the Arts Council Conference)
7. following another recommendation of the Arts Council Conference, the setting up of a literary award for lesbian and gay writing, perhaps organised via the national focus group
8. further research into the current extent of community contact by public libraries, with recommendations for good practice
9. develop ways of supporting lesbian communities in their own analyses of their requirements
10. develop meaningful partnerships between public libraries and lesbian communities (eg based on common objectives, shared resources)
11. further study of the ways in which public libraries should deal with policy and service provision in areas with which their community may not agree
12. research into the effects of supplier selection on the available ranges of materials of relevance to lesbians
13. public libraries should continue to raise with materials suppliers (publishers, booksellers, library suppliers, authors, illustrators) the range of materials available and gaps in that provision (such as large print publishing of relevant lesbian material)

¹³ the Society of Chief Librarians-led training initiative to develop approaches for librarians in promoting books and reading.

14. the development of materials selection policies to cover the requirements of lesbians
15. research into comparisons of provision with other sectors, such as museums, the arts
16. the Library Association and local government organisations to press for the (re)introduction of equal opportunity policies into all local authorities, and to ensure that lesbian issues are included

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