

Institution: The Open University

Unit of Assessment: C23 Sociology

Title of case study: Changing policy, practice and public understandings of sexualities and intimate relationships in the UK

1. Summary of the impact

Through the production of policy and practice reports, public engagement events, provision of continuing professional development (CPD) and training for practitioners, and dialogue with key stakeholders in government, the research team on sexuality and intimacy in the OU has had a direct impact on policy and practice concerning intimate lives in the UK. In particular, they have effected change in policy and public understandings of both bisexuality and intimate relationships. Underpinning this work is a motivation to shape contemporary debates about our intimate lives to further social justice and improve quality of life.

2. Underpinning research

As members of the Research Centre for Citizenship, Identities and Governance (CCIG), colleagues have been involved in a number of associated projects on sex, sexualities and relationships over the past eight years. These have included work on family lives (Gabb, Fink), lesbian and gay parenthood (Gabb, Langdridge), adoption (Fink), migrant families and transnational intimacies (Erel), sadomasochism (Langdridge, Barker), bisexuality (Barker), and relationship therapy (Vossler, Barker, Langdridge). Two leading journals were founded and continue to be edited by group members: *Psychology & Sexuality*, published by Taylor and Francis (Barker, Langdridge), and *Families, Relationships and Societies*, published by Policy Press (Featherstone, Gabb).

Members of this sexuality and relationships group have conducted a number of studies exploring different minority community understandings of sexuality and relationships, often working at the interstices of the psychological and social. For instance, using data from her empirical research, Gabb has published widely on same-sex and heterosexual family experience and how the absence–presence of children impact on family sexuality and intimacy in parental relationships. Barker has headed up BiUK (the UK national organisation for bisexual research and activism), working closely with bisexual communities to conduct a series of linked grass-roots research projects into UK bisexual experience, including the annual BiCon survey. OU research on bisexuality, specifically, has informed two national and two international conferences (BiReCon and BiReConUS), with this work culminating in the production of *The Bisexuality Report*. Langdridge and Barker have drawn on their various research studies to bring together academic work with writing from activists, practitioners and community members in two edited collections on sadomasochism and consensual non-monogamous relationships, amongst numerous other academic articles.

Research on couple relationships and family lives is embedded in and developed through policy, practice and community contexts. This work has been advanced through collaboration with national third sector organisations (Gabb, Fink, Vossler – Relate; Gabb – Tavistock Foundation; Barker – COSRT and the national LGB&T partnership) and community networks (Fink, Community Action MK; Milton Keynes Community Foundation; Barker, BiCon, BCN, The Bisexual Index). Erel's research on migration, ethnicity and class foregrounds the agency and subjectivity of migrant women. She holds an advisory role with the Roj Women's Association, a group who submitted to the United Nations Committee Against Torture (November 2010) resulting in their inclusion in the Concluding Observations (paragraph 19) (<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cat/docs/CAT.C.TUR.CO.3.pdf>). Erel is also on the Management Committee of the SAFRA project, providing social support for lesbian, bisexual and transgender Muslim women.

3. References to the research

1. Barker, M., Bowes-Catton, H., Iantaffi, A., Cassidy, A. and Brewer, L. (2008) 'British bisexuality: A snapshot of bisexual identities in the UK', *Journal of Bisexuality*, 8 (1&2), pp. 141–162.
2. Erel, U., Williams, F. and Brennan, D. (eds) (2012) 'Transnational care: changing formations of citizenship, family and generation', *Social Politics*, Special Issue, vol. 19, no. 1.
3. Fink, J. and Lomax, H. (eds) (2012) 'Images and inequalities: implications for policy and research', *Critical Social Policy*, Themed Issue, vol. 32, no. 1.
4. Gabb, J. (2008) *Researching intimacy in families*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 211pp, ISBN 978-0-230-52722-5. (Winner of the 2009 BSA Philip Abrams Memorial prize for the best sole-authored first book in sociology in the UK. Second edition published 2010, including new foreword).
5. Langdridge, D. (2013) 'Gay fathers, gay citizenship: on the power of futurism and assimilation' *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 17, no. 6–7, pp. 713–726.
6. Vossler, A. (2004) 'The participation of children and adolescents in family counselling: the German experience', *Counseling and Psychotherapy Research*, vol. 4, pp. 54–61.

Key funded projects include:

1. *Behind Closed Doors: Researching Intimacy and Sexuality in Families* (Gabb, ESRC RES-000-220854 - £47,700.45)
2. *Enduring Love?* (Gabb & Fink, ESRC RES-062-23-3056 – £507,231)
3. *Mapping the Future of the UK Childcare sector* (Fink and St. Francis Children's Society, KTP – £11,000)
4. *Visual Dialogues: New Agendas in Inequalities Research* (Lomax, Fink, Rose & Whiting, RES-451-26-0722 – £18,000).

4. Details of the impact

Below we provide evidence of three distinct, though interlinked, impacts driven by our research:

1. Advancing policy and public understandings of bisexuality

The Open University and BiUK published *The Bisexuality Report*, which summarises key national and international research and advances recommendations for policy and practice. The report has led to the following policy impact:

- The Government Equalities Office has met regularly with the authors to discuss implementation of the report's recommendations.
- On the strength of the report Barker has been invited to be a member of the government-funded Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender (LGB&T) Partnership and the LGB&T Chief Executives Network.
- A summary of the report findings on health has already been included in the Public Health Toolkit Document for Local Authorities launched in Parliament in April 2013. This toolkit will have a significant impact on the delivery of public health on a national scale.
- The report has informed public debate and the understanding of bisexuality. It has been endorsed by national LGBT organisations including Stonewall and Pink Therapy. *The Bisexuality Report* has been downloaded over 50,000 times since publication in February 2012 and been discussed in the national and international press.

2) Impact on policy and public understanding of relationships

The project team of *Enduring Love?* has impacted on both policy and public understanding of couple relations:

- The *Enduring Love?* project has helped shape the Department for Education (DfE) agenda, mainstreaming 'public service' relationship education and couple support. Invited presentations

Impact case study (REF3b)

of findings have been completed at the DfE (February 2013), Relate (Annual Conference 2012 and 2013), One Plus One (October 2013), and Tavistock Institute.

- The research team has impacted on the democratic debate on couple relationships. They have been invited to participate in all-party parliamentary briefings, receptions and consultation events, including House of Commons (July 2013 and April 2012), Houses of Parliament (February 2013) and Windsor Castle (March 2012).
- The project is contributing to public interest in what makes couples stay together. A series of iTunes audios and videos have been produced (Gabb and Fink) that speak to a general audience and received over 24,000 hits on their launch. Findings and reports of the research have also been disseminated to wider publics via involvement in radio programmes (including BBC's *Woman's Hour*) and a number of large circulation print publications, such as *The Metro* (14 February 2013) and *The Sun* (16 January 2011).
- In a related project, Barker has contributed to public debate and understanding of relationships by authoring a book for a general audience on relationships and maintaining an associated blog, *Rewriting the Rules*. Both received considerable media coverage (e.g. the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, *DIVA* and *Elle* magazines, BBC radio and television).
- Fink's research has impacted on Milton Keynes residents' understanding of the dynamics of poverty and place in children's lives and family relationships. She organised and participated in a number of successful knowledge exchange activities with Milton Keynes' residents including children's workshop participation and attendance by local residents and councillors at the *Second International Visual Methods Conference* (2011).
- Fink also contributed to local understanding of changes in adoption policies. Fink's Knowledge Transfer Partnership with St Francis Children's Society (SFCS), Milton Keynes, resulted in a (confidential) report for SFCS and publication (2011) has disseminated findings about shifts in adoption policy and practice to both practitioner and academic audiences.

3) Impact on professional practice

Barker, Vossler and Langdridge are psychotherapists and trainers in the areas of sexual and/or relationship therapy who exercise wider impact through their established links with key professional bodies in the field.

- **Impact of 2012 British Psychological Society's guidelines on working psychotherapeutically with sexual and gender minorities.** Barker and Langdridge's work underpins the 2012 British Psychological Society's guidelines on working psychotherapeutically with sexual and gender minorities, where they have been key members of the working party. These are the first UK guidelines on these matters for UK psychologists and will have a significant impact on practice.
- **Training of professionals.** Vossler, Langdridge and Barker have all undertaken numerous workshops for professionals including: workshops for Relate (Vossler, Barker) and continuing professional development days for COSRT (Barker) and Pink Therapy (Langdridge, Barker).
- **Impact on the future of psychosexual and relationship therapy in the UK.** Barker has been responsible for producing the public-facing material on the COSRT website and organising their conferences, which shape the future of psychosexual and relationship therapy in the UK.
- **Contributing to the improvement of Milton Keynes Council's services for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) families and children, as well as enhancing cooperation with voluntary sector organisations.** At the level of local professional practice, Erel is the Independent Chair of the Commission on Ethnic Diversity in Milton Keynes that has been tasked with improving these services and co-operations.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1) Advancing Policy and Public Understandings of Bisexuality

- Head of the LGB&T division at the Government Equalities Office to confirm impact of The Bisexuality Report on government policy.

Impact case study (REF3b)

- Chief Executive of the Department of Health, LGB&T partnership to confirm the importance of The Bisexuality Report and its key role influencing UK policy and practice on LGB&T equality and enabling LGB&T organisations to meet the needs of bisexual people.
- TV interview (US) with Barker - <http://blip.tv/bicities/235-dr-meg-barker-because-2013-6626420> - at the 1st US BiReCon event.
- Barker, M., Richards, C., Jones, R., Bowes-Catton, H., & Plowman, T. (2012). *The Bisexuality Report: Bisexual inclusion in LGBT equality and diversity*. Milton Keynes: The Open University, Centre for Citizenship, Identity and Governance.

2) Impact on Policy and Public Understanding of Relationships

- Director of One plus One to confirm impact of work on 'Enduring Love' in influencing activities of UK relationship charity.
- Chief Executive Officer of Relate to corroborate impact of 'Enduring Love' on training professional practitioners in relationship therapy.

3) Impact on Professional Practice

- Director of Pink Therapy to corroborate impact of BPS guidelines and work by Barker and Langdridge on professional practice for working with sexual and gender diversity clients.
- Storify record of celebratory event at OU London Offices to launch and reflect upon the impact of the BPS Guidelines and related work -<http://storify.com/megbarkerpsych/sexuality-and-gender-reflecting-on-the-bps-guideli>.
- Shaw, L., Butler, C., Langdridge, D., Gibson, S., Barker, M., Lenihan, P., Nair, R. & Richards, C. (2012). Guidelines for psychologists working therapeutically with sexual and gender minority clients. Leicester: British Psychological Society.