2.2 Methodology

Theoretical Considerations

The research project is a practical rather than academic exercise in that it seeks to improve local services rather than construct models of behaviour or identity. However some consideration of theory may be useful as it informs research method and provides context for the research.

Theorising can assist analysis, explanation and understanding but it can also constrain these. The usefulness of theory clearly lies in its ability to improve analysis and explanation and further understanding.

Theorising generates a tension, namely the struggle to analyse, explain and understand a particular phenomenon *and* phenomena in general. Many theories strive to be universal seeking to analyse, explain and understand all phenomena within a single schema. In the process the particular is often reduced to, or determined by, the general. This can leave theory seriously lacking, as identified by Albert *et al* (1986:6):

> Advocates of different schools of thought rarely claim to already have all the answers we need about contemporary societies. They often do claim however to have conceptual frameworks sufficient for developing these answers now and in the future. While these theories teach many important truths, they also bias our analyses by obscuring some important dynamics and unduly exaggerating others.

As an example, in attempting to analyse, explain and understand the human world and its social forces and processes many theorists adopt or favour a class, ethnic or gender perspective. All too often these perspectives and theories do not adequately explain everything. Those phenomena not explained are often dismissed as irrelevant in the 'bigger picture'.
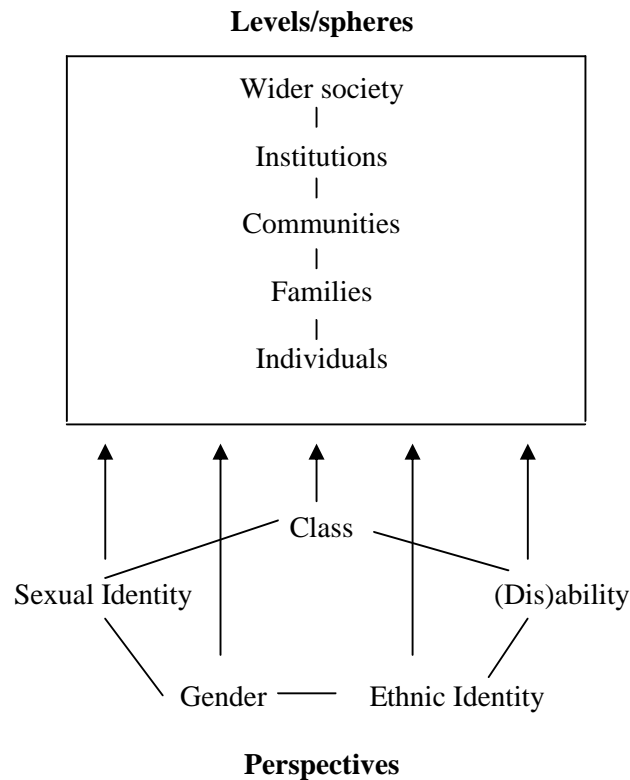
Turning to the real world and the subject of this research, bisexual, gay and lesbian young people are clearly *not* a homogenous group. They are young, bisexual, gay, lesbian, men, women, Asian, Black, white, working class, middle class, able-bodied, disabled, etc. and they can be many of these, not only one. Consequently, theorising cannot be one-dimensional; behaviour and identity cannot be analysed and explained solely in terms of an individual's sexual identity.[3]

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[3] The research project attempts to look at behaviour: the individual and collective behaviour of young bisexuals, gays and lesbians in terms of health and housing issues and the behaviour of local institutions towards these young people. It also attempts to look at identity: the identity of Asian and Black young people who are also bisexual, gay and lesbian.

Individual and collective behaviour and identity are influenced and shaped by both personal choice and social forces and processes. In other words, an individual's freedom of action is often influenced by and/or constrained within socially defined parameters. Personal choice and social forces and processes can be analysed in terms of class, disability, ethnic identity, gender, sexual identity, etc. and at the level of the individual, family, community, institution and wider society (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Theoretical Analysis of Society

Levels/spheres

Wider society
|
Institutions
|
Communities
|
Families
|
Individuals

Class

Sexual Identity   (Dis)ability

Gender ——— Ethnic Identity

Perspectives

In terms of analysis, explanation and understanding no one level/sphere or perspective has all the answers. A multi-dimensional *complimentary holist* approach therefore seems sensible, one that encompasses several perspectives and several levels/spheres of analysis.

Complimentary holism, as propounded by Albert *et al* (1996:12-13) involves two concepts:

Holism [which] informs us that reality's many parts always act together to form an entwined whole. [The central point is that] all phenomena influence all other phenomena and care needs to be taken about how we abstract any particular aspect from the whole.

Complimentarity [which] means that the parts that compose wholes interrelate to help define one another, even though each appears to have an independent and even contrary existence. Every part embodies and is subsumed in a larger whole.

Therefore, "since society itself is holistic, it is essential to develop an intellectual framework *specifically contoured to understanding an interconnected reality*. We should expect interdependence and only introduce simplifying assumptions that deny the importance of interconnections when such assumptions are carefully justified" (Albert *et al*, 1986).

Furthermore, individuals' behaviour and identity are not fixed, they are subject to change through both personal choice and the action of social forces and processes. They can change depending on the environment, hence there should be a spatial element to the analysis. They can also change depending on the stage reached in a person's life, hence there should be a temporal element to the analysis. The complimentary holist conceptual framework can accommodate spatial and temporal elements.

Using this complimentary holist conceptual framework it is possible to better analyse, explain and understand behaviour and identity. Individual and collective behaviour and identity are subject to conflict, contradiction and tension both within and between these levels/spheres, when viewed from different perspectives and when considered in a spatial and temporal context. These can occur simultaneously, hence multi-oppression, as propounded by Bridget (1996). However, there is a need to use this conceptual framework to go further.
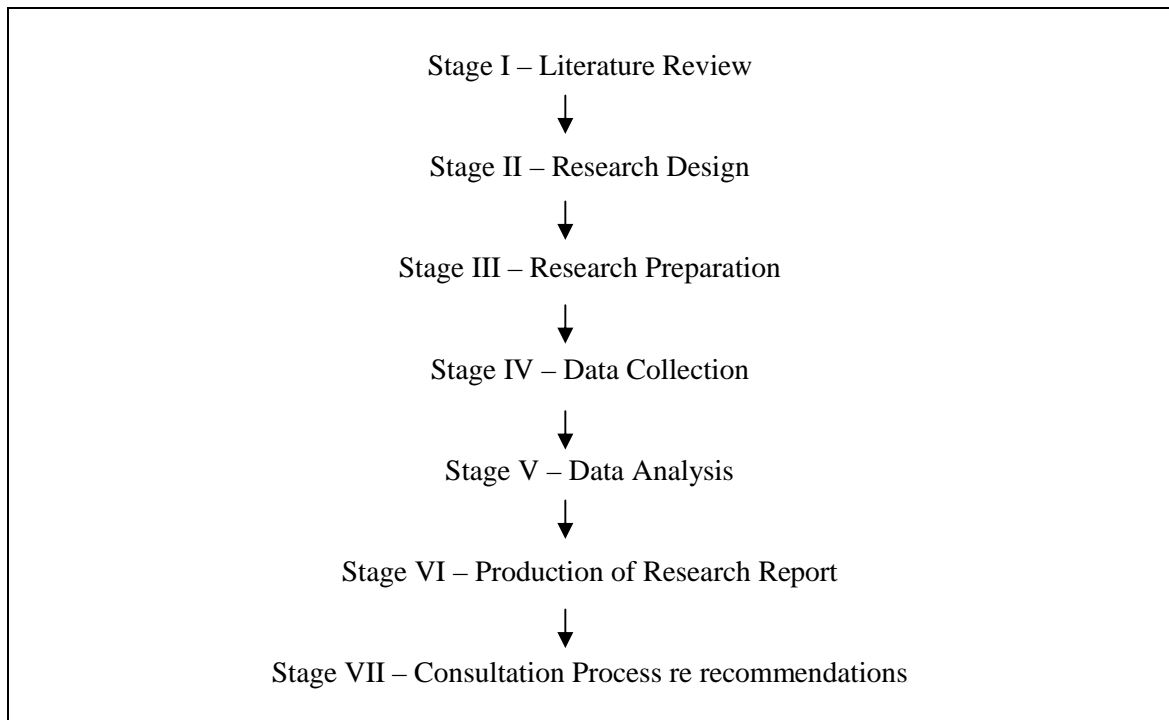
The world of young bisexuals, gays and lesbians is not limited to their sexual identity. Nor should they *only* be seen as a marginalised and oppressed section of society. Young bisexuals, gays and lesbians are also members of other sections of society at the same time. Consequently they can be responsible for both marginalising and oppressing other young bisexuals, gays and lesbians and other sections of society. In this way, they play a role in reproducing these social forces and processes, so influencing and limiting others' freedom of action. For example, a young Asian gay man may experience racist abuse from a young white gay man and a young bisexual woman may experience domestic violence by an older lesbian woman, etc. It is the author's opinion that any study or theory hoping to further understanding must acknowledge and accommodate these truths.

As stated, the project is a practical piece of work and as such, these theoretical considerations are of limited value. However, the complimentary holist conceptual framework does reflect the author's approach to this work by, for example, influencing the research design and strategy.

The Research Project

There were several stages to the research project as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Stages of the Research Project

Stage I – Literature Review

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Stage II – Research Design

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Stage III – Research Preparation

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Stage IV – Data Collection

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Stage V – Data Analysis

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Stage VI – Production of Research Report

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Stage VII – Consultation Process re recommendations

Stage I – Literature Review

The research project aimed to reveal the 'local picture', which could then be compared and contrasted with the 'national picture' (from the studies in the literature review). The Asian and Black, health and housing issues that emerged from the literature review formed the basis of the research design. The surveys and interview questions were constructed with the intention of identifying the local picture using the national picture as the framework.

Stage II – Research Design

The research project is concerned with the bigger picture – the position of bisexual, gay and lesbian young people in Berkshire – *and* the particular – the specific experiences, issues and needs of individual bisexuals, gays and lesbians. However, being a practical project seeking tangible improvements in local service provision, it seeks to avoid the construction of a universal model of young people's behaviour and identity in Berkshire (or even British society), just as it seeks to avoid seeing individual's experiences, issues and needs as unique and without pattern. The research

project seeks the 'middle way'; to identify *typical* experiences, issues and needs (typicality as distinct from universality or individuality).

The research project seeks to identify:

(a) The *typical* experiences, issues and needs of young bisexuals, gays and lesbians in terms of health and housing.

(b) The *typical* experiences, issues and needs of young Asian and Black bisexuals, gays and lesbians.

Evidence of typical experiences, issues and needs can help agencies and workers alike to improve their level of knowledge and hence service delivery.

Although the research project is concerned with young people's experiences, issues and needs, the author also thought it important to investigate the 'institutional framework', i.e. local agencies' policies and procedures and local workers' experiences and practice, as it obviously has an impact on the services available to young bisexuals, gays and lesbians. An example should illustrate its importance: if a young lesbian receiving treatment from her GP comes out and if that GP does not know about ReachOUT, and furthermore considers homosexuality to be a mental disorder, s/he may refer that young woman into the mental health system. Contrast that scenario with a GP who does know about ReachOUT and who actually refers that young woman accordingly. The consequences of these two very different scenarios for this young woman's life are surely obvious. The contrast is striking and serves to highlight the role that agencies and workers can play, i.e. that of 'gatekeeper' in terms of the type and quality of service that young people experience. It is therefore important to consider the impact of the institutional framework on the lives of these young people. For this reason the research project was designed to identify both young people's experiences, issues and needs, and the policies and practice of key local agencies and workers.

After reviewing the range of research methods available, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in addition to secondary data sources.

Qualitative Methods

Qualitative methods involved the use of semi-structured interviews with individuals and groups, both young people and workers. The questions were devised so as to give structure to the interview. However the structure was flexible rather than rigid; participants had the freedom to discuss a range of experiences, issues and needs. The facilitators followed up with supplementary questions, albeit keeping within the general framework of the design. This approach produced a wide range of in-depth data. These interviews were recorded and the transcripts analysed for main themes and examples.

Quantitative Methods

Quantitative methods involved the use of surveys aimed at young people and local agencies, schools and workers. The surveys aimed at young people were both anonymous and confidential because of the personal and sensitive nature of some of the questions. The surveys aimed at local agencies, schools and workers were confidential but not anonymous. The surveys did ask for the name of the agency, school or place of work/position of worker for the purposes of tracking, but it was made clear that this information would not be divulged. Participants were assured that the aim of the surveys was not to 'name and shame' individuals or institutions. The surveys were constructed with both closed and open questions and for efficiency, used a tick box system. Requests for a written response were kept to a minimum.

Secondary data sources included ReachOUT's records, Reading Lesbian and Gay Helpline's records and data from documents.

Figure 3 summarises the methods and sources used for each of the four objectives.

Figure 3: Summary of the Methods and Sources used for the Research Project

Research Objective	Methods/Sources Used
(a) To identify the health experiences, issues and needs of young bisexuals, gays and lesbians.	▪ Young People's Health and Housing Survey. ▪ Homophobic Incidents Survey. ▪ Individual and group interviews with young people. ▪ Data from ReachOUT's and Reading Lesbian and Gay Helpline's records.
(b) To identify the housing experiences, issues and needs of young bisexuals, gays and lesbians.	▪ Young People's Health and Housing Survey. ▪ Individual and group interviews with young people and workers. ▪ Data from ReachOUT's and Reading Lesbian and Gay Helpline's records.
(c) To identify the specific experiences, issues and needs of Asian and Black young bisexuals, gays and lesbians.	▪ Individual and group interviews with young people and workers.
(d) To assess the impact of the institutional framework i.e. local agencies' policies and procedures and local workers' experiences and practice.	▪ Local Agencies Survey. ▪ Local Secondary Schools Survey. ▪ Frontline Workers Survey. ▪ Group interviews with workers. ▪ Data from statutory agencies about training provision. ▪ Data from housing agencies about policies and provision.

Stage III – Research Preparation

A research team was established, comprised of a white female researcher and an Asian male researcher. They helped in the construction of the interview questions and surveys. They also helped to facilitate the individual and group interviews, the former with young women and the latter with Asian and Black young people.

A Code of Ethics and an Informed Consent Form (for interview participants) were produced and on 28 October 1998 Berkshire Health Authority's Research Ethics Committee endorsed the research project.

Stage IV – Data Collection

Participants in the research interviews were recruited through ReachOUT's Youth Group, Reading University's Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Group, the two bisexual, gay and lesbian scene venues in Reading and through a publicity campaign. The research project was publicised through adverts in the local press and through publicity in local colleges, libraries, youth centres and at the university. The campaign aimed to encourage young people to participate, especially those not accessing the local bisexual, gay and lesbian scene or community organisations. Several young people came forward to participate as a result of this campaign.

The Young People's Health and Housing Survey (completed by young bisexuals, gays and lesbians in Reading) and the Homophobic Incidents Survey (commissioned by the Berkshire Anti-Homophobia Group) were distributed through ReachOUT's Youth Group, Reading University's Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Group, the two bisexual, gay and lesbian scene venues, bisexual, gay and lesbian community organisations and voluntary sector organisations.

The Local Agencies Survey (aimed at local statutory and voluntary Asian, Black, health and housing agencies) was sent to the agency co-ordinator/manager to complete.

The Local Secondary Schools Survey (aimed at both private and state schools) was sent to the headteacher of the school to complete.

The Frontline Workers Survey (aimed at those working on a regular basis with young people in the aforementioned agencies) was sent to the agency co-ordinator/manager to distribute.

Figure 4 summarises the data that was collected.

Figure 4: Summary of Data Collected

- One hundred and sixty-nine Young People's Health and Housing Surveys.

- One hundred and seven Homophobic Incidents Surveys.

- Thirty-nine Local Agencies Surveys.

- Ten Local Secondary Schools Surveys.

- Twenty-seven Frontline Workers Surveys.

- Interviews with 11 Asian people: seven young men, two female workers and two male workers.

- Interviews with five Black people: three young men, one young woman and one female worker.

- Interviews with 18 young men about health and housing issues.

- Interviews with five young women about health and housing issues.

- Interview with a young transsexual about health and housing issues.

- Interviews with two women working in women's organisations.

- Interviews with five housing workers: three in the statutory sector and two in the voluntary sector.

- Interview with ReachOUT workers.

- Data from ReachOUT's records.

- Data from Reading Lesbian and Gay Helpline's records.

- Data from statutory agencies about training provision.

- Data from housing agencies about policies and provision.

Stage V – Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel were used to analyse the results from the surveys. Interview transcripts and secondary data sources were analysed for key and recurrent themes.

Stage VII – Consultation Process re recommendations

The research report was issued as a working document, giving ReachOUT's Management Committee, youth workers and young people the opportunity to consider the report and its findings. A consultation process was then staged, its aim being to give Asian and Black community organisations and workers and statutory and voluntary sector health and housing agencies and workers, the opportunity to consider the report and to reflect on their own policies and practice. They were then able to help fashion a set of recommendations (aiming to improve local services for young bisexuals, gays and lesbians) in conjunction with ReachOUT. This consultation and collaboration hopefully ensured that the recommendations are achievable and sustainable. ReachOUT seeks to avoid producing a 'wish list' of costly initiatives. We also seek to avoid issuing a prescriptive list of work practices and policies that need wholesale change. This would be unrealistic and would not be in the spirit of partnership. As a result of the consultation process the recommendations will hopefully have a wider ownership and hence an improved chance of being implemented.

Difficulties Encountered

Most of the young people who participated in the interviews and who completed the surveys were those who were already accessing the bisexual, gay and lesbian scene and community organisations. The author faced great difficulties in trying to recruit young people *not* accessing bisexual, gay and lesbian space, despite the publicity campaign. Arguably these young people were inaccessible: physically and psychologically isolated. These young people may not have even acknowledged their sexual identity, never mind talk to a researcher about it. This situation may have biased the research but in a sense it reflects the practical difficulty of conducting research with a hard-to-reach and socially excluded group.

Even when young people were accessible, recruiting for the interviews and asking them to complete the surveys raised a number of difficulties. As participants had to be targeted, the researcher was put in the position of having to make judgements about age, ethnic identity, sexual identity, willingness to participate, etc. This raised the dual questions of bias and definition. For example, who is 'Asian' and who is 'Black'? Is it how the researcher sees them or how they see themselves? This is but a small example of what sometimes felt like a very subjective exercise.

Other problems encountered included the invisibility of young Asian and Black people and young women on the bisexual, gay and lesbian scene and in community organisations. This made recruitment very difficult and placed extra pressure on those who were visible to participate.

The surveys sent to agencies were sent to co-ordinators/managers who potentially played the role of 'gatekeeper' in terms of whether or not the survey would be completed and whether it would be passed on to workers.

The survey sent to schools was sent to headteachers. Again they potentially played the role of 'gatekeeper'. Furthermore, would responses have been different if surveys had been sent to individual teachers or governors?

Despite these difficulties and limitations the author considers the data gathered to be useful and valuable.

Copies of the interview questions and surveys used for the research project are available as a supplement, see Appendix 1: Other Publications Available.