

**SETTLEMENT EXPERIENCES OF
LESBIAN, GAY AND BISEXUAL
NEWCOMERS:
IMPLICATIONS FOR SERVICES IN
LARGE AND SMALL CANADIAN
CITIES**



Presenter

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Rationale

- Need to improve accessibility and effectiveness of health & social services for diverse ethnic groups recognized
- Issues of lesbian, gay, bisexual people within newcomer (immigrant and refugee) populations often overlooked

Defining Sexual Orientation

- ‘Western’ sense - based on sex to which one is erotically attracted
- Non-’Western’ sense - may be based on roles/behaviour irrespective of sex
- In reality, erotic attraction influenced by age, appearance, behaviour, social context...
- Evidence of same-sex eroticism widespread

Identities & Sexual Orientation

- Historically, sexuality not basis for identity
- Identity in individualistic & collectivist cultures
- Importance of 'coming out' in West
- Some people involved in same-sex sexuality do not identify as gay or lesbian

Various Terms

- Queer: an umbrella term referring to an array of social locations: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, Two Spirit
- Transgender: people who identify their sex as other than that based on their physical characteristics, e.g., people who identify as men though they have female genitalia

Heterosexism

- everyone is, or should be heterosexual
- Promoted by social institutions
- Impacts on health, mental health, relationships, violence, ...
- Often expressed in ‘homophobic’ behaviour

Intersecting Oppressions

- Heterosexism intersects with racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, ablism, agism
- LGB newcomers may experience heterosexism in addition to racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, ablism, etc.

Attitudes and Laws

- Progressive Canadian attitudes and laws
- Sexual orientation omitted from Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- Same-sex sex illegal in 86 UN countries
 - Penalties – prison, death
- Pre-immigration experiences of newcomers shape service delivery & use in Canada

Purpose

Add to understanding of settlement service needs of LGB newcomers

Identify implications for policies, programs, education of settlement services and LGB organizations

Methodology

- Semi-structured individual interviews of LGB newcomers and family members
- Individual and focus group interviews of service providers and members of LGB groups

Interview Questions for all

- Meaning of same-sex sexual orientation
- Issues & needs of LGB newcomers
- Experiences with services
- What helpful?
- What impediments?

Questions for SPs & LGB orgs

- Relevance of sexual, cultural, ethnic diversity
- Knowledge, values and skills to welcome LGB newcomers
- Aspects of organization that welcome or might deter LGB newcomers
- Rationale for organization's response to newcomers

Recruitment

Written invitation to participate circulated in 3 cities: small, medium and large:

- LGB community organizations
- Immigrant settlement services
- Snowball sampling

Participants

Newcomers

- Gay men: 13
- Lesbians: 6
- Family members: 3

Service Providers (from 13 agencies)

- Managers – 11
- Workers – 29

LGB Organization members - 25

Complexity in Revealing and Recognizing

- Shaped by values and understanding regarding identity, family, sexuality
- Newcomers show different aspects of self in various contexts
- Settlement services perceive what they are prepared to recognize
- LGBT community organizations influenced by dominant values regarding newcomers

Preview

- LGB newcomers' experiences, needs & perceptions in relation to their sexuality and settlement services
- Settlement service providers' experiences & perceptions re serving LGB newcomers
- LGB community organization members' experiences and perceptions re newcomers

Identity, Family & Sexuality in various cultures

Important to recognize that understandings & expectations re

- identity (individualistic/collectivist)
- family roles
- sexual behaviour
- what is public/private

vary across and within cultures

Does Sexuality Matter?

- “I was living in Iran as a gay person ...I must hide everything from everybody ...I have to fight with myself and it was the worst torture ... people think ...[gays] are not complete persons”
- “What differentiates an LGB immigrant from others, nothing ... they’re all the same ...[LGB] doesn’t define you as a person ...”

Meanings of 'Gay'

- “...in North America ... sexual orientation is seen as part of individual identity... terms like gay and lesbian... [put] it into a realm of separateness ... some communities have holistic [concepts] of identity ...”
- “...the minute you say 'gay' it creates a particular image, usually very Western ...”
- “...when you're engaging in homosexual activity, you're not looking towards a permanent relationship or lifestyle ...”

Individual/Collective

“... if you're from an individualistic community, it doesn't matter for you to be different from the community ... that drives the coming out perspective of the West - you have to come out, be honest, be proud and fight for acceptance. In a more collectivist community, the value is to be [harmonious] within the community, it's a risk to stand out, people do not want to stand out ...”

Risks of Coming out

“... its all about personal choices. I don't think that everybody has to come out ... risking everything and saying 'this is who I am' ... I just wouldn't feel it would be worth losing my family over ...”

“...immigrant parents want their children to get married and have children, to not change the community ... if you deviate from the norm, you get a bit of a backlash ...”

Family Role Expectations

“...when a guy comes out to his family
...response can be ‘how can you be so
selfish? ...you are turning your back on
your obligations, like having a family ...’”

Managing Public/Private

“... there’s a lot more in the private sphere, like in Asiait’s the reputation of the family that’s affected by having a homosexual ...”

“... in families, agencies and community ... its alright as long as you don’t publicly acknowledge it ...”

Migration and Coming Out

“...I didn’t recognize I was attracted to men ... I was trying to suppress [it] until I came to Canada and was able to have enough space ... to delve deeper into that issue ... finding out who you are as a person ... people go through an identity crisis, there’s stress associated with that ...”

Intersecting Oppressions

“If you have different marginalizations, whether you are gay or a minority ... you are less likely to be accepted by your own community and by the larger community, so you face double discrimination, triple discrimination ...”

Racism

“...the mainstream gay community, the mainstream community at large in Canada, they have a tendency to blame South Asians or any minority ... if there’s a gay bashing and the person responsible is a South Asian, they blame all South Asians ... and say ‘send them back home’ ...”

Isolation & Loneliness

“... I didn't feel I would be supported by my culture, my community, and I was really depressed and suicidal when I was younger ...”

“... the worst thing when we come here is to be alone, we lost all friends in Iran ... its very lonely, its really a shock ... [we need] to see gay[s] and lesbian[s] who are friendly ...”

Vulnerability

“... if you’re a young person ... new to the country, maybe you’ve never experienced this kind of freedom, never dated before and you don’t have anybody to consult ... because you can’t go to your family [or] your friends [from] back home ... that happened with me, I didn’t have anybody for guidance and I made some mistakes ...”

Health Risks

“... if you come from a region of the world where there is a lot of silence ... in terms of HIV, you can still get infected very quickly here ... people don't have the networks ...about sexual health ...”

“...a lot of [immigrants] get married ... and then they have sex with men and ... give STDs to their wives ...”

Anticipating Rejection

“...[settlement agency was] specifically not focusing on sexual orientation, so I wasn’t feeling comfortable ... wonder[ing] if there would be rejection ... I pulled back from revealing my sexuality ... if there [were] advertisements ... people would take advantage of that service”

Needs of Families of LGBs

“... when she [came out] it ruptured her relationship with her father ...”

“... what do you say to your friends and your [ethnic minority] community who were equally not prepared for that ...”

“... there is an assumption that immigrant families look a certain way ... it is a very touchy subject, officially, nobody is gay ...”

Language Barriers

“...If you don't speak the language ... you're stigmatized ... afraid to start conversations ...”

“... if there is abuse, you don't know where to go ... probably its due to language issues ...”

“... you have to help the interpreter if you know she is not saying the truth, because sometimes they feel uncomfortable ...”

Mistrust of Services

“...[don't] use [settlement services] ... because the community is small & probably they know your parents. It's kind of scary”

“...not comfortable going to [settlement agency] ...because I don't feel the [ethnic minority] ... community is very open”

“...where I came from, government agencies ...confidentiality and respect are not guaranteed. I don't trust them”

Safe & Accessible

“... people would use services if they are discreet ...”

“...[if service] doesn't require them to self-identify ... kind of a multi-purpose thing, like health services ... something that's not specifically towards gay people ...”

“... gay people understand gay people ...”

Settlement Workers' Perceptions

- few newcomers reveal they are gay ...
- Agencies reluctant to gather info re sexuality of clients for fear of offending
“... it’s not pertaining to our services, so it wouldn’t be appropriate to collect the information ... it could also turn people away ...”

Perception of Danger

Safety for all LGB people is issue in smaller, more rural centres

“... Here in [small city] ... there’s still some gay bashing going on ... some rural communities are not very receptive to the gay population ... focused around fears ...”

Lack of Awareness of Needs

“... I don't know what we'd need to do differently [with LGB clients] ...”

“... If someone comes to us [for] ... service it doesn't make any difference whether or not he is gay...”

“... If a gay or lesbian person comes in ... they require specific skills because it's a different kind of relationship ...”

Conflicting Rights?

“... we should be in the pride parade .. Should we? ... we’re saying we’re accepting, but part of **our role is to be neutral** because we’re also serving clients that come from countries where its not acceptable, so then are those clients excluded ...?”

Issues in Smaller Cities

- In small centres, there is not a ‘gay community’ like in big cities

“... we socialize in ... couples ...in small towns, most people connect for sex only ...”

Newcomers' Participation in LBG Community Organizations

- Newcomers participate to some extent in local LGB organizations in larger cities
 - In smaller centres, few newcomers in LGB groups
- “... if newcomers show up ... their situation is respected ...”

Needs of LGB Organizations regarding Newcomers

- Gain understanding of LGB newcomers' experiences in their home countries
- Address language barriers

Canadian National Settlement Service Standards

- Particularly relevant values:
 - Access
 - Inclusion
 - Respect
 - Cultural sensitivity
 - Community development
 - Collaboration

Recommendations: Organizational Level

- Officially and publicly recognize the presence of people with same-sex sexuality among newcomer populations, agency boards, staff and volunteers
- Consistent with Charter and Human Rights obligations, explicitly state the agency is committed to effectively addressing settlement needs of these populations

Recommendations: Services

- Provide orientation to Canadian human rights and other relevant legislation in relation to LGB people as part of educational package for all
- Provide opportunity for newcomers to identify their sexual orientation and their service needs

Recommendations: Services

Provide information, referral, counselling, support and mentoring for LGB newcomers and their families, especially around:

- Coming out
- LGB community resources
- Health/mental health, abuse and exploitation

Recommendations: Personnel

- Provide safety and encouragement for LGB management, staff and volunteers to be open
- In staff development, address knowledge, values and skills for working with LGB people
- Emphasize importance of confidentiality for LGB newcomers

Recommendations: Community

- Address homophobia in anti-racism work in general and in newcomer communities
- Address anti-gay harassment in 'Safe harbor' programs

Recommendations: Collaboration

- Link settlement services with local LGB community organizations
- Use LGB volunteers
- LGB community organizations should reach out to newcomer communities

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