

**Experiences of and responses to disempowerment, violence, and injustice within the relational lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people.**

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Despite many recent social justice victories for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people and their families around the world, many continue to face violence, injustice, and persecution. In some countries, laws or social sanctions continue to criminalise or prohibit same-sex relationships or transgenderism and others are considering criminalising bills (Mendos 2019). Elsewhere across the globe LGBTQ rights to exist and have protection from discrimination have been enshrined in law. However, LGBTQ families and relationships around the globe continue to face legal and/or social injustices. This includes negative experiences in school for LGBTQ young people and across the life-course (Jones 2020; Gahan, Jones, and Hillier 2014; Hillier et al. 2010), in many spheres of life including parenting rights, difficulties in accessing fertility treatment or adoption agencies (Mendos 2019), a lack of protection from discrimination or threats to existing protections (Ruggeri 2020; Equality Tasmania and Croome 2020; Cooper et al. 2018), limited or no relationship recognition (Siegel and Wang 2018; Roache 2019), immigration discrimination (Nakamura and Pope 2013; Redcay, Luquet, and Huggin 2019), and a lack of access to LGBTQ affirming service providers including aged care, counselling, lawyers, schools, health and medical professionals (Almack and King 2019; Almack, Seymour, and Bellamy 2010; Gahan 2019, 2017; Lindsay et al. 2006).

As we write this editorial, the world is undergoing rapid and immense social change as every country begins to grapple with the devastating impact that the COVID-19 global pandemic is having on public health, communities, local and global economies. While the theme of this special edition was conceived well before the pandemic, the topics explored in this issue take on new meaning as we bear witness to the impact of COVID-19 on our LGBTQ communities. Matthewman and Huppertz (2020) argue that the pandemic has created vulnerabilities and has impacted some constituencies in more negative ways than others, both

physically and socially; in particular the elderly, ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples, and women. LGBTQ people have also been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and this has escalated existing stigma, disempowerment, violence, and injustice (Kneale and Becares 2020; ILGA-Europe 2020). No LGBTQ community is immune to this COVID-19 vulnerability – it is being experienced, albeit in different ways, around the world.

A month after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights issued a statement declaring lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people as being particularly vulnerable to the impact of the pandemic (United Nations Human Rights 2020). They identified five key areas where LGBTI will be vulnerable: stigma and discrimination seeking health services, the de-prioritization of required health services (such as HIV testing/treatment or gender affirming treatments for trans people), hate speech and attacks on their communities, domestic violence and abuse, and access to work and livelihood (United Nations Human Rights 2020).

LGBTQ people have been targeted around the world for being responsible for the virus. In the USA, some evangelical Christians labelled the virus *homovirus* calling on LGBTQ people to *repent* in order to protect the country from *coronavirus* (Browning 2020). Similarly, in Israel an Orthodox Jewish rabbi claimed that the virus was divine punishment for pride parades (Times of Israel 2020) and in the Ukraine, an Orthodox Christian leader blamed the virus on same-sex marriage (Bacchi and Georgieva 2020). In South Korea gay nightclubs have been blamed and news outlets published identities of people they believed to be gay and who had tested positive for the virus (Strudwick 2020). In Uganda, police used social distancing restrictions to raid an LGBTQ shelter where according to witnesses people had

their hands bound, shoes taken, and were marched barefoot to the police station (Bhalla and McCool 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic is cutting LGBTQ people off from their support structures and is forcing many to *lockdown* in hostile domestic spaces (Dasgupta 2020; LGBT Foundation 2020). Many existing challenges and hostilities faced by LGBTQ people, and discussed in this edition, have been made worse by the pandemic. The LGBT Foundation (2020) reports that after social distancing measures were introduced in the United Kingdom (UK), many LGBT people isolated at home within *LGBT-phobic* households, were unable to access support for domestic abuse, and many in the community went back *into the closet* or avoided *coming out* to those they live with. When the pandemic began in the UK, the LGBT Foundation helpline experienced an increase in calls about discrimination – in particular, calls about biphobia (450% increase) and transphobia (100% increase), and 88% increase in calls about homelessness or housing concerns, and their domestic abuse program had a 340% increase in the number of unique viewers of their webpages (LGBT Foundation 2020).

The articles in this special edition were written prior to the global pandemic – in a time that feels so distant to many of us today. However, the disempowerment, violence, and injustice within the relational lives of LGBTQ people reported in this edition are not distant realities, they continue to exist and have been amplified by the our new COVID-19 realities. This special edition of the Journal of Sociology originated as a session at the XIX International Sociological Association World Congress in Toronto Canada in 2018. The theme of the conference was *'power, violence, and justice'* and the session addressed the experiences and responses to these issues within the relational lives of LGBTQ people. We have brought together scholars from Europe, Asia, North America, and Australia to interrogate the ongoing

entrenchment of heteronormativity and the consequential manifestations of power, violence, and injustice experienced by LGBTQ people in their relationships and family lives.

The first two articles in this collection address LGBTQ<sup>1</sup> people's experiences of relationships within families of origin and within same sex relationships and families. Starting with LGBT young people's experiences within their family of origin, Dempsey et al. (2020) examine homelessness risk among LGB young people; drawing on data from the *Australian Journeys Home* large-scale survey. Their findings suggest that this risk is cumulative and stems from multiple childhood disadvantages. They suggest that that LGBTQ+<sup>2</sup> inequalities in homelessness, including interactions with family of origin will to some degree be influenced by living in a heteronormative society, in which overt social exclusion and/or an internalised sense that one does not belong may be acute. Gabb et al. (2020) also explore impact of families on the experience of LGBTQ+ young people and mental health, in a qualitative UK study. Their starting point is to move away from the dominant individualised model that focuses on family function. They develop a novel conceptual tool *paradoxical family practices*. This facilitates an analysis of divergent practices and experiences that characterise everyday family life for LGBTQ+ young people. It sheds light on forms of emotion work that LGBTQ+ young people do to manage the precarity and complexity of everyday family life. It could have wider application in developing understandings of the ways in which emotion work are deployed as a strategy to manage complex and contradictory family dynamics.

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<sup>1</sup> The acronyms we used below are those employed by the authors in their papers.

<sup>2</sup> The authors use + to denote the inclusion of other sexual minorities under this umbrella term

In another UK study, Donovan and Barnes (2020) pick up on complex and contradictory family dynamics in their article, which considered help-seeking among LGBT victims/survivors of domestic violence and abuse (DVA). In line with Gabb et al., they problematise neoliberal trends, identifying how this encourages a privatisation of social problems. LGBT people remain largely invisible in DVA policy and practice and tend not to recognise or name their experiences within the *public story* that has presented DVA as a problem within heterosexual cisgendered relationships. Rosenberg et al. (2020) discuss the risks of harm faced by transgender and non-binary (TNB) people, who are also significant more likely to experience DVA than the general population. Their paper draws on findings from two studies (one with Australian participants and the other with participants across Australia and the UK) to provide insight into TNB people's experiences of navigating DVA and animal companionship. They highlight research which suggests that animal companions (i.e. domesticated animals who live in the home) and the bonds formed with such animals may help ameliorate TNB's people experiences of harm. Animal companions can provide affirmation, positivity and non-judgement safety during times of crisis. However, participant accounts also highlighted the harm that animal companions can suffer (from witnessing domestic violence between humans and/or being a direct target of abuse). To date, animal companions have mostly been ignored in domestic violence theorising, policy making and service provision.

Our next two articles, by Nelson (2020) and Lahti and Kolehmainen (2020), address areas where research to date had been limited. A lack of adherence to *public stories* (as referenced by Donovan and Barnes) is also present, in different ways. Nelson (2020) identifies the academic and social invisibility of plurisexual people (Galupo, Ramirez, and Pulice-Farrow 2017). Their research identifies how plurisexual people (of different nationalities) navigate

gender norms and queer coding in their negotiation to make their gender and sexual identity visible. Nelson's findings suggest that many plurisexuals pay close attention to their various social worlds; concerns for their safety limited how they felt able to communicate gender and sexual (non-conforming) identities. Lahti and Kolehmainen (2020) take up the story of the successes gained in recognition of LGBTIQ+<sup>3</sup> relationships; they suggest that this has potentially placed LGBTIQ+ people's relationships under pressure to fit into the *public story* of heteronormative model of long-term monogamous relationships (that the dominant *public story* of DVA is also seen as prevalent in heteronormative and cisgendered relationships highlights the complex nuances of public discourses). Few studies to date have explored the experiences and causes of LGBTIQ+ break-ups (Gahan 2018). Lahti and Kolehmainen's research explore LGBTIQ+ relationships and separation, drawing on three Finnish studies. Despite the progress in LGBTIQ+ people's legal rights in many Western countries, LGBTIQ+ intimacies do not receive the same structural, legal and social support as mixed-sex couples; nevertheless, Lahti and Kolehmainen are concerned to reject short-cut explanations of LGBTIQ+ break-ups that foreground focus exclusively on top-down operations of societal power. They employ a conceptual framework of assemblages identify the multiplicity of elements that might play a role in LGBTIQ+ relationships ending, from the relationship between the partners to the other people involved (ex-partners, relatives, children, social workers etc.), and from societal power relationships (norms, heteronormativity, homo- and transphobia, gendered asymmetries etc.) to non-human elements (such as legislation, job stresses or material possessions).

Themes of invisibility, choice, and individualisation are further explored in the article by Lo (2020), who explores the ways in which Chinese lesbians, who identify themselves as lalas,

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<sup>3</sup> The I in this acronym stands for *intersex*

form their own families and navigate their relationships with families of origin. Again, an area where there has been little research. Lo finds that lalas' family-building strategies are constrained by the regulatory framework of social and familial norms, which are often tightly governed by their families of origin, especially fathers. The experience of Lo's participants challenges a Westernised notion of *coming out* to form their own families, but rather, they manage complex gendered, familial, material, and socio-political constraints to maintain relationships with their families of origin. This resonates with Gabb et al's notion of *paradoxical family practices*.

Kazyak and Park's (2020) research examines the everyday experiences of LGBTQ parents in the USA, where there has been an increased recognition of LGBTQ-parent families. Kazyak and Park ask, to what extent do the cultural and legal changes that have helped shape this recognition correlate with diminished experiences of discrimination. They suggest that inequality and disempowerment for LGBTQ people persists even where there have been significant cultural and legal changes (the extent of change differs across the different states in the USA). Their findings highlight a complex relationship between law, culture, and daily interactions and reveals ways in which the dominant assumption of heterosexuality is embedded in the social category of *parent*. LGBTQ people are often disempowered and overlooked as parents of their children due to these heteronormative assumptions. Importantly, these assumptions are intertwined with people's racialised and gendered expectations.

Finally, Flaherty (2020) turns our attention to debates about marriage equality legislation in Australia, where the prevailing argument was about equal recognition of love rather than recognition by the state of the union on legal grounds. He identifies attitudes revealed in the

lead up to this legislative change including the proliferation of symbolically-violent messages such as ‘Vote No’ skywritten across the emblematic Sydney Harbour, and ‘Vote no to faggots’ graffiti etched across Sydney train carriages. His study explores gay men’s resistance to this symbolic violence in which love, and love stories, emerge as central.

Across this collection of papers, risks of harm in public and private spaces are evident from living in societies that are governed by cisnormative, heteronormative, homonormative, and monosexist norms. These risks are present even in the most liberal societies; but while many of us have seen our rights legally recognised, more LGBTQ people are also in greater danger of being discriminated against, criminalised, attacked, persecuted and even murdered.

Dempsey et al; Gabb et al; Donovan and Barnes; and Rosenburg et al., variously identify and identify the risks of homelessness, conflict and DVA within the family lives of LGBTQ people, while noting the complexities of these experiences and strategies to challenge and/or manage impacts on their mental and physical well-being (and that of animal companions).

Nelson further illustrates navigational strategies, exploring the ways in which plurisexual people respond to gender norms and queer coding in making their gender and sexual identity visible. They note however, constraints to this visibility related to concerns for their safety.

Lahti and Kolehmainen; Lo; Kazyak and Park; and Flaherty turn our attention to LGBTQ people’s same-sex and parental relationships; couples breaking up, living as lesbians in a less liberal society, recognition of parenthood, and same-sex marriage. These articles also demonstrate that despite the progress in LGBTQ people’s legal rights, LGBTQ intimacies across the globe do not receive the same structural, legal, and social support as mixed-sex couples. This has disempowering implications for the visibility of all LGBTQ relationships.

All of the articles in this collection demonstrate and expand our understandings of the complexities of LGBTQ lives, negotiating empowerment, safety, and justice within societies

dominated by varying degrees by cisnormative, heteronormative, homonormative, and monosexism norms.

However liberal the society, the themes of disempowerment, violence, and injustice are played out within the relational lives of LGBTQ people. We can see how the ongoing entrenchment of hetero- and cis-normative borders have consequential manifestations of power, violence and in/justice in the everyday relationships and family lives of LGBTQ people, of all ages. As we note, such realities may have been amplified by the current pandemic. To our knowledge, this is the first specific collection to explore this topical area of research and theory, thus making a valuable contribution to expand our empirical and theoretical knowledge in this field.

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