Research Summary: Violence, Sexuality and Space

Our Research Question was: How do groups, vulnerable to social conflict, social instability and social exclusion, produce sustainable security in public spaces?

- We concentrated on the experiences and practices of safety NOT violence.
- We collected data on the experiences of 3 different groups previously identified as ‘high risk’ (lesbians/gay men/ heterosexual women) by victim surveys.
- We collected data on community, institutional and commercial practices and policies on safer spaces.
- We compared two locations: Manchester (with a definable commercial leisure space known as the ‘gay village’) and Lancaster (with only virtual gay space).

We were interested in how homophobic violence as a new social problem, pointed to undetected practices of social exclusion. We drew on prior research on victim surveys, hate crime initiatives and ‘risk and responsibility’ literature to explore the difference space makes to generating safety for different groups of people.

Our initial analysis was informed by research on gay space, on space, race and violence; on gender, violence and space, including studies of masculinities and femininities, and on how the much neglected area of class was central to the production of safety.

We also drew on research that pointed to the significance of community AND consumption, including regeneration policies and wider debates about the symbolic economy and representation.

Criminological work and feminist work, on violence and criminal justice was combined with legal scholarship on property and propriety to explore ownership and investments in space. We developed and modified Bourdieu’s metaphors of social space.

Our findings were produced by a multi-disciplinary team of researchers, representing different social positions (2 gay men, 1 lesbian, 1 heterosexual woman, supplemented by a transgendered temporary researcher). All these factors have worked to produced some unusual and unique findings. We used many different methods including: key informant interviews, surveys, focus groups, citizens’ inquiries. We continually cross-fertilised findings. We continually fed data back to our participants and collected their points of view. Differences between our research participants and groups were reflected in our team. Every result presented has been subject to a rigorous analysis and struggle.

Findings:

1. What a difference a space makes
   - In Manchester gay men worry about safety in the Village more than any other group, even lesbians. However, nearly all our gay male respondents feel safe in Lancaster town centre. Lancaster lesbians report similar feelings of safety.
• In Manchester lesbians in the gay Village are more likely to worry about their safety than heterosexual women are about theirs. Yet in Lancaster there is no significant difference between how lesbians and heterosexual women feel unsafe using the town centre.

• In Lancaster heterosexual men worry much more about safety than Lancaster lesbians and gay men. Yet in Manchester almost all heterosexuals feel safe in the Village.

2. Safer space
Management of safety
• The management of safety is different in our two research spaces. In Lancaster prior experience of violence is important. This is in direct contrast to our Manchester respondents who avoid spaces mainly because of perceptions of fear and danger.
• In Manchester ‘heterosexuals’ have emerged as a distinct category of ‘danger’. This is not the case in Lancaster.

3. Reproducing Invisibility
Respectable citizens and risk
• Policies and practices to promote safety tell lesbians and gay men what they already know.
• Safety literature that focuses upon ‘risk avoidance’ reinforces experiences of exclusion through self-policing and making oneself ‘invisible’ through safety strategies such as ‘passing’.

4. Challenging ways of thinking about safety
Comfort and community
• ‘Comfort’ not safety is the main-response to danger:
  Loss of comfort threatens a sense of belonging and being, of being able to occupy the space. Comfort challenges traditional thinking about safety:
  Comfort is also a key aspect of community, giving a sense of belonging.
• Narratives of ‘heterosexual invasion’ are continually reproduced to erect imaginary boundaries for safety, but are also a source of anxiety.
• Experiences of being safe and secure (‘being in place’) depend upon ideas of investment in space (cultural as well as economic) and ideas of ‘property’ ownership.

5. Challenging ways of thinking about safety and policing
Comfort and Policing
• When people experience danger to be a loss of comfort this is likely to be beyond the focus of criminal justice (can you imagine comfort laws?).
• Policing initiatives that focus upon violence and safety will fail to meet expectations if perceptions of fear and danger are not informed by ‘comfort’.

6. Safe havens?
Heterosexuals and gay space.
• Use of gay space by heterosexual women is not just based on safety.
• Gay space appears to be a haven from violence for some heterosexual men.
7: Exclusions

The danger of ‘hen parties’.

- Exclusion is a common way to make a space comfortable, safe and free from perceptions of danger and violence.
- Repeated references in Manchester’s Village to the danger of ‘Hen parties’ is a good example of the way class and gender anxiety feed into exclusion.
- Race is another common basis for exclusion.

Impact of the research

The research has already had a significant impact with users, especially on policy and provision. The Lancaster Police force used our Citizen’s Inquiries as a base for community liaison and have now developed a hate crime policy (it’s a start). Manchester City Council have used our research as a basis for further City Centre research and a study of Lesbian violence. It has also been used by Belfast, Lancashire and Brighton community safety advisors. Dr Moran now advises the Home Office and Metropolitan Police. We have also published and given conference national and international papers on the research.

See http://les1.man.ac.uk/sociology/vssrp for current information on project. Our website includes full bibliography, maps, census questionnaire, GIS analysis, a synopsis of all publications and conference presentations. A full copy of the Citizen’s Inquiry is also posted on the site.