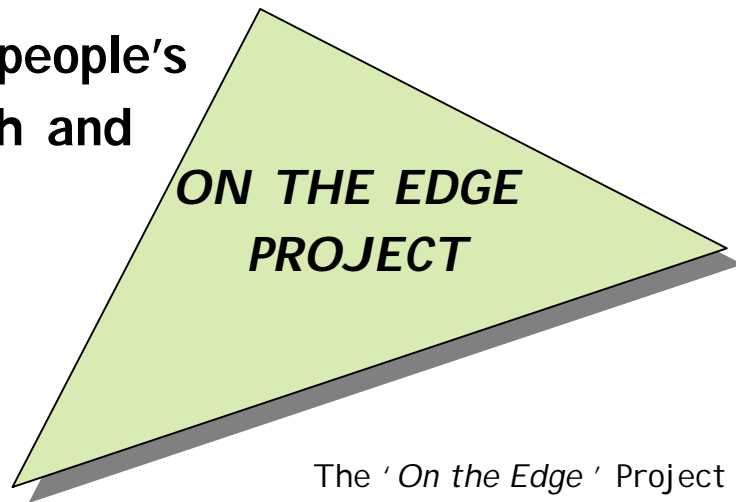


**LGBT young people's
mental health and
well-being:**



The ' *On the Edge* ' Project involves qualitative research with young people on how they think about distress, suicide and self-harm, with particular reference to distresses surrounding gender and sexuality

ESRC REFERENCE NUMBER
RES-000-22-1239
TITLE
The cultural context of youth suicide: Identity, gender and sexuality
INVESTIGATORS
Principal Investigator: Katrina Roen Co-Applicant: Jonathan Scourfield Researcher employed by the project: Elizabeth McDermott
INSTITUTION
Lancaster University

Introduction

This research explored what young people believe about self-harm and suicide. Since previous research has found high levels of suicidal thoughts among lesbian, gay and bisexual young people (LGB), the research focused in particular on questions of sexuality and gender identity. The research objectives were (i) to identify and analyse the discursive frames through which young people make sense of suicidal behaviour and (ii) analyse the ways in which distresses or struggles around sexuality and gender identity may play a role in suicidal thoughts and behaviour.

The research has sought to make an innovative contribution in the following ways:

- by improving understanding of emotional challenges faced by young people in relation to issues of sexuality and gender identity.
- by generating new qualitative data in a field that is primarily informed by quantitative studies.
- by providing new information to practitioners concerned with young people, mental health, sexuality and gender issues, self-harm and/or suicide prevention.
- by improving the understandings of youth suicide and self-harm that may be used to inform academic work, policies, and service provision in these areas.

Methods

This was a qualitative study, using data from focus groups and interviews carried out in North England and South Wales. Research participants included 69 young people (aged 16-25) across a range of diverse ethnic backgrounds, rural and urban areas, and those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), as well as those who do not. Research participants were also diverse in that some had personal experience of suicidal or self-harming behaviour, while others did not. A discourse analytic approach, informed by critical psychological work, was taken to analysing the data.

Results

A thematic analysis of the data concerning self-destructive behaviour and LGBT young people highlighted the importance of being able to negotiate distressing environments. LGBT young people's reactions to distressing environments are not straightforwardly either resilient or self-destructive. There is evidence in the data set of young people articulating understandings about being 'out and proud' but simultaneously feeling uncomfortable with their sexual identity.

The LGBT young people were concerned to identify places that are safe for people belonging to sexual minority groups. They provided clear examples of their own resilience in the face of homophobia. One of the resilient strategies talked about involved making a physical 'escape' in the form of a move to a city that was perceived to be gay-friendly, or a deliberate strategy of seeking out LGBT organisations.

While some self-destructive behaviour was dismissed as being 'attention-seeking,' participants offered causal explanations for LGBT suicidal behaviour that they or their peers regarded as 'genuine.' Explanations which stand out relate to: isolation; homophobic reactions; and the impact of coming out in the context of the family.

The discourse analytic process investigating how young people make sense of suicide identified four central frameworks for understanding youth suicide. These frameworks of understanding variously (i) cast suicidal subjects as Other, (ii) highlight suicide as something that is accessible to young people, (iii) demonstrate the desire to rationalise suicidal behaviour, and (iv) define suicidal subjects in terms of their relationships with others. According to our analysis, suicide occupies a paradoxical position of being mundane and accessible to all, being horrific and inexplicable, yet repeatedly requiring rationalisation and explanation. Importantly, emotional connections between people were constructed as being central to maintaining the will to live.

The data from LGBT participants suggest a strong link between experiencing homophobia and self-destructive behaviours. The discourse analytic work with these data demonstrates that homophobia works to punish at a deep individual level and requires young LGBT people to manage being positioned, because of their sexual desire, as abnormal, dirty and disgusting. At the centre of the complex and multiple ways in which young LGBT people negotiate homophobia are 'modalities of shame-avoidance' such as: the routinization and minimizing of homophobia; maintaining individual 'adult' responsibility; and constructing 'proud' identities. We argue that, where young LGBT people are unable to find ways to resist the 'shaming' of homophobia, they may be more vulnerable to engaging in self-destructive behaviours.

Dissemination

Results from the present research are being disseminated in a variety of ways and to a variety of audiences, which are summarised here:

A dissemination event has been held at Cardiff University (29th March 2007) for research users, including those who work with young people. This involved 80 participants.

The principal investigator was interviewed about the research on the BBC 4 programme 'Thinking Allowed'. (Aired on 28th March 2007).

Further funding for dissemination activities, relating to this research, has been obtained from Lancaster University. These activities (listed 1-2 below) are on-going:

- (1) A project website has been developed to disseminate key findings and to inform people of relevant events we will be holding later in 2007: <http://www.ontheedge.lancs.ac.uk/index.htm>
- (2) A dissemination event will be held at Lancaster University (June 8th 2007). This event will include people who have supported the research locally (such as youth group organisers and local council staff), as well as academics.

An article about the research findings will be submitted to a publication likely to be read by people who work with young people and/or are concerned about youth suicide and self-harm (e.g. *Community Care*).

The research is being presented to academic audiences through conferences and journals. Preliminary results have been presented at the 11th European Symposium on Suicide and Suicidal Behaviour (ESSSB) (Slovenia, 9th – 12th September 2006) and a manuscript sent to *Health and Social Care in the Community* (special Issue on the health and social care needs of children and young people). Further work towards academic research products is currently underway.

On-Going work

Out of this project, three new activities have emerged:

- 1) Development of an edited book that will profile interdisciplinary, social science research on suicide.
- 2) A one-day conference (Cardiff University, 2nd July 2007), focusing on methodological developments in suicide research.
- 3) Development of a new research proposal, concerning suicide and sexuality, to be written up into a funding application by the end of 2007.