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BiReCon: An International Academic Conference on Bisexuality

Meg Barker, Christina Richards, Rebecca Jones and Surya Monro (of BiUK)

Thursday 26th of August 2010 saw the first international BiReCon event. It took place in London on the day preceding the tenth international conference on bisexuality (10 ICB), which was organised that year by the UK bisexual convention (BiCon). The aim of BiReCon was to bring together researchers and academics with activists, organisations and community members to develop, disseminate and discuss research and theory about bisexuality. It was suggested on the day that this may have been the first truly international academic conference focusing on bisexuality, and it is hoped that it will be the first of many.

In this paper we will provide some history of the BiReCon event, within the broader context of bisexuality in Britain today. We will then give a brief overview of the BiReCon event as we experienced it, and draw out some points from the day to be taken forward into the future. We are grateful to the *Journal of Bisexuality* for their huge support, and for devoting this special issue to BiReCon and 10 ICB. We hope that this paper is a good introduction to the following range of articles and commentaries drawn from what was an invigorating and stimulating event.

BiReCon: The Context

BiReCon developed from the work of a group of active researchers on bisexuality in the UK, who have been writing and studying together for the past seven years or so¹. The UK has, for many years, been a fertile ground for writing and research on bisexuality (e.g. George, 1993; Storr, 1999; Hemmings, 2002), and by the mid 2000s there seemed to be a critical mass of young academics and post-graduate students emerging from within the bi community who wanted to take this work forward.

Initially our work together involved facilitating a workshop each year at the annual national BiCon event for those who were interested in research and/or academic work about bisexuality. We also regularly attended bi activist events in order to have an impact on policy and practice in UK bisexual communities, as well as gaining understanding of the areas which required research and theorising within these groups. Many of us wrote about academic matters for the UK bisexual newsletter, *Bi Community News* (BCN) and contributed to various projects and events run by and for bisexual people in the UK. A yahoo group called 'Biblio' was set up for online discussions, which later became the official academic Jiscmail Bi Research Group in 2006. Significantly from the start, the group has been open to all who were interested in any kind of research on bisexuality, whether or not they were qualified academics themselves.

In 2004 a subgroup of us conducted the first survey of BiCon attendees, in collaboration with the organisers of that year's event. BiCon is the key annual gathering for bisexual people in the UK, providing a central hub to almost all other bi-related events. BiCon is a weekend-long gathering for bi people, their friends, partners, and others with a supportive interest in bisexuality. It has run for 28 years continuously and is held in a different part of the UK each year, organized by a different team of volunteers. Activities include social and networking events, self-care and care for others, and activism. A typical UK BiCon might have 200-300 participants, of whom about 60-90 are at BiCon for the first time (<http://bicon.org.uk>). BiCon also plays an important role on the international bisexual scene, having hosted two out of the last five International Conferences on Bisexuality (UK BiCon 2000 incorporated the 6th ICB and UK BiCon 2010 incorporated the 10th ICB, see Wikipedia 2010 for further details).

Up until 2004, data about the bisexual population of the UK was largely lacking as it is difficult to obtain due to both theoretical and practical complexities of bisexual identities (Jones, 2010), for

example the classic difficulty of obtaining data from sufficiently large numbers of people from traditionally marginalised groups. There has been a recent large scale survey which indicated that bisexuals make up 0.5% of the UK population (Joloza et al 2010), but because the data came from just a single question, was gathered from households rather than individuals, and is based on a very simple definition of sexual orientation (<http://psycentral.wordpress.com/2010/09/24/sexual-identity-figures-flawed-psychology/>), we suspect that there was serious underreporting. In this context, we thought that surveying the attendees of BiCon would provide key data for policy makers, planners, academics and practitioners as well as for bisexual and LGBT communities, which would enable them to provide better services for bisexual people. In the UK, lesbian and gay communities are represented well by professionalised, reasonably well-resourced organisations (especially UK Stonewall, the largest gay lobbying organisation in Europe formed in 1989, see Stonewall, 2010a), whereas bisexual communities rely heavily on the grassroots activism that revolves around BiCon.

The results of that first BiCon survey were published in the *Journal of Bisexuality* (Barker, Bowes-Catton, Iantaffi, Cassidy, & Brewer, 2008). Since then, those involved have continued to distribute and collect the survey year on year in order to gain a fuller longitudinal picture of bisexuality in the UK, including any shifts and changes in UK bi communities over time. We hope to publish the results of longitudinal analysis in future issues of *Journal of Bisexuality* once we have secured funding to continue our investigations. We now have a wealth of data on this group, representing most of those people who explicitly identify as part of the bisexual community in the UK. The survey covers areas of major importance to bisexual people's lives and wellbeing, including the following:

- Demographic data such as age, ethnicity, gender identity, employment status, income, qualification levels and religion
- Relationships and sexuality
- Health, including mental health, sexual health, and experiences of healthcare provision
- Experiences of BiCon

The survey is important because existing research in the UK demonstrates that bisexual people experience higher levels of marginalisation and prejudice in the workplace than the wider population (both heterosexual and gay/lesbian) (Chamberlain, 2009). It is also clear that bisexual people are at greater risk of having mental health and substance abuse issues than both gay/lesbian and heterosexual people (King & McKeown, 2003; Fish, 2007), largely related to their relative invisibility in society and the double discrimination that they face from both heterosexuals and lesbians/gay men (see Barker & Langdrige, 2008). The results of the 2004 BiCon survey certainly supported these findings, and the continued survey offers the possibility of charting whether, and how, prejudice and mental health issues change over time, as well as identifying particularly at risk subgroups of the bi communities. In addition to this, BiCon and related events are clearly a major source of support for bisexuals in the UK, and this research offers the opportunity to explore the ways in which this support operates.

Several more qualitative projects have spun off the original survey research in order to investigate key aspects in greater depth. Examples include Helen Bowes-Catton's in-depth examination of the way bisexual lives are lived within, and outside, bisexual spaces, and the importance given to 'safe space' in bisexual communities (see Bowes-Catton, Barker & Richards, forthcoming 2011); Richard's work on trans bi experiences, following the survey findings about the crossover between these populations (Richards, forthcoming 2011); and Jones' research on bisexual ageing (Jones, this publication) following survey findings that the majority of BiCon attendees are aged over thirty, in contrast to many lesbian and, especially, gay events.

Another major activity of the bisexuality researchers in the UK has been an ongoing examination of

the representations of bisexuality in the UK media, much of which is published on the bi media website (<http://bimedia.org>). An overview of this was also published in the 2008 *Journal of Bisexuality* article (Barker, et al., 2008). Since then, representations have remained relatively consistent. Generally speaking, people in the news, and characters on television programmes, are not presented as bisexual even if they demonstrate attraction to more than one gender. Rather they are depicted as moving across the gay-straight dichotomy in one direction or the other. The most recent example of this in 2009-10 was the character Syed Masood in the soap opera, *Eastenders*.

When bisexuality *is* depicted, it generally takes the form of a negative representation. The UK Stonewall charity conducted two surveys on LGB representations in recent years: one on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (Cowen & Valentine, 2006), and one on television aimed at young people (Stonewall, 2010b). In the BBC study, no specifically bisexual representations were reported at all, and focus group participants could recollect very few portrayals of bisexual people. On television for young people, whilst LGB people altogether accounted for 4.5% of all programming, bisexual portrayals accounted for under 1% of this 4.5%, and they were represented overwhelmingly negatively, for example as greedy.

The BBC conducted its own audience consultation on the portrayal of LGB people in 2010 (BBC, 2010). Following this they expressed a commitment to more positive, diverse and realistic portrayal, particularly of bisexual people. They acknowledged that bisexual people had been largely invisible in the past, represented in terms of behaviour in ways which erased bi identity, and/or represented in negative stereotypical ways (BBC, 2010, p.33). We have yet to see how these recommendations will be taken up by actual programming.

Having been involved with so many small-scale studies ourselves over the years, in 2008 we felt the time was right to organise a national conference to reflect this burgeoning of research and writing on bisexuality in the UK. We explicitly tied this event to the annual BiCon in order to embed the research and academic work within the communities from whence it came, and for whom it was most relevant: All BiCon attendees were able to attend BiReCon for free in both 2008 and 2010. The aim of BiReCon 2008 was to disseminate research back to bisexual communities, to obtain feedback from them about research projects, and to bring together as many governmental bodies and relevant organisations as possible so that they could also hear about research on this often invisible group.

The name 'BiReCon' for the event was suggested to us by a member of the 2008 BiCon organising committee, Elizabeth Baxter-Williams. The catchy title seemed appropriate because the event was a *bisexual research conference*, but also because it was a chance for outside organisations and groups to do some 'recon' (short for reconnaissance) about bisexuality. It was a place for them to find out about good practice, who makes up the bi community, what their needs were, and what they could do about this.

The first BiReCon event attracted around sixty people altogether, and included a mixture of presentations and workshops on various aspects of bisexuality. There was an initial session where organisations such as Stonewall, the police service, various unions, and governmental bodies all gave brief overviews of their work in relation to bisexuality. There were also workshops on mental health, biphobia, training about bisexuality, and different forms of research, and a small number of presentations of academic work on topics such as bi experience and bisexual people in counselling.

Following the success of the 2008 event, an umbrella organisation, BiUK, was set up to manage future events, the bisexuality research group mailing list, the BiCon survey, and potential projects about the UK bisexual communities. We put together a website for the group (www.biuk.org) and began to prepare for an international conference in 2010.

BiReCon 2010

BiReCon 2010 began to take shape in the Autumn of 2009 when calls for contributors were sent out to all of the bisexual, and LGBTQ research, mailing lists that we were aware of. Potential keynote speakers were also contacted to determine whether any of the main writers and researchers on bisexuality on a worldwide scale might be able to attend. As previously, BiReCon was run on an entirely voluntary basis. The organisers made no profit from the event (other than the good feelings they were left with after a conference gone well), and all delegate fees went directly to BiCon itself in order to help fund their event and to enable those with less money to attend it. Therefore, we were extremely grateful when not only did Robyn Ochs, Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Eric Anderson, agree to be keynote speakers, but also John Sylla, from the American Institute of Bisexuality (AIB) agreed to present and to chair a panel discussion at the end of the day. Also, the AIB kindly offered to provide funding so that we could have drinks and food at a social event once the work of the day was over.

As previously mentioned, BiReCon 2010 took place the day before 10 ICB. ICB itself attracted 450 delegates from many different countries across the three days that it lasted. The day of BiReCon attracted over 100 attendees from Australia, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Puerto-Rico, Finland, Spain, Israel, Ireland, the US and the UK. Again, we attracted a range of different groups of people including community members and activists as well as researchers, writers, academics, therapists, and representatives of voluntary and governmental organisations. Due to the high number and quality of submissions following our call for contributors, we also expanded the format from the 2008 conference to include parallel streams of presentations as well as workshops.

The sessions were all of an extremely high standard and covered a wonderful diversity of topics from biphobia in the workplace to bi relationships in different countries; bi experiences of ageing to ecosexuality; bisexuality in Shakespeare to bi behaviour amongst young men. Attendees also heard about a wide range of research approaches, including sociocultural perspectives, neuroscience, survey results, interviews, media analysis, and in depth creative research.

The international flavour of the event was particularly captured in the stream of presentations on relationships and biphobia. The four presenters in the room represented six different countries between them (Britain, Iceland, Finland, Spain, Denmark, and Germany). First, Anna Einarsdottir presented her team's research on young people who engage in civil partnerships in the UK. There were marked gender differences between her participants, with women being more likely to meet through friendships or colleagues and men more likely to meet in social spaces. Also, Einarsdottir was able to make comparisons to the Icelandic situation which she studied for her doctoral research. This linked in well with Jenny Kangasvuo's work on Finnish bisexual relationships between 1999 and 2009. It became clear that legislation in various countries had a marked impact on people's relationships. LGB people in relationships rushed for relationship recognition or marriage when it first became available, and sought to have children when there was a perceived risk of adoption or fertility rights being removed. Such moves could put relationships under additional pressure. Some couples also found their activist roles influencing, and being influenced by, their relationship practices. Miguel Obradors presented on biphobia specifically, examining the overlapping and multiple different kinds of discrimination and phobia which bi people may experience (homo-, hetero- and bi-phobia; phobia relating to gender as well as sexuality; and discrimination on many different levels from symbolic to overt). This connected to Christian Klesse's presentation on biphobia and bi relationships, which included consideration of specific issues bi people face when discussing their relationships compared to heterosexual or lesbian & gay people. For example, Klesse spoke about the possibility of family hoping that bisexuals would choose an 'opposite sex' partner eventually, and echoed keynote speaker, Robyn Ochs', contention that bi people would be

considered risky partners by many outside bisexual communities.

A key theme running through the conference was the issues that bisexual people face in the workplace. We had two workshops and a stream of presentations covering these aspects. In the presentation stream, Nicola Wood from the University of Leeds and Ruth Hunt from Stonewall gave interlinked papers about bisexual people's experiences in the workplace. Wood's paper focused on the reports of bisexual people themselves and Hunt's on what employers can do to be more inclusive of their bisexual staff. Hunt presented the findings and recommendations of Stonewall's recently published guide *Bisexual people in the workplace* (Chamberlain, 2009). Following this, Surya Monro reported a recent study on the ways in which LGBT equalities work is approached within local government. Monro and her colleagues found that the inclusion of bisexuals in statutory sector equalities initiatives is largely rhetorical and that bi people are 'bottom of the pile' where LGBT equalities work is being done. There was evidence of prejudice against bi people still being very much alive in statutory sector organisations as well as in the lesbian, gay and heterosexual communities (see Monro 2010, Monro and Richardson 2010). Monro also discussed the way in which LGBT equalities work in local government entered a new stage with the introduction of a raft of legislation post 1997, in line with the European Employment Equality Directive (2000). In England and Wales the legislation included the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (2003), the Civil Partnerships Act 2004, the Equality Regulations (Sexual Orientation) 2007, and the Single Equality Act 2010ⁱⁱ. Whilst broadly progressive, some of this legislation has not acted in a way that supports some bi people, for example the Civil Partnership Act reinforces norms of monogamy and makes people who are single or in poly relationships more likely to experience social marginalisation. Finally, Heidi Bruins Green and Nicholas Payne introduced their current large-scale international survey into the workplace experiences of people who identify as bisexual (and allied identities). One of their initial findings was that if an employer has a policy on sexual orientation that doesn't include gender identity, bisexual people were no more likely to be out at work than if the employer had no policy on sexual orientation at all.

The final stream of presentations focused on research on bi experience and literary and media representations. Helen Bowes-Catton presented the visual methods research mentioned earlier in this paper (Bowes-Catton, Barker & Richards, forthcoming 2011). She reported finding that bisexuals feel 'at home' and 'able to breathe more' in bisexual spaces like BiCon, when compared to their everyday lives. George Voss spoke about her, and Camel Gupta's, experiences of organising Brighton Bifest events, echoing keynote speaker Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio's contention that bisexuality has an important role to play in challenging and overflowing the heterosexual/homosexual binary and is consequently productive in relation to LGBT policy and practice, and to queer theory (see also Barker, Richards & Bowes-Catton, 2009). Beth Roberts reprised her ongoing work on bisexuality and the cinema, continuing previous academic reflections upon the meaning given to bisexuality in contemporary cinema, as well as the visibility and invisibility of bisexuality and the ways in which the technology of cinema can be used to address this. Finally, Kaye McLelland presented her work on Shakespeare. Rather than engaging in the debate about whether Shakespeare himself was, or wasn't bisexual (given that such a concept would have made very little sense at the time) she concentrated on possible bi readings of his work and on the lives of people who he based his characters upon. She concluded that, because Shakespeare is so commonly studied in school, it is vital for young people to see bi identities reflected in the work of such a great cultural icon.

The two keynote presentations by Robyn Ochs and Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio shared a focus on deconstructing binaries and moving beyond hetero/homo divisions. They complemented each other in emphasizing global issues, from a multicultural and an ecosystemic perspective, respectively. Both also represented the tradition of female outness and leadership that characterizes the bisexual movement, exemplified by their important recent works (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2010 and Ochs,

2005) which were available to conference delegates. On a different note, Eric Anderson presented his work on the attitudes of heterosexual male youths. He argued from his findings from 'street-corner' research, that young men seem much more comfortable than in the past about physically expressing affection, for example kissing one another on the lips, and indeed that male bisexuality generally did not seem to be viewed in such a negative light as it has previously. Also, John Sylla presented some very interesting research from the days before the AIB which found that many lesbian, gay and straight identified people report regularly and/or recently being sexual with both men and women. This led into a presentation on recent developments following the problematic research a few years ago which was reported (in the New York Times) as demonstrating that bi men were either 'straight, gay or lying' (Rieger, Chivers & Bailey, 2005). Sylla and his colleague reported that this research has recently been re-conducted using a better form of participant recruitment and more appropriate materials, and has found that bi men *do* show a different pattern to gay or straight men: the difference between the amount of arousal they have to their 'preferred' and 'non-preferred' genders is smaller. Some of the audience at this presentation questioned the understanding of gender in the study (that people are either male or female, and that attraction is based on this). The researchers responded that this study was just the first step towards more complex and nuanced research, and pointed out the political value in overturning the previous, problematic, findings. Sylla also outlined a diverse range of additional projects which the AIB is looking to fund in the years to come.

We were very fortunate at BiReCon that we were able to obtain funding from the university where two of us work (Jones and Barker: The Open University) to pay for some of the day to be video-recorded. All of the keynote presentations were captured, along with the stream of presentations on relationships and biphobia. Clips from all these presentations are now available on YouTube to give those who could not attend a flavour of the day, and to disseminate key ideas and research about bisexuality far wider than just the attendees at the conference itself.

BiReCon: The Future

It is hoped that BiReCon will continue to be a biennial event in the UK, taking place on the day before BiCon every other year, with a shifting group of organisers and different foci each time. For example, a day focused entirely on mental health issues has been suggested, given the prominence of such issues within bi communities. The next UK BiReCon event should be taking place in the summer of 2012.

In addition to this, we are very keen for other countries to use BiReCon as a model for their own events around bisexuality, research, activism and good organisational practice. We are more than happy for others to use the 'BiReCon' name, and/or to structure the event along similar lines to our own conference. Indeed, Miguel Obradors, one of the speakers at BiReCon 2010, has already announced that Spain is planning its own 'micro-BiReCon'.

We hope that others will use the opportunities opened up by BiReCon 2010 to plan another international academic conference on bisexuality in the near future. Clearly there is an ever-increasing number of people writing and researching on this topic, as evidenced by the many people who were unable to attend BiReCon 2010 but said that they were keen to take part in future conferences, particularly if they took place closer to home (in Australia, for example, or the US).

BiReCon has been used as an example of good practice in terms of researcher and academic public engagement in a number of fora (e.g. Hagger, Johnson, Hegarty, Barker & Richards, forthcoming 2010; www.open.ac.uk/ccig/public-engagement).

We would like to end this paper by drawing out a number of discussion points which were raised in the panel discussion at BiReCon 2010, and in the feedback session from the event at 10 ICD the

following day. These may well be useful for others to take forward to future events and to different locations:

- What questions about bisexuality has research already answered, how can we compile these in one place and get the messages from them across to communities themselves and to the wider population?
- How should researchers instrumentalise bisexuality for research purposes? Should they focus on people who are attracted to men and women, for example? Or should they use the kinds of definitions which come from bi communities such as 'attraction regardless of gender'? Or should they focus on fluidity of sexuality rather than bisexuality per se?
- What research needs to be done for bisexual communities? Should the emphasis be, for example, on physiological research trying to prove that bisexual people exist or have certain brain patterns, on survey research into the demographics of bi people, and/or on in depth qualitative research on bi experiences.
- How do we reach beyond bi communities to bi people (or people who have sex with men and women) who don't attend BiCon and similar events? Is eliciting participation on street corners the answer, as in Eric Anderson's research? Might online possibilities be another way forward as in recent biological research which recruited from couples-seeking-singles websites?
- How can the gap between the research that communities want, and the resources are available to carry out that research, be bridged?
- How can bi people engage with issues of sustainability? How does bisexuality relate to ecosexuality (sexualities and relationships structures that aim to be environmentally and socially conscious)?
- How can we best engage with bi media and mass media?
- Who should fund bi research? To what extent might their agenda impact on the results and conclusions?
- How can we continue international dialogues about these issues?

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Links

All details of BiReCon are available on www.biuk.org

The YouTube clips for BiReCon 2010 are available on www.youtube.com/user/BiReCon

If you are keen to join in ongoing discussions on these matters, please join the following groups at the weblinks provided:

International: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/academic_bi/

National (UK): <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=BIRESEARCHGROUP>

The websites of the keynote speakers from BiReCon 2010 are:

Robyn Ochs: www.robynochs.com

Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio: www.serenagaia.com

Eric Anderson: www.ericandersonphd.com

American Institute of Bisexuality: <http://www.bisexual.org>

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BiReCon Programme: 26th August 2010

10.00-10.30 Registration

10.30-11.00 Welcome: Christina Richards and Meg Barker, and introduction to bi research in the UK

11.10-12.40 Presentations

12.45-1.15 Keynote talk: Robyn Ochs – *Why we need to “Get Bi”*

1.15-2.15 Lunch

2.30-3.00 Keynote talk: Serena Anderlini D'Onofrio - *Gaia & the New Politics of Love: Notes for a 'Bi' Planet*

3.00-4.00 Workshop 1

4.00-5.00 Workshop 2

5.10-5.40 Keynote talk: Eric Anderson – *Heterosexual men, bisexual behaviour*

5.40-7.00 Panel discussion: John Sylla (American Institute of Bisexuality) and keynote speakers – *The future of bisexual research and theory*

7.00-onwards Conference end, socialising, supported by the American Institute of Bisexuality

Presentations

| Time | Workplace | Experience & media | Relationships & biphobia |
|-------------|--|---|---|
| 11.00-11.20 | Nichola Wood – “...apparently you can't be bisexual”: <i>Bisexual experiences of inequality, prejudice and discrimination in the workplace</i> | Helen Bowes-Catton – <i>Visualising bisexual spaces</i> | <i>Anna Einarsdottir and Brian Heaphy - 'A date or a drink?' How Civil Partners meet</i> |
| 11.20-11.40 | Ruth Hunt – <i>Bisexuals in the workplace: Applying the research</i> | George Voss – <i>Activism in queer and bi spaces</i> | <i>Jenny Kangasvuo - "It's Like a Wave, This Thing Called Bisexuality." Comparing the Experiences of Finnish Bisexuals in 1999 and 2009</i> |
| 11.40-12.00 | Surya Monro - <i>Where are all the bisexuals? Bisexuality and local government equalities work in the UK</i> | Beth Roberts – <i>Imag(in)ing Bisexuality in the Cinema</i> | <i>Miguel Obradors – Deconstructing Biphobia</i> |
| 12.00-12.20 | Heidi Green – <i>Workplace survey: bisexuality, pansexuality, many gender loving, MSMW, WSMW, fluid desire.</i> | Kaye McLelland – <i>Towards a Bisexual Shakespeare</i> | <i>Christian Klesse - 'I did my way ...' – Creating Bisexual Intimacies in the Face of Heteronormativity and Biphobia</i> |

Workshops

| | | | | |
|------------------------------|---|---|--|--|
| Workshop 1: 3.00-4.00 | Ruth Hunt and Louise Kelly – <i>Bis in the workplace</i> | Ele Hicks – <i>Supporting and finding the bisexuals</i> | Lindsay River – <i>Issues for older bisexual people</i> | Hartmut Friedrichs – <i>Political strategy: bisexual or queer? - a two-eyed approach</i> |
| Workshop 2: 4.00-5.00 | Rebecca Jones - <i>'When I get older': Imagining your bisexual future</i> | Surya Monro - <i>Bridging the Gap: The bisexual community influencing policy making</i> | Richard Lohman & Carola Towle - <i>Working for bi equality – how can we use the 2010 Equality Act?</i> | Sue George – <i>Bi blogging</i> |

ⁱ See www.biuk.org for a complete list of the founder members of this group which includes Helen Bowes-Catton, Caroline Walters and Tracey Plowman, in addition to the authors of the current paper. It should be noted that several other people have been involved in the broader group of UK bisexuality researchers over the years, notably the authors of Barker, Bowes-Catton, Iantaffi, Cassidy & Brewer (2008) and Barker, Richards & Gupta (2010).

ⁱⁱ See www.stonewall.org.uk, www.pfc.org.uk, for details (accessed 14.05.2010).