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## **Positive and Negative Psychological Wellbeing in a Post-Pandemic World? The Relative Contribution of Social Support for LGBTQPIA+ and Cisgender Heterosexual Individuals**

On 13<sup>th</sup> February, the Birkbeck institute for Gender & Sexuality research and the School of Psychological Sciences hosted an opportunity to hear about Gender & Sexuality research in the Faculty of Science and discuss pathways to early careers research in psychology.

The event took place at Birkbeck during a reading week and drew a modest audience which gave it an intimate feel in which each attendee was able to speak with the events hosts and each other about how the research postgraduate experiences discussed resonated with their personal interests and academic aspirations. Hosted by Professor Fiona Tasker, attendees were delivered insights from fresh findings by guest speaker Katie Stokes' analysis of data from a large-scale pandemic project undertaken by Fiona and colleagues. Facilitating the evening was me! Laura Phillips-Farmer, I'm currently working on a PhD supervised by Fiona, and shared the details of my pathway from the MSc Psychology course at Birkbeck through to the PhD.

Katie, a Birkbeck alumni, graduated from her MSc Psychology course at Birkbeck in 2022 while student life was still somewhat restricted by the pandemic. Katie's work itself focussed on pandemic impact: Katie investigated wellbeing for LGBTQ+ people compared to cisgender-heterosexual people two years on from the onset of the pandemic.

Katie shared that going into the study, previous research had demonstrated that the LGBTQ+ community typically has faced greater negative wellbeing challenges: greater health challenges, greater social support challenges, and worse outcomes in the face of large adverse social events such as the pandemic. A study at the beginning of the pandemic confirmed these expectations to be the case, but Katie wanted to know how these processes had developed two years on.

Katie had a few further ideas about how to dig into the situation in 2022. She mentioned that often in response to large social events such as the pandemic only negative wellbeing outcomes are focussed on; Katie wanted to see what looking into positive wellbeing outcomes would reveal. Katie also wanted to focus on social support since it had been a protective factor in natural disasters research and is a key issue in LGBTQ+ research. During the first wave of the pandemic social support was a key mitigating factor for the wellbeing outcomes of LGBTQ+ people, with lots of variation in how that played out and what that looked like.

As expected, Katie found that LGBTQ+ people were still more likely to have increased negative psychological wellbeing outcomes (higher levels of depression, anxiety, stress) compared to those found among the cisgender-heterosexual sample, while positive wellbeing outcomes (for which Katie used the Satisfaction with Life Scale) were quite similar between the two groups.

The main results of interest came via Katie's investigation into social support factors. Social support data were split into three categories in Katie's hierarchical multiple regression models: family support, friend support, and support from a special person. Contrary to Katie's expectations, no social support in any category impacted negative wellbeing outcomes for either the LGBTQ+ group or the cisgender heterosexual group. However, confirming Katie's intuition that positive wellbeing outcomes were valuable to investigate distinctly, Katie found that in both groups family and special person support increased satisfaction with life. Despite LGBTQ+ people reporting relatively high social support from friends compared to family and special people, support from friends did not make a significant contribution to Katie's positive wellbeing regression model.

The findings intrigued our attendees who were interested in how the study could more specifically capture the intricate differences in how LGBTQ+ people engage with their social support networks. Katie shared that the limitations of the measures had been a consideration during the study, as well as possible survey fatigue issues and a lack of focus on specific groups within the LGBTQ+ community. The attendees bounced ideas back and forth with Katie about how measures could pick up different types of family support for LGBTQ+ people in the future, and whether measures could distinguish between family with parents, and family with chosen people, romantic or otherwise.

Once Katie had inspired the room with a small taste of what master's level research could demonstrate and how it could fit with the wider academic world, our conversation turned to different approaches aspirational researchers could follow themselves to further their academic pathways. The key takeaways from our conversation were:

- 1) Use any previous experience you have, even if it seems tangential!
- 2) Try to choose bachelor's or master's courses or projects that line up with your ultimate research aims.
- 3) Remember you don't have to find full-time funding to do a part-time PhD if you can find a job or tutoring opportunities that can support you financially
- 4) Try to meet people in your department who focus on the topics that you find interesting or that use methods that you enjoy using – don't be shy in speaking to them about developing your ideas!

As with many students choosing Birkbeck, Katie and I both had different backgrounds prior to re-entering the world of academia; we each shared how those backgrounds equipped us with skills and experience to fuse with our study with the encouragement of Birkbeck's culture, turning what could be seen as a disadvantaged position in some universities into unique advantages as we look towards continuing in academia.

Most of my adult life had been spent working in youth work and homelessness support roles. I managed a winter night shelter project and went on to work in various roles in homelessness support services. Eventually I would embed this into my research proposal to win highly sought after ESRC-UBEL funding for a three year full-time fully funded PhD. As

I approach my submission date this September, I am looking to apply for further funding to expand upon and disseminate my findings. Part of my PhD included a comparison between the homelessness experiences of LGBTQ+ people and cisgender heterosexual people which indicated interesting preliminary findings that I would love to investigate further.

Attendees at the event were each at different positions in their academic journeys – from first to final year of their studies – just as you are as a reader of this blog! I hope that in sharing a bit about recent LGBTQ+ research findings and pathways into research this has left you feeling a little more aware and inspired about what your research pathway could look like.

Please do get in touch if you have any further questions or would like to discuss anything this post has raised for you.

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