

Introduction

In 2008 Iris Robinson, a former Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) MLA and MP, made a series of statements about homosexuality live on BBC Radio Ulster which caused a widely publicised furore that resonated far beyond her Northern Ireland audience. Mrs Robinson, wife of the First Minister Peter Robinson, stated that she felt homosexuality was an ‘abomination’ and that it ‘nauseated’ her. She also suggested that homosexuals could be ‘cured’ with psychiatric treatment and promoted the services of a ‘very nice’ psychiatrist she knew who could help to ‘re-orientate’ homosexuals back to heterosexuality (Young 2008). She defended these statements by claiming that she believed it was the ‘duty of Government to uphold God’s law’ (*Belfast Telegraph* 18 July 2008). These assertions proved inflammatory to many regardless of their sexual orientation across Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. It soon emerged however that this was not the first time Mrs Robinson had expressed her repulsion towards homosexuality. As well as having compared homosexuals to murderers (Henry 2008), Hansard transcripts released in the midst of the furore showed that Mrs Robinson had also declared that ‘there can be no viler act, apart from homosexuality and sodomy, than sexually abusing innocent children’ (*Belfast Telegraph* 21 July 2008). Homosexuality, she believed, was worse than paedophilia.

As will be seen later in this book, Iris Robinson was not the first high-profile public minister to make disparaging comments about homosexuality in Northern Ireland. What made this particular event so notorious was that at the time of her statements, she was Chair of the Stormont Health Committee. In this role, Mrs Robinson was ultimately responsible for overseeing the delegation of funding for strategies and interventions designed to address the myriad mental health problems incurred by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGB&T¹) people affected by everyday experiences of homophobia. Her comments called into question her impartiality as a leader in this role, yet she remained in post. Mrs Robinson also evaded criminal action; after an investigation lasting a year the Police Service of

1 Hereafter, the acronym LGB&T will be used. A common complaint with this label is that including the ‘T’ can be tokenistic and more damaging for trans communities who, quite rightly, do not see their gender-based victimisation as the same as sexual identity victimisation. While transpeople can be lesbian, gay or bisexual, their victimisation is perhaps best analysed from a specific, gender-bias perspective. In Northern Ireland, the trans community is often included with lesbian and gay organisations (which also cover bisexuality too) although there are several smaller organisations which have their own identity. The research which informs this book derives solely from the experiences of lesbians and gay men who identify as the gender assigned to them at birth.

Northern Ireland (PSNI) stated that no action would be taken against her for any of the public statements she had made as they believed that she had done nothing wrong (Gordon 2009). Not content with this, calls for some form of comment from Westminster led to the then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown reiterating his reluctance to get involved, citing it as a matter for the Northern Ireland Assembly to resolve. Mrs Robinson remained in post until early 2010, her resignation from public office being prompted by revelations about her personal life and accusations of improper conduct. Mrs Robinson was alleged to have failed to follow procedure when involved in granting a licence to, and investing in, a restaurant owned by teenager Kirk McCambly, who she had been engaged in an extra-marital affair with at the time.²

These events, though interesting in their own right, indicate Northern Ireland's anomalous identity. To some, it appears to be a community rooted in the past, where moral objections to homosexuality result in it being religiously and publicly denounced alongside other forms of perceived sexual deviancy (although objections to such deviancy do not appear to extend to Catholic priests' physical and sexual abuse of children which for decades was overlooked and denied by the Catholic Church). To others, Northern Ireland is progressively moving away from its troubled past to celebrate inclusion and recognise that societies and social attitudes have changed significantly. Either way, there has most certainly been an increase in the visibility afforded to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender in Northern Ireland, most notably over the past decade. However, despite debates about the rights and wrongs of homosexuality occupying a prominent position in social and political discourses in Northern Ireland, research and theory concerning Northern Irish lesbian and gay lives remains significantly underdeveloped compared to the rest of the UK.

This book focuses on Northern Ireland without recourse to comparisons to the Republic of Ireland or Great Britain, although at times some similarities are evident. This is because Northern Ireland offers a unique mix of British and Irish heritage which has interwoven to produce distinctive responses to particular social and political issues, several of which are discussed in later chapters. The cultural difference demarcating Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK is perhaps best introduced in the words of one of the gay male interviewees. At the time of interviewing, Rob had been in a relationship with Mack for over thirty years. Rob was from a Protestant background and Mack had a Catholic upbringing. They met in the 1970s while Rob was working in a factory, where his sexuality had become common knowledge as a result of a colleague telling people without Rob's permission. Rob's colleagues discovered that his partner was not only male, but a Catholic. What follows was, as Rob points out, an exchange that could only have happened in Northern Ireland:

² In 2011, Mrs Robinson was eventually cleared of any wrongdoing in relation to the financing of Mr McCambly's business.

This woman comes up to me one day and she says, ‘You know, it’s not you being gay that’s the problem, but couldn’t you have met a nice Protestant boy?’ Now, that’s a very typical Northern Ireland response; they didn’t care that I was gay, but they knew he was Catholic, so it is a very Northern Ireland sort of thing. Nowhere else in the world would it really matter I suppose.

This exchange is enlightening in that it appears as if homosexuality was a more favourable social transgression than being in a cross-community relationship. This may well have been the case given the timing of the incident, which took place at the height of Northern Ireland’s violent ethno-political conflict. The complexities surrounding attitudes towards homosexuality and sexual minorities in Northern Ireland, and the impacts of these on the lesbians and gay men exposed to such attitudes are focused upon in this book to draw out how homophobia has been informed and sustained. There are several different themes which are drawn upon throughout this analysis: issues of identity (including religious, political, national, sexual, gender, class and geographical), ideological constructs of ‘homosexuality’ and what this represents, the position of lesbians and gay men during the ongoing ethno-political conflict in Northern Ireland and the politicising of a sexual minority identity to attain recognition, rights and responsibilities.

Purpose and Structure of this Book

This book aims to account for the ways in which homophobia has become normalised in facets of Northern Irish social and political cultures to the detriment of those affected by it. It also addresses what this state of affairs may mean in terms of effecting purposeful social, legal and political change. Analyses of homophobia in Northern Ireland must be based within the particular social, moral and political perspectives relevant to that society. Such an approach links to other contemporary analyses of prejudices which suggest grounding these investigations in their culturally specific environments (Bowling 1993, Perry 2001, 2003). There has been considerable research into LGB&T people’s experiences of homophobia and violence in England the past few decades and to a lesser degree Scotland and Wales. The findings from such studies have ensured that sexual orientation was eventually included in legislation addressing what has become known as ‘hate crime’ in Great Britain. However, these studies cannot be said to be truly representative of the UK as they often make little reference to Northern Ireland, or in some cases exclude it altogether (see Duggan 2008a, 2010a, 2010b). Some theoretical analyses which address homophobia in Northern Ireland make passing reference to existing cultural differences although few ground these examinations in empirical research with LGB&T communities. Alternatively, fact-finding studies into the nature and prevalence of homophobic discrimination or victimisation have focused on highlighting negative experiences and their impact, but have done little to assess what causes or sustains these prejudices in Northern Ireland.

The culturally specific analysis of homophobia undertaken in this book is coupled with suggestions that responding to homophobic hate crimes in Northern Ireland requires a similarly culturally specific response. This is not to say that initiatives currently in place elsewhere in the UK are not relevant or useful, but rather suggests that additional answers may be found in Northern Ireland's socio-political history. The study also hopes to show that understanding competing responses to sexual identities in Northern Ireland is integral to recognising and challenging different facets of homophobia. Existing policies which aim to address homophobia may not take into account the differing reasons why a person holds such prejudices if these are linked to religious or national backgrounds. Similarly, they may also fail to recognise homophobia which differs as a result of a prejudiced person's gender, race, class, ability, faith and so forth. Therefore, there are myriad ways in which homophobia can be addressed and engaged with to challenge the specific factors informing this prejudice.

As well as exploring how political and religious philosophies are imparted and operate to regulate sexualised identities, the chapters assess the type of victimisation experienced by lesbians and gay men, the impact of this on their lives and the methods employed to overcome sexual oppression and move closer towards visibility, recognition and acceptance. The analyses offer a historical perspective on factors informing contemporary homophobia in Northern Ireland. They suggest that if such factors remain unchallenged they will continue to sustain negative ideologies. Distinctions are made between urban and rural areas, men and women, older and younger interviewees and occasionally between Northern Ireland and comparable UK cities when this comparison is of particular note. The focus remains on exploring and explaining this prejudice within its unique Northern Irish socio-political history with a view to providing culturally informed recommendations to address the root causes of this particular prejudice.

Methodological Approach

What started out as an investigative study into contemporary homophobia soon ground to a halt when it appeared that there was very little literary LGB&T history specific to Northern Ireland to draw upon as a theoretical basis.³ The research soon morphed into a much broader social, political and historical study of how contemporary homophobia has been informed and sustained in Northern Ireland. Much of the knowledge concerning Northern Irish LGB&T lives still resides with the often marginalised people living there, although some documents are archived in historical collections held at the Public Records Office and the Linen Hall Library in Belfast. These histories which provide testament to the struggles, progress and positive developments concerning LGB&T lives, have proved invaluable to

³ The research findings which inform this book arose from a doctoral project undertaken at Queen's University Belfast.

understanding not only how and why contemporary forms of homophobia exist in Northern Ireland, but why this form of prejudice remains largely unchallenged in social and political spheres.

As is the norm with exploratory analyses, this book is intended to supplement existing knowledge on homophobia, victimisation, the nature and impact of homophobic hate crime and responses to these issues. Unlike other areas of hate crime research, there is a marked absence of comparable Northern Irish research and literature within which to situate this knowledge. Looking into histories of homosexuality and homophobia in England, it becomes clear that these are not immediately transferrable when trying to evaluate similar histories in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, it is Northern Ireland's specific history of conflict that in part facilitated the perceived invisibility of LGB&T communities there. Therefore, this book proposes several starting points for further study into homophobic victimisation that are informed by historical readings of nationality, identity, community formation and political conflict which can be compared to similar postcolonial, post conflict societies.

Information was gathered through the following methods: documentary analyses; participant observation in various LGB&T community events and organisations; several focus groups held with lesbians and gay men in different parts of Northern Ireland; email contact with participants; online interviews and surveys, forum discussions, and questionnaires; attendance at several community or LGB&T public meetings; and, most significantly, two dozen recorded, in-depth, life history interviews with a selection of lesbians and gay men from across Northern Ireland who 'came of age' during the worst years of the political conflict. The documentary element is particularly significant when exploring the struggle for homosexual decriminalisation (discussed in Chapter 3). However, the oral testimonies given by the interviewees involved in the research form the majority of the book's focus and evidential base.

Life history interviewing is a popular method for exploring and understanding lesbian and gay lives (Porter and Weeks 1991; Nardi, Sanders and Mermor 1994; Diamond 2008). This popularity stems from the ability of life histories to provide insights into 'the complex, varied and uneven fashion' by which lesbians and gay men made sense of their 'needs and desires, and fashioned for themselves manageable social, and sexual ways of life' (Porter and Weeks 1991: viii). Similarly, 'coming out' stories have highlighted important themes of 'suffering, surviving and surpassing' in the lives of lesbians and gay men (Plummer 1995: 15). Life history, or biographical, research methods utilise people's subjective reconstruction of lived experiences to produce or enhance knowledge. It reintroduces the subject into sociology and privileges the experiences of people who are immersed in social relations. Roberts (2002: 3) differentiates between the life history and the life story stating that the life story 'is commonly applied to the narrated story by the author while the life history infers the later interpretive, presentational work of the researcher.' Faraday and Plummer suggest that life history research offers a subjective perspective onto historical knowledge: '[w]hen one conducts a life

history interview, the findings become alive in terms of historical processes and structural constraints' (1979: 256). The individual's life is understood within the social context, but at the same time their narratives may shed light on the influence of that social situation on those experiences. In this manner, life history research is a process for understanding both the self and society (Bertaux 1996).

In the chapters which follow, the interviewees are referred to by their chosen pseudonyms as well as their age at the time of the interview. Their gender is rendered evident through their sexual orientation, as some pseudonyms may appear ambiguous. At times, these experiences are contextualised with reference to other studies of a quantitative nature, or other theories relating to homophobia, heterosexism or hate crime generally. Overall, however, it is the interviewees' experiences which provide the insight used to analyse, assess and account for the ways in which homophobia has been experienced and responded to in Northern Ireland. Therefore, references to 'the interviewees' relates to the lesbians and gay men interviewed in the course of the research which informs the empirical and theoretical foundations of *this* book.

In addition to the interviews, an online survey of women's experiences of being lesbian in Northern Ireland was conducted. This was sent out electronically via the Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative (or LASI, a Northern Irish lesbian and bisexual women's organisation) to ask women specific issues about themes which arose from the interviews. These included: gendered experiences of homophobia, growing up lesbian in Northern Ireland, coming out as lesbian in later life, levels of engagement with LGB&T communities and organisations, managing family relationships and the impact of the ethno-political conflict and the peace process on LGB&T communities. Forty-one women responded to this anonymous survey and their answers were used to elicit more information about issues affecting women who were less likely to be 'out' about their sexuality (discussed in Chapter 5).

Outlining the benefits of involvement in a survey can be difficult, especially if there is often no direct advantage for the individual respondent. Wright (2006) indicates that researchers who offer to share the information they obtain with the community involved can foster a harmonious relationship and potentially increase the number of responses. He suggests creating a report whereby the most interesting results are communicated to those interested, either electronically or otherwise, to inform as well as bring the communication to an end. In keeping with Wright's (2006) suggestion, some of the preliminary findings were disseminated via several feature articles for the Northern Ireland feminist publication *Women's News* (Duggan 2008b, 2008c, 2008d, 2008e). Copies of these articles were provided to LASI to forward on to the respondents via the organisation's mailing list (which was how the survey had been distributed). Although only a small gesture, ensuring that people see the worth of their involvement is a necessary part of community research and helps break down the barriers between academic and non-academic stakeholders.

As with all research, this study has its limitations. The views of the interviewees are not representative of all lesbians and gay men who grew up in Northern Ireland, nor are they meant to be. However, they do offer an important insight into experiences which, as a result of the underlying moral conservatism evident in Northern Ireland's history and the dominance of the ethno-political conflict, have otherwise been overlooked in academic research.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 offers an overview of particular events in Northern Ireland's socio-political history which can be seen as impacting on lesbians' and gay men's lives. Embedded in this chapter is a history of the Troubles and the events leading up to this thirty-year period of violent division and heightened security. Interestingly, there are facets of this history which evidence the tactical use of sexual denigration in Ireland at a time when the legal suppression of same-sex activities was being enhanced. This analysis develops into a wider exploration of homophobia, heterosexism and hate crimes in order to set the scene for the culturally specific examination to follow.

Chapter 2 provides an in-depth look at homophobia and hate crime in Northern Ireland as it currently stands. Using official and unofficial statistics, prosecution figures, existing research and several of the interviewees' experiences, attitudes towards homosexuality are theorised using a framework of power, identity constructs and acceptable forms of victimisation. An examination of several barriers to reporting victimisation leads on to a consideration of the influence of paramilitary opposition to homosexuality in local communities. Finally, the chapter concludes by outlining the measures some lesbians and gay men continue to take to negotiate and resist these forms of sexual regulation in their day-to-day lives.

Chapter 3 focuses on politics and politicising sexual identities in Northern Ireland. Starting with an outline of the struggle for, and opposition to, legislation decriminalising homosexuality in Northern Ireland, the analysis indicates the necessary politicisation of the burgeoning LGB&T community during a time of heightened political conflict. Enhanced security measures are shown to have advantaged some lesbians and gay men in terms of visibility, space and freedom from sexual persecution due to the desertedness of the city in the evenings. Implicit in this chapter is the theme of resilience and resistance to social and political forms of identity persecution, particularly in light of the comments made by several prominent Northern Irish politicians in recent years.

Chapter 4 looks at the underlying level of moral conservatism which permeates Northern Irish society and interrogates its impact on both the lives of lesbians and gay men and the attitudes of others towards them. Issues such as addressing the 'lifestyle choice' debate, reorientation ideologies and attempting to reconcile sexual and spiritual selves indicate the myriad difficulties negotiated by many

lesbians and gay men growing up in a culture where religious rhetoric dictated the life course. The chapter also provides an evaluation of the current controversies surrounding the picketing of the annual gay pride parade by Evangelical opponents and the importance of this event to sustain LGB&T visibility in a largely invisible society.

Chapter 5 provides a gender-specific focus by looking solely at women's experiences of being lesbian in Northern Ireland. Although lesbian women were not legally persecuted in the same way as gay men, several social and political constraints were evident in the women's stories. In covering issues such as managing family relationships, parenting and vulnerability to victimisation, it is clear that the additional aspect of gender difference impacted on some women's social and sexual regulation in a manner not experienced by gay men. Also addressed in this chapter is the importance of activism to the women involved in this research and the effect of women's politicisation on developing and sustaining lesbian visibility in Northern Ireland.

Chapter 6 addresses the personal impact of homophobia. The focus is on some of the less visible impacts of homophobia and negative coping strategies employed by people. These ranged from denial, isolation, migration and substance misuse through to contemplating more drastic measures. In addition, and to reflect the tenacity of those who overcame these challenges, the chapter also illustrates the freedom gained through undergoing personal 'coming out' journeys.

Finally, the conclusion offers an overall analysis of the central themes evident in lesbians' and gay men's experiences of homophobia in Northern Ireland, indicating how these can form the basis for change. Taking the core tenets of political imperatives, cultural conservatism and community interventions, the chapter suggests alternative measures of dealing with homophobia and hate crime in Northern Ireland which draw on the unique environment, history and identity inherent to this society.