
EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR LESBIANS, GAYS AND BISEXUALS: THE “VELVET TRIANGLE” OF RESEARCH, SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND POLICY

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In Flanders (the Northern Dutch speaking part of Belgium) the socio-political awareness of homosexuals, lesbians and bisexuals (in short LGB's) has enormously risen the last decennium. The slowly changing social attitude towards LGB's and the enlarged visibility of homosexuality bring up divers challenges for policymakers and researchers. In this article we will describe the interrelation of research, policy and social movement when it comes to LGB's.

0. To be or not to be LGB

Let's start with defining our object of research. The concept of sexual identity has its roots in the modern western culture and thinking: sexual desire translates itself into a certain identity (Foucault, 1980). Language constructs these identities. In Flanders we speak of 'holebi', which is a acronym for 'ho'mosexuals, 'le'sbians and 'bi'sexuals. This concept of sexual identity really became very popular in media, policy and LGB movements. It even ends up in the official dictionary of the Dutch language.¹ Although some shiver when hearing acronyms as 'holebi', it surely is an grammatically conceptualization of the heightened awareness of the long existing internal diversity in LGB movement.

When one uses the acronym LGB or holebi, one could argue that it's an improvement in comparison to the former use of 'homosexual', since lesbians and bisexuals are explicitly mentioned. At the same time whatsoever, it's also very clear who's *not* included. A very striking feature is the absence of transgenders.² On an international level the social movements and policy makers speak of LGBT, adding the T of transgender. In Belgium nor in Flanders transgender movements are almost non-existing, and have therefore lead to little research nor policy.

Slowly one even notices, mostly in America, the adding of Q, of queer (see later), and I, of intersexuals (people who are not clearly men or women on genetically, hormonally and/or anatomically basis). This is due to the fact that one sexual orientation implicitly refers to belonging to a specific sex category (men or woman). One is called a homosexual because one belongs to the male sex order, and one has a male partner (or wishes to have one). For a person not clearly belonging to one of the sex categories, it becomes complicated to speak of

¹ For a history of the term, see Dewaele Alexis, Motmans Annemie (2003). Holebi's in het voetlicht. In: Michielsens Magda, Vanhaegendoren Mieke, Vranken Jan (eds). *Steunpunt Gelijkekansenbeleid. Jaarboek 1*. Leuven: Garant.

² For more information, see Dewaele Alexis & Motmans Annemie (2003); Motmans Annemie (2003); and Motmans Annemie (2002).

homosexual, lesbian or bisexual. LGBTIQ thus becomes the concept that gathers in a nutshell everyone who's alienated from the heteronormative guidelines in life.³

Still one can see a difference between the LGB and the TQI: the common feature of LGB is their shared feature of a sexual orientation towards people of the same sex, whereas TQI's organize around gender identity (of course they also can be part of LGB community). This explains for Flanders why transgenders don't really unite with the LGB movement, and the LGB movement thus far not really explores the issue of gender identity.

Homosexuality, lesbianism and bisexuality are multidimensional concepts, and can be differentiated in three areas: behavior, self-definition or desire, or a combination of these three. Research (see Vincke, 2002) has shown us that only in 1/3 of the cases all three elements of homosexuality occurs. This makes clear that there is more homosexuality than there are self-declared LGB's. LGB behavior or desire doesn't automatically leads to an LGB identity. In *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953) Alfred Kinsey introduced his model of the Kinsey Homosexuality Scale. He was one of the first researchers that thought of sexuality as a continuum, and showed how differentiated homosexuality occurs in the society when one questions people in a differentiated manner. He made clear that the largest part of respondents are somewhere in the middle, with only very few respondents on the extremes. This made clear that desire for and sexual behavior with the same sex is much more widespread than commonly agreed on. Besides, identity concepts change over time as well. The categories used for defining, measuring and analyzing human behavior change, as well as the social organization and expression of human sexuality aren't timeless or universal (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, see also Blackwood Evelyn & Wieringa Saskia, 1999).

One's sexual orientation isn't fixed once and for all, one can have a relationship with a man today and with a woman later on. Authors as Fox, Golden and Esterberg (cited in Esterberg, 2002:221) underline that sexual identities are much more changeable over the lifespan than dual perceptions of sexuality development assume. Still, most models of homosexual identity only consider the development from one angle: from straight to gay (Cass, 1979, 1983/1984, Troiden, 1988, cited in Esterberg, 2002:222). There has also considerably more attention been paid to those who claim a bisexual identity en route to a gay/lesbian one. "Relatively little attention has been paid to those who move away from a gay or lesbian identity to a bisexual one – or to those who experience numerous, multiple shifts in identity. (...) Yet it is clear that these changes exist for significant numbers of people" Esterberg (2002:222).

Sexual identity became also a political battle. From the lesbian-feminist angle it was read as a choice (Rust, cited in Esterberg, 2002:220), bisexuals were traitress (Jeffrey, 1999, cited in Esterberg, 2002:216). Queer politics of the nineties welcomed everyone alienated from the dominant organisation of sex and gender.

How can one conduct research or make policy for such a blurring group of people? LGB's are in fact a very diverse group – if one can speak of a group – who only share a common sexual feature. But it's exactly this sexual feature that causes a specific socio-political position in our western society with still lots of discriminations and inequality. And it's on this ground that LGB movement, policymakers and researchers (try to) work together.

1. The velvet triangle for LGB's

"Actors within the state (...) need information and support from those outside the state, both from political and social movements, and from the academic and expert groups that are active at national and international level" (Woodward, 2000:285). Woodward (2002) puts this

³ See Bornstein Kate (1995), Feinberg Leslie (1996).

(in)formal network in this construction which she calls the ‘Velvet Triangle’⁴. The ‘velvet’ refers to the fact that almost all of the players in her model are female in a predominantly male environment. So for LGB’s we could call it the ‘Pink Triangle’, making at the same time a bridge to GLB history.⁵

The poles of the triangle are held down by bureaucrats and politicians, trusted academics, and formally organized voices in the movement. “Policy making (...) can be seen through the lens of the network and its personal relationships” (Woodward, 2002:385). The “clusters of participants are frequently connected by ties of common personal histories or connection” (Woodward, 2000: 387). These triangles between policymakers, movement and academics can be found on global EU level and national, regional and local levels.

“One of the possible negative consequences of the Triangle (...) is closure. (...) Another consequence is the necessary linking to the pre-conditions of the state” (Woodward, 2002:385). This implies a policy language, a language of the state and public administration. The danger exists that information no longer flows, or a language no longer understandable for the outsider of the Triangle. And above all, there’s power in the Triangle. “The Triangle is unbalanced, in favor of those holding the purse strings at the level of the state” (Woodward, 2002:385). Grass root participants of the LGB movement become followers instead of leaders, and there are not only gains but also losses: “the risk is that the very organization necessary to succeed in impacting on globalization and governance may lead to compromises in bringing about a wider access to policy for a range of women’s (or here: LGB) issues” (Woodward, 2002:385).

2. Equal opportunities Policy (EO Policy) for LGB’s in Flanders

As stated above, it’s difficult to specify the precise content of the term ‘LGB’ or in Dutch ‘holebi’. Therefore it is even more difficult to fill in what should be understood as equal opportunities relating to LGB’s. LGB’s have different needs; they have a different vision on equal opportunities. Some LGB’s see the possibility to marry as a major step towards emancipation. For others it just means assimilation in the heteronormative society.

We examine the evolution of the EO policy for LGB’s, and its impact on the formal (judicial) equal opportunities, and the informal EO: the attitudes in society concerning homosexuality.

2.1. Policy in development: 1995-2003

From 1995 on, the Flanders have an explicit equal opportunities (EO) policy that also covers gays and lesbians as a target group. Before this date the issue of gays and lesbians wasn’t an issue as such and therefore often forgotten over the range of policy domains and ministers. There was no explicit EO policy to LGB’s, nor towards migrants or elderly. The only recognized policy group for EO was women.

With the installation of the new Flemish government in 1995, a minister was appointed in charge of EO. The first minister was Anne Van Asbroeck from the socialist party. ‘The Interdepartmental Commission of EO’ and the ‘administrative Cellule EO’ within the Flemish administration were installed.

EO was a new jurisdiction as such for the Flemish government, it did exist before on federal level. The reformation of the state structure made it a regional matter as well. Until this date there was no LGB-policy in Flanders, or Belgium for that matter. Some LGB-movements did receive a financial support from the minister of welfare. From 1995 on, specific measures for

⁴ Inspired by the term ‘Velvet Ghetto’ by Ghilloni (1988) which refers to horizontal segregation in business organizations in which women are relegated to the margins of a large business organization.

⁵ The pink triangle was the nazi sign gays had to wear during WOII.

LGB's were on the agenda, stimulated as the government was by the LGB movement. A structural EO policy must go beyond women's emancipation alone, EO is for all citizens, so it was said (Van Asbroeck, 1995: 1,23). The concept of EO was clearly extended. All minority groups that are involved in a certain form of self-organization (i.e. migrants, LGB's and disabled people) 'deserved' an EO policy.

The main accent for LGB EO policy was on communication, and spreading of information. Forms of structural meetings were installed: representatives from LGB groups were allowed at the table. Off course this gave rise to multiple new LGB groups from people who wanted to have a say, and internal discussions about who was allowed to speak in the name of lesbians or gays... In this phase for instance, bisexual women were not accepted by lesbians as spokeswomen on their behalf. Furthermore there was work to be done on the installation of the anti-discrimination law, which in the beginning was a shared battle of women, migrant organizations and LGB's.

According to the agreement in the Flemish government, the position of EO minister was handed over in 1997 to Brigitte Grouwels, a member of the catholic party. She made a clear distinction between an EO policy for wo/men and minority groups. The problems of minority groups are fundamentally different than these of women, and are already partially covered by different ministries, so was her opinion (Grouwels, op cit., Soettaert, 1997). Furthermore, the main themes to be dealt with according to her were issues of judicial discrimination of LGB's, which is a domain of federal jurisdiction.

As a result a systematic approach towards LGB's was absent. She chose to further develop the administrative Cellule EO and to have an open dialogue with the umbrella organizations and consultative bodies. Her accent became positive representation of LGB's. An awareness campaign in 1999 on acceptance of LGB children within the family tried to give families and children an opening to talk about their sexual orientation. Together with the department of education further initiatives were taken to spread correct information amongst school kids. Also some policy research was done, for instance concerning therapeutic needs of LGB's and their place in welfare institutions. Also, for the first time, a large scale survey financed by the EO government was carried out on the living conditions of LGB's in Flanders (Vincke & Stevens, 1999). But there still was no structural financial support for the work done by the LGB movement. The adage was still 'the more they can do themselves, the better' (Nico Bogaerts, 1998: 10). This definitely rings a bell for those early feminist movements.

In 1999 new elections provided a new minister for equal opportunities from the green party: Mieke Vogels. In the first time the green party became member of the parliament with lots of fresh and enthusiastic people and give rise to what was called 'a second wave of LGB emancipation in Belgium' (Pelsers, 2000). The policy of the last years was bearing its fruits and new needs also became visible. For instance the need for scientific research and knowledge. The creation in 2002 of the "Policy Research Center on Equal Opportunities" with a specific research unit on LGB's, fulfills this need.

Minister Mieke Vogels and the EO policy still wanted to eliminate unequal opportunities, but was also concerned in preventing the creation of new ones. Her main concern was on visibility and sensitization (Vogels, 2002). A campaign called 'Yes, so what?' aiming at youngster under 19 was a good example of this. The financial support of the largest LGB organization should also further sustain this. A recent switch in ministers due to federal elections and a big loss in votes for the green party brought up a new and young minister: Adelheid Byttebier, who will further carry out the policy agenda already set by Mieke Vogels.

2.2. LGB mainstreaming, or: what's next?

From the beginning of the EO policy for LGB's there was work on two tracks. Besides the specific policy with a few groundbreaking initiatives financed with EO money, the other

ministers of the Flemish government were made aware of their responsibility for equal opportunities in their own department. “The inclusive or mainstream approach is internationally recognized as a method for obtaining equal opportunities on the whole range of areas of social life. In Flanders we also obtained an inclusive policy” (Grouwels, 1999).

The last legislature showed that slowly here and there a minister starts to take the issues of LGB’s a bit more seriously. Especially on the domain of education and labour some progress is visible. Clearly the formal equality of LGB’s – still not totally achieved – is not enough for the emancipation of homosexuality. The big challenge for the future is to inform and sensitize other ministers from other departments, but also the LGB surrounding family and environment, as the society as a whole.

Where Woodward (2000) demonstrates for the women’s emancipation, that the steps for remediating legislation seemed rather easy in comparison with the complexity of mainstreaming and addressing issues of global governance, the same can be expected for the process of mainstreaming LGB issues. Also for LGB issues transnational developments and European processes strongly influence this process. Lots of decisions that are important for LGB equality must be made at EU level. The LGB movement in Flanders therefore is part of ILGA Europe⁶, and thus also active lobbying in the Council of Europe and the European Union.

2.3. Judicial aspects or formal EO

Recently there have been major achievements in Belgium concerning the elimination of judicial discriminations as opposed to LGB’s. The pressure by the LGB-movement, the growing awareness with the public, the willingness by politicians to address LGB issues, etcetera, are the major causes (Borghs, 2003). Yet there is also pressure from the European Community. On the 9th of February 1994 the European Parliament approved the report on equal rights for LGB’s.⁷ On a European level one uses four pillars to measure the emancipation of LGB’s:

- The equalization of LGB’s and heterosexuals concerning minimum age for sexual intercourse;
- The decriminalization of homosexuality;
- The realization of an antidiscriminationlegislation;
- The granting of civil rights for LGB’s.

In Belgium three of these pillars have been obtained: there is an equal age of consent for both heterosexuals and LGB’s to have sexual intercourse at the age of 16 (Reekie, 1997), homosexuality has been decriminalized (Jeukens, Devuyt en Vanoutryve; 1996) and since the 12th of December 2002 the antidiscriminationlegislation has been definitely approved by the Senate. The possibility for LGB’s to marry can be seen as an acknowledgment of LGB relationships. At the same time several legal discriminations are eliminated.

Which legal discriminations still remain? Based on an inventory made up by the Counsel of Equal Opportunities for Men and Women (2000) and completed with recent judicial developments, we can distinguish following judicial discriminations:

⁶ ILGA-Europe is a non-profit organisation with more or less 130 members from national and local LGBT associations from approximately 30 countries. It’s basically a network organization that works at European level on human rights, and against discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation and gender identity.

⁷ European Parliament, Resolution on equal rights for LGB’s EC, B4-0824 and 0852/98

- LGB parenthood: non-biological parents (parents who haven't got a judicial relationship of descent with a child) have no rights and duties towards a child even if they took care for the child for a long time. When an LGB couple has registered as living together, both partners do have certain financial duties towards the child. An LGB couple, even when married, cannot adopt a child. This is possible if one of both partners adopt the child as a single but then this partner has to go through a difficult evaluation process with very strict requirements.
- The laws of inheritance: Leaving an inheritance to the same sex partner is no problem if one marries that partner. But as the legislators choose to detach the LGB-marriage from aspects of parenthood, the impossibility for the non-biological partner to donate the inheritance entirely to the child stays.
- Foreign partners: It is very difficult for a foreign LGB-partner to attain a Belgian residence permit. What's more, the Belgian partner has to be affluent. The possibilities, which are created by the legislation, rest on a very weak judicial basis. The possibility to marry doesn't change this situation. For, one can only marry a foreign partner from a country that allows LGB's to marry and up until now there are only two of such countries, namely Belgium and the Netherlands.
- Political asylum: prosecution on a base of sexual orientation has been grounded as a sufficient condition for applying for political asylum. The problem here is that one has to prove one has been the victim of homophobic violence or repression. Therefore few of these requests are accepted.

The most important discrimination is the lack of a decent legislation concerning LGB-parenthood. Non-biological parents and their children are therefore in a very weak and uncertain position. Adoption stays impossible for LGB-couples. In Denmark, Sweden, Iceland and the Netherlands they have made it possible for LGB's to adopt children (de Holebifederatie, 2003). At the same time one can say that when LGB's want to make a battle out of homosexual parenthood, that it is a battle directed at the core of heteronormative society. There is a danger that one stops fighting for the right to be different.

2.4. Informal EO: attitudes in society concerning homosexuality

We need to address to the position of LGB's in society in order to further explore what equal opportunities for LGB's can mean. Are LGB's still seen as subversive, inferior, or just different? One does not have equal opportunities if one is treated different than others on an unjustifiable and subjective base. Discrimination also concerns daily interactions and therefore can be very subtle. When does one walk a bridge to far? Can one tolerate people who openly detest and disapprove homosexuality? Is this freedom of speech and therefore a value to appreciate in a democratic society?

Homosexuality can count on a higher level of acceptance by the majority of Belgian people (Elchardus, Chaumont & Lauwers, 2000). This confirms a study of Waeye & Agneesens (2001), which points out that 75 percent of the respondents found the creation of legislation for alternative relationships (completely) acceptable. Research by Vincke & Stevens (1999) shows that LGB's share the opinion that attitudes in society concerning LGB's are improving.

Few people will oppose against equal opportunities for LGB's. However, when one is confronted directly with homosexuality, biases and prejudices come to the surface. That's why some researchers use the term 'superficial tolerance' which is defined by Bour, Gresnigt & Tielman (1986:14) as follows: "Homosexuals can do as they want as long as they do it in private, in public they have to conform to the commonly accepted norm as proclaimed by the heterosexual community". Borghs & Hintjens (2000) view 'tolerance' as the acceptance of LGB's as long as they stay invisible and as long as homosexuality is distinguished from heterosexuality. This brings up the concept of 'heteronormativity', which means that LGB's have to follow the commonly accepted norm as defined by the heterosexual community

(Dewaele, 2003). Vincke & Stevens (1999) determine a shift from 'homophobia' to 'heterosexism'. Heterosexism puts heterosexuality on a pedestal and all the relating heterosexual social activities in diverse social territories (relationships, lifestyle and sexuality) are brought to the foreground. Those aspects belonging to LGB-culture who deconstruct heteronormativity are not tolerated and therefore not visible as an alternative (Vincke & Stevens, 1999).

LGB invisibility keeps prejudices alive and kicking. Their invisibility makes them a hidden population (Baert & Cockx, 2002; Vincke & Stevens, 1999) and has implications for the daily life of LGB's. Borghs & Hintjens (2000) determine that LGB's have few role models in their environment. This, in combination with their invisibility in society, can lead to severe feelings of isolation. Invisibility can support cultural stereotypes (Ochs, 1996) en coming out as an option (Vincke & Stevens, 1999) leads to the fact that LGB's continuously have to decide whether or not they come out and whether they are prepared to pay the price for being honest to themselves and others (Ochs, 1996).

The presence of superficial tolerance, the heteronormativity and the invisibility can have serious consequences for the well being of LGB's. It seems that LGB's are most threatened in their opportunities to make secure and qualitative relationships with others, both hetero- and homosexuals. Discriminations and negative (heteronormative) attitudes make it difficult for LGB's to have good relationships with some heterosexuals. LGB invisibility adds to this fact the difficulty of finding other LGB's to relate to. The phenomena 'negative anticipation' and 'internalized homophobia' illustrate how the well being of LGB's can be threatened.

In reality it is often easier not to talk about one's sexual orientation, rather than facing all kinds of discrimination and even get fired as the result of a coming out (De Brauwere, 2002). Vincke & Stevens on (1999:63) the phenomena of 'negative anticipation': "Many LGB's anticipate on certain problems by concealing their homosexuality. First, they wait and see, and only than follows a coming out when they are convinced that it is safe to do so. The image they create about their surroundings and the negative responses they expect, are often not congruent with what would really happen. Therefore they often regret that they didn't come out earlier. On the contrary, their negative expectations could become reality". About 45% of LGB's anticipate sometimes or often to discrimination (Vincke en Stevens, 1999). Finally Baert & Cockx (2002) found that LGB's anticipate continuously on rejection and negative reactions of the outside world.

Hiding one's sexual orientation can harm the well being of LGB's. Savin-Williams (1995) claims that 'passing' may be a destructive strategy because it fosters low self-regard, inner turmoil, acting-out behavior, and low levels of interpersonal intimacy. Friend (cited in Reid, 1995) describes the older stereotypical LGB (he claims at the same time that certainly not all older LGB's are like this) as one who internalizes the homophobia of the larger culture and conforms to those images by keeping his or her sexual orientation secret, living with shame and self-loathing. Reid (1995) writes about the incorporation by LGB's of homophobia from the mainstream society and Savin-Williams (1995) states that many young LGB's go dating with heterosexuals because they internalize pressures to conform with society's insistence on heterosexual norms and behaviors. Finally we found similar findings in research of Ochs (1996) who determined internalized biphobia. Hiding one's sexual orientation can thus lead to the incorporation of a heteronormative model resulting in internalized homophobia.

3. LGB movement(s)

Negative attitudes in society and the invisibility of LGB's as a group, make it hard for LGB's to create extensive and solid social networks. LGB movements can play an important role in giving LGB's the possibility to create those networks. In Flanders there are plenty of LGB

movements for quite a small territory. Those movements are important for LGB's on several domains.

In 1953 the first LGB movement, the Cultural Centre Belgium, was founded in Brussels (Elbers, 2002). From that year on, lots of LGB movements arose. Not all of them were successful, some disappeared, others co-operated and only in the seventies would they actively come out. In 1977 FWH (Federation working groups Homophilia) was born from the fusion of two other LGB movements (Elbers, 2002). Recently FWH changed his name to the 'Holebifederatie' (LGB-federation). It has become the largest LGB umbrella organization in Flanders and Brussels. In 1987 one of the first LGB youth organizations 'Verkeerd Geparkeerd' (wrongly parked) in Ghent was founded (Editorial staff 'Wel Jong Niet Hetero', 2003). This organization took initiative to create the LGB youth umbrella organization 'Wel Jong Niet Hetero' (we are young, not straight) in 1995. (Editorial staff 'Wel Jong Niet Hetero', 2003). At this moment 'we're young, not straight' harbors about fifteen Flemish youth LGB movements.

It is important to distinguish the LGB movements and the broader LGB-scene. Plummer (1999) describes the LGB-scene as a world consisting of socio-political movements, an amorphous world of communities and scenes, LGB-media, self-help social worlds, the academic wing of the movement, the gay prides and the Internet. Duyvendak (1994) makes a division between movement and subculture. From this perspective LGB demands and interests are the foundation of the movement. The movement survives on subsidies and does a lot of political lobbying. On the contrary it are LGB desires on which a subculture (containing the commercial circuit) can be built on. Thus, LGB movements are only a part of a broader and incoherent LGB environment. What is the importance of the LGB-scene and -movements for the LGB individual?

LGB movements only receive limited funding from the government, and this only recently, and therefore has to count on lots of volunteers. Professional support is limited. Some LGB movements are negatively evaluated by their (ex-)members. This also implies to the broader LGB scene. The (dominantly male) scene is experienced as too sex-oriented, LGB movements would have low accessibility and relevant information would be lacking (Baert & Cockx, 2002). The same authors state that some LGB's wear themselves out in these movements and thereby forget their own well-being. One can also raise the question if all those LGB movements can meet the needs of the existing diversity within the LGB-group. Queer-theory doesn't see the LGB-group as a homogeneous one but as a group characterized by a diversity resulting from different ethnical, religious and socio-economical accents (Vincke, 2002). Adel (1998) relates the problems, which are developing within several LGB youth organizations, to the dominant picture one portrays of the LGB youngster. Reid (1995) adds to this that older LGB's can be harmed by the stereotyping ageism within LGB community. LGB movements thus fail to address the diversity within LGB community. However, not all LGB's want to be a member of these organizations because they don't feel attracted to them or because these organizations are not accessible for all LGB's. Yet these LGB movements are important for the well being of lots of LGB's.

Vincke (2002) points out that it is important for LGB's to engage in the gay subculture and he relates this to the different stages in the coming out process. He continues that it is difficult to identify as a homosexual without having contact with other homosexuals. The LGB movement(s) visualizes one part of the LGB-population and therefore creates opportunities. According to recent research from Baert & Cockx (2002) it seemed that LGB movements were an important source of help: LGB's praised the movements because they helped them not to feel alone all the time. In these movements they can be themselves, they can find a partner, get some information about LGB-specific issues and they can discover diverse LGB lifestyles (Baert & Cockx, 2002). Wagner (1994) also found that integration in the gay community was correlated inversely with internalized homophobia. That is why the support

of an LGB identity is necessary to conquer the stigmatizing effects resulting from the negative judgments of heteronormative society (Adel, 1998). The movement(s), providing opportunities to meet peers, doesn't have to stimulate the separation of LGB's from mainstream society.

According to Epstein (1999) it was the British LGB movement that contributed to the growing acceptance and integration of LGB (and Transgender)'s. He sees the stimulation of social change by means of political activism and accelerating LGB (and Transgender) visibility by the movement as a major merit. The role of LGB movements in attaining an EO policy for LGB's must not be underestimated. The strong movement in Flanders has been recognized as a discussion partner on different political levels. Years of debates, extensive political dossiers, meetings with ministers, press conferences, collecting information, political actions and lobbying, ..., influence the public opinion and the political climate in which changes becomes possible.

Slowly the internally diversity of the group LGB's becomes more and more visible, and specific groups like elderly LGB's or migrant LGB's are demanding researchers and politicians to give attention to their specific needs. They need data to support their case, and policymakers need research results to be able to develop a suited policy. That's were researchers come in.

4. On doing research on LGB's. Methodological questions: specific problems and specific solutions

LGB researchers are confronted with several challenges. Specific characteristics, which can be ascribed to LGB's as a group, are responsible for restrictions in LGB research. Nevertheless, the search for new methods to guarantee the reliability of LGB research continues. We made a list of the several challenges in LGB research.

4.1. Demarcation and categorization of the target group

The first problem concerns the issue of how to define LGB's and LGB-research. In Flanders one uses the term 'holebi' that stands for gay men, lesbians and bisexuals (see above). However in the Anglo-Saxon literature nowadays the T from transgender is added forming LGBT. LGBTQ is also a new term thereby adding the Q from 'queer'. Queer refers to the diversity within the LGBT group (Vincke, 2002). Queer ideology was successful in the United States with those LGB's who found that they didn't fit into the LGB community. Several LGB movements didn't succeed in bringing young lesbians and gays, lesbians and gays from ethnic minorities, bisexuals, transgenders and radical LGB's together in one community (Epstein, 1999).

To do empirical research often implies to categorize. It is difficult to research homosexuality because its definition depends on a cultural and individual interpretation. The possibility for LGB's to choose if they come out or not results in the fact that a large part of the LGB-population stays invisible. It is far more difficult to hide one's sex, age or ethnic minority status. It is difficult to get a representative sample of the LGB population because of their invisibility. Therefore they are often described as a 'hidden population' (Vincke & Stevens, 1999; Baert & Cockx, 2002). The presence of 'superficial tolerance' (LGB's are tolerated as long as they don't differ to much from 'normal', see Schuyf & Krouwel, 1999) and heteronormativity in society, can contribute to LGB invisibility (Dewaele, 2003). It is a difficult task to estimate the level of invisibility. According to Vincke (2002) it is not possible to measure the exact prevalence of LGB's in society but yet he estimates that three to eight percent of the population is gay, lesbian or bisexual. As a researcher we have to make sure that our research is often based on only a small part of the LGB population. This is a serious impediment in LGB research and results often can be misleading.

Homosexuality must be seen in a multidimensional way (Vincke, 2002). Homosexual desires, behavior and identity are congruent in only one on three cases (Vincke, 2002). This means that there are individuals who have homosexual contacts (or homosexual desires) but who don't identify as LGB. Shively & De Cecco (1993) see the dichotomy heterosexual/homosexual as a simplification of a complex and diverse construct. For them, biological sex, gender identity, gender role and sexual orientation are altogether important aspects in the sexual identity of an individual. Therefore we have to try to reach respondents who don't identify as a LGB yet acknowledge a homosexual component in their life. The issue remains difficult because Western society is based on a binary man-women model (Ochs, 1996). Society expects us to choose between one out of two options, male-female, maleness-femaleness, heterosexual-homosexual. However, it should be possible to use a model based on a continuum. This makes it possible to allow gradations. Self-description of sexual orientation doesn't have to be static (Savin-Williams, 1995). Rather it should be seen as a variable condition instead of a characteristic, which inevitably has to lead to strict categorization (Vincke, 2002).

In LGB research we can use these continuum scales that also incorporate a time dimension. This can help us to map a part of the presumed hidden population. After all it is possible that a married man has had several homosexual contacts without identifying as a homosexual. It is common within certain cultures to have homosexual contacts without labeling themselves as an LGB. The Coleman-procedure (1999) makes it possible to use continuum scales and a time dimension resulting in research that avoids the selection effect that is typical for LGB research.

4.2. The lack of diversity and representation samples used for LGB research

Many samples of LGB populations are distorted and fail concerning the issue of representation: the sample doesn't reflect the 'true' composition of its population.

Vincke & Stevens (1999) determine the effect of self-selection as is often applied to hidden populations. When one tries to investigate hidden populations, the respondents often show similar characteristics: they are often motivated, have a high degree of education and are of young age. Vincke and Stevens (1999) tried to solve this problem by looking for respondents themselves (active data gathering) and by using quota samples (= making sure that the sample reflects both sexes, different ages, different levels of education...).

American research shows the same limitations. Their LGB samples often consist of white gay men who live in urban regions. Lesbians, bisexuals (men and women), ethnic minorities, Jews and Catholics, people who are disabled, young adolescents, LGB's from rural areas and with a low socio-economical status are often underrepresented (Savin-Williams, 1995). Research on older LGBT's does rarely exist and when it does, the same constraints are determined (Cahill, South & Spade, 2000).

4.3. Lack of large-scale quantitative research

A large part of the LGB population is difficult to reach. Therefore, it is difficult to gather data about this population on a large scale. Several target groups are measured by means of demographical data (women, the elderly and children). Sexual orientation is not or rarely an item in surveys in which other demographical data is gathered. Normally, it is a solid technique to use random samples to get a representative picture from certain segments in society. However, coming out as an LGB is an act of free choice and belongs to the most private and intimate sphere in that person's life. However, if we don't try to reach this hidden population, we will never solve important (social relevant) questions concerning this group. Surveying this population is also an acknowledgment of the fact that they exist. In the United States they already use large-scale surveys to map the LGB population (see research by Badgett & Goldge, 1998). The British bureau of statistics is also planning to survey sexual

orientation (Gay Belgium, 2002). At the side of those national surveys it is also interesting to survey more specific issues by academic settings as in the research of Vincke & Stevens (1999). In that research project they've used the technique of active data gathering to make the sample more representative.

The amount of qualitative LGB research is a lot larger in comparison to quantitative research. Qualitative research allows a more thorough analysis of processes. However, this kind of research is targeted towards exploration rather than trying to give general facts about that population. It is difficult to give general statements about the LGB population when reliable quantitative research is lacking or because of the fact that few quantitative research projects succeed in mapping the hidden population (or at least a part of it). We need quantitative research to get more certainties. We want to notify the impediments of LGB's in their life course from an equal opportunities perspective. Therefore, we can't afford to use data that doesn't represent the 'whole' LGB population.

5. Conclusions & questions

The concept of 'holebi' or in English 'LGB' has its history, advantages and disadvantages. LGB has everything to do with self definition, homosexuality goes further then this and also contains behaviour and desires. When research shows that only one third of respondents consider themselves gay or lesbian on all three levels, we must ask the question if we want equal opportunities for those only?

LGB's are a very difficult EO group, since class, race, age or gender differences can be of more impact then being gay or lesbian or bi. Researchers and policymakers can not but at the same time take into consideration other levels of discrimination when talking about sexual orientation.

It's difficult to describe what EO for LGB's can or should be. What we can do is register problems, discriminations and lack of knowledge and information. On the ground of this kind of research policymakers can try to establish EO for LGB's. Judicial discriminations are rather easy to point out to, more difficult are attitudes in society. The slowly positive change that research can measure don't diminish phenomena as heteronormativity or superficial tolerance that still causes LGB's not to come out. It's not always easy to meet 'equals' or to find a partner. The relative low visibility is countered in Flanders with lots of LGB groups and an explicit LGB policy on different levels. Both LGB policymakers and movements play a major role in educating and spreading information. LGB policy stands nowadays for the big challenge of mainstreaming the LGB issues over different policy levels and policy domains.

Scientific knowledge is necessary instrument for obtaining EO for LGB's, though it is confronted with specific methodological problems as there are: demarcation and categorization of the target group, the lack of diversity and representation samples and the lack of large-scale quantitative research. We presented in this paper solutions as using the Coleman-procedure (1999) with its continuum scales and a time dimension, active data gathering and quota samples, as well as building in a sexual orientation questionnaire in other quantitative research done by colleagues in different fields.

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