

LGBT Populations in Studies of Urban Neighborhoods: Making the Invisible Visible

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When I first began my training as a sociologist, I learned about urban poverty under the mentorship of William Julius Wilson at the Center for the Study of Urban Inequality in Chicago. The 1990s were an exciting time to be in dialogue with the different schools of thought among those examining life in metropolitan areas. I decided to narrow my focus to the study of U.S. family formation and sexuality in urban contexts, and more than 20 years later I have not strayed far from those interests.

The great ethnographies of urban neighborhoods have taught us many things about the ways individuals and families use that space, about the constraints imposed on them by community and larger institutions, about the role of the police in these neighborhoods, and the varied modes of surveillance of daily life. However, as I began the research for my first book, *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships and Motherhood among Black Women* (Moore 2011), I could find very few indicators of sexual orientation in these detailed studies of life in big cities. I searched through appendices, endnotes, as well as the primary content and theoretical framing of these books, but with few exceptions, the experiences of sexual minorities living in these areas were not represented as part of the social fabric of urban neighborhoods.

Most ethnographic approaches to the study of city life are biased toward the experiences of people who claim heterosexuality. We do not see sexual minorities incorporated into larger analyses of family life in urban areas, or included, in studies of how the various social groups in a community work together or against one another in the acquisition of resources, against a threat of encroachment, or in numerous other situations as they arise in day-to-day living and survival. Ethnographers who spent months or years studying the detailed and mundane aspects of life in urban areas have devoted very little space in their published work to the existence of sexual minorities who also inhabit these spaces.

Yet, we know they exist in these neighborhoods. Historians of LGBT life have shown us that sexual minorities have long flocked to urban metropolises (Chauncey 1994). Demographers have found that the largest numbers of same-sex couples reside in the country's major cities (Gates and Cooke 2011). We know that African-American, Latino/a, and Asian-American sexual minorities tend to live in cities and towns with large numbers of their racial and ethnic group members (Gates 2012), and lesbian and gay people have historically been integrated into the everyday life of these communities (Carbado et al. 2002; Han 2015; Ocampo 2012). LGBT people in these neighborhoods congregate on the same street corners and building stoops as other residents, they patronize the same

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nightclubs and bars as their heterosexual peers (sometimes, but not always, on different nights of the week) and they sing in the same choirs and sit in the same congregations with non-sexual minority friends and family members.

To be fair, the study of LGBT people as an identity group is relatively new. While sexual minorities have always existed in society, the rapid change in the political and social climate for this population over the last twenty years has only just now begun to move them out of a position of marginality and into mainstream sociological research. In the past, urban scholars may have come across LGBT individuals and thought about them, or their sexual identity, as an exception to, or a peripheral component of the larger phenomena they were studying. But the consequences of this group's invisibility in studies of urban sociology more generally, and qualitative research on urban poverty more specifically, are many. We are unable to turn to ethnographic studies to corroborate demographic work, that describes the characteristics of sexual minorities, or elaborate on the processes that explain characteristics of LGBT people who are identified in large-scale data analyses. We cannot rely on qualitative community studies to measure the influence of sexual orientation on broader family processes, or use this work to estimate the protective or deleterious impact of same-sex couple status on children's outcomes in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts.

We cannot draw from much of urban sociology to understand the effects of sexual orientation on poverty status, or how race and ethnicity intersect with sexual orientation to affect the lives of people living in urban communities. For example, incomes of transwomen may be lower than those of single *cisgender* mothers. If transwomen have less access to state resources and are less able to benefit from state economic programs, they become a vulnerable population that is ignored in our understanding of vulnerable populations in urban areas.

The consequences of this neglect are not just relevant for poverty-related research. Our understanding of how different groups utilize public space is incomplete when we do not account for sexual minority populations in these areas. Public spaces are also places where LGBT and non-LGBT people encounter one another. Information on these interactions can inform us of locales where mutual understandings of each group take place, as well as areas where moments of discrimination or conflict more frequently occur. The relationships of families to urban schools suffer when we lack information on the sexual orientation of parents. The consequences of neighborhood gentrification are also misunderstood when we only consider the influence of white gay men buying existing real estate and ignore a discussion of whether and how the community climate changes as middle-class racial and ethnic minorities who are also sexual minorities move into those neighborhoods. Many African-American and Latino/a LGBT people have been pioneers of neighborhood socioeconomic change yet are unnoticed or left out of the debates and coverage of gentrification.

It is time for urban scholars to incorporate into their research the experiences of LGBT populations and the ways they relate to urban spaces, taking into account other identities around race, ethnicity, religion, social class, gender presentation, and age. Greater attention to the experiences of sexual minorities, and racialized sexual minorities in particular, would help us theorize more effectively the role of urban communities in a changing society. For example, the research on black unmarried mothers has shown how some heterosexual women form families in the face of inadequate economic resources, disadvantaged neighborhood environments, and partners who for different reasons are less

able or willing to fully participate in activities that contribute to the healthy functioning of families. In my fieldwork for my *Invisible Families* study, I found patterns in the experiences of black and Latina gay women that were similar in many ways to what has been found in research on heterosexual women. Most live in the same neighborhoods, have similar cultural understandings, and have organized their families in similar ways as their heterosexual counterparts. Many lesbians of color are very involved in their families of origin and draw on or provide kin with support and assistance in childrearing, financial concerns, and other aspects of daily life.

Black and Latina gay women who create families are a socioeconomically heterogeneous group but tend not to be as economically privileged as white women. Their networks tend to lack information about such things as gay-friendly schools or service providers, and most of these women have not amassed the type of wealth needed for alternative insemination procedures, private schooling, or other forms of support more advantaged lesbians are able to procure. They live in black and Latino neighborhoods where heterosexual norms and expectations are practiced and imposed on their members. In these contexts, their communities have historically been more likely to accept an individual's sexual minority status as long as it is not openly expressed or discussed.

As a result, many who live in these neighborhoods are not as outwardly expressive of their sexual orientation, especially when compared to those who live or spend a great deal of time in communities with more visible LGBT populations. Their neighborhoods are also more variable and less stable in the types of resources they can provide, so most parents spend a great deal of time worrying about issues like how to get their children into decent public schools or how to keep them safe from the hazards in their environments. They usually bring into lesbian relationships children from prior heterosexual unions, and have complicated relationships with the biological fathers of their children. Many first- and second-generation Caribbean and African gay women have unique cultural issues stemming from the homophobia they have escaped in their countries or families of origin, and these factors also result in a particular set of experiences that could be analyzed in research on urban communities.

Marcus Hunter's (2010) work is one example of how the study of sexual minority populations can be integrated into urban sociology. His choice to publish his paper on urban nightlife in *City & Community* emphasizes the importance of the community setting on the behaviors and experiences of individuals across sexual orientation. It uses participant observation and semistructured interview data collected from black heterosexuals and black lesbians and gay men who patronize a local bar in a popular city on different nights of the week. It analyzes the ways in which urban blacks use space in the nightclub setting to mediate the harsh realities of daily life, as well as how they use such gatherings to sustain and enhance social support and social capital.

Hilary Silver once said, "The city, like much of social life itself, is cast in a complex set of layers, of differing elements, each of which is important, and each of which discloses its own set of truths about urban life in particular, and social life in general" (Silver 2002, pp. 247–48). The argument I am making does not require scholars to analyze LGBT people as a particular identity group in urban neighborhoods. Instead, it calls upon scholars to see them not as aberrations or exceptions to a heterosexual environment but as one component of the setting, and to incorporate them into a larger analysis of the actors that together comprise the social world being studied. It asks whether and how sexual orientation and gender identity might influence the processes of community life, aspects

of relationship and family formation being observed, and the interactions residents have with neighbors, teachers, social workers, drug dealers, religious leaders, and various authority figures who set norms in these contexts.

My challenge to sociologists who have already written qualitative studies on urban neighborhoods is to return to your data. You may have detailed snippets in your fieldwork about sexual minority community members that never made it to the final drafts of your manuscripts. Go back and review those data, build on that work, and publish it to provide a blueprint for future scholars looking to understand how sexual minorities fit into urban spaces. Moving forward, I hope those collecting new data will not shy away from incorporating the presence and activities of sexual minorities into their studies, integrating those populations into their work in ways that will enhance larger theoretical and analytical findings.

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