Workplace friendships between men: Gay men's perspectives and experiences

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Abstract

Challenging the heteronormative bias in the current literature on men's workplace friendships, this article uses qualitative interview data to explore how gay men understand and experience workplace friendships involving other gay and heterosexual men. Developing a Foucauldian approach, this study suggests that gay men's experiences and perspectives on workplace friendships can supplant negative stereotypes of men's friendships, by understanding them as relational sites for developing empowering organizational gay sexualities and genders. From a Foucauldian theoretical orientation, we can examine how gay men can(not) avoid falling into the trap of treating gender and sexuality in dichotomous and heterosexist terms, allowing them and their male work friends to explore new possibilities for workplace friendships that are more gender and sexually complex than is currently assumed. This article advocates future research on this matter as it could potentially enrich extant critical scholarship that has often bathed organizational masculinities in a negative light.

Introduction

This article adopts a poststructuralist approach to the study of gay men's workplace friendships to problematize a common view emerging from research that suggests men are not as intimate as women in friendship, and do not value friendship highly (Wood, 1993, 2009). In line with scholars who seek to break from dichotomous perspectives on

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gender differences in women's and men's friendships (Butera, 2008; Kaplan, 2006; Walker, 1994), I explore the variation in gay men's workplace friendships, particularly in terms of the empowering and disempowering potential of these friendships for disrupting heteronormative discourses of gender, sexuality and friendship. Deriving theoretical insights from Foucauldian conceptions of discourse (Foucault, 1979, 1980) and the work of Foucauldian writers to emphasize the discursive performativity of friendship (Butler, 1990, 2004; Weedon, 1997), I demonstrate how the meanings gay men attach to male-to-male friendship are contingent, multiple and fluid. From this theoretical orientation, I examine how gay men's friendships are influenced by the cultural norms that surround them and how they are shaped by the discursive performativity of gender and sexuality. By framing men's friendships in this way and drawing on qualitative interview data with 28 gay men employed in the UK, I nuance the theorization of men's workplace friendships by challenging stereotypes that suggest, among other things, men are instrumental in friendship and refrain from displaying emotional closeness for fear of such behaviour being interpreted as evidence of homosexuality.

Researching how gay men understand and experience workplace friendships with other men is apposite for at least two reasons. First, many of us spend the bulk of our waking hours engaged in paid employment as a means to many ends, and friendship is an important and advantageous part of the workplace experience. Previous research shows how friends can use each other as a source of intimacy and companionship (Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 2004), and rely on each other for emotional, material and practical support (McGuire, 2007). Work friends can also help each other climb career ladders and provide professional advice and information about job opportunities (Granovetter, 1973; Kram and Isabella, 1985; Pettinger, 2005). Of course these benefits are not unique to gay men, as the studies above demonstrate. The point is more about giving credence to the idea that gay men are perhaps acutely aware of the particular merits associated with workplace friendships involving other men. For example, support, intimacy and identity growth are advantages noted in friendships negotiated between gay men in non-work contexts (Gottlieb, 2008; Nardi, 1999; Weeks et al., 2001). That gay men's friendships can be characterized as such is partly owing to the past endeavours of gay men and others to form a collective 'gay' identity, which could then be used as a shared basis for organizing and connecting within heteronormative contexts (Nardi, 1999). Thus, within contemporary heteronormative work cultures, the influence of sexuality in providing common ground among gay men for organizing gay male friendships may not have lost any of its salience. However, organizations are not uniformly heteronormative and many gay men (and other sexual minorities) have since questioned the relevance of a collective gay identity, and found the dichotomous categories heterosexual/homosexual extremely limiting within a postmodern world of fluid identities and selves (Weeks, 2007).

Second, against a cultural background of postmodern sexualities, characterized by a blurring of sexual boundaries and an emphasis on a multiplicity of sexualities from which to choose and with which to experiment (Roseneil, 2000; Simon, 1996; Weeks, 2007), the notion of the 'homosexual' as culturally subversive is under attack not just from gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender persons, but also from heterosexuals (Weeks, 2007). It is plausible that within an increasingly diverse range of lifestyle choices on offer, new opportunities are available for men to overcome barriers (e.g. homophobia) to male

friendships. One advantage of friendships between men who recognize categories of sexuality and gender as fluid and provisional is the potential for developing new ways of relating that defy heteronormative discourses on men's friendships (Fee, 2000; Gottlieb, 2008). In that regard, the study of gay men's workplace friendships can potentially reveal much about understanding contemporary notions of sexuality and gender as sites where diverse meanings are constructed and contested. An opportunity emerges to throw a different light on how men's friendships have been previously theorized, by focusing on how gay men can buck the trend of stereotyping men in friendship as emotionally stilted, reluctant to disclose feelings and reveal deeper selves.

This article is organized into three main sections. The following section provides an overview of gay men's friendships within a Foucauldian framework, outlining notions of discourse, friendship, sexuality, gender and organization. The study's methodology is then presented in the second section, before analysing three main discourses that appear to influence how participants understand male-to-male friendship in the workplace. The third section draws out the study's key contributions and signals directions for future research.

Men's friendships and discourse

With this article, I argue that a discursive approach grounded in Foucauldian poststructuralist theories, seldom used by friendship researchers, encourages us to explore the variation in how friendship is understood and experienced. From this perspective, friendship is constructed and ascribed meaning through the multiple discourses in which it is situated momentarily. As theorized here, discourse refers to a general but incoherent set of ideas, beliefs, concepts, actions, symbols, and so forth, which provide the 'conditions of possibility' for the expressions of certain ideas and bodies of knowledge at specific moments in time (Foucault, 1979, 1980; Weedon, 1997). Subscribing to a Foucauldian view that emphasizes the constitutive function of discourse, it is possible to explore how individuals establish and understand human relationships in different ways. For example, friendship is often understood in relation to, and distinct from, kinship (Allan, 1989), but studies on family and friendship ties demonstrate the importance of understanding the meanings of these terms as overlapping and produced in specific historical and cultural sites (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Tadmor, 2001; Weston, 1991).

As such, I discuss friendship not as a fixed, essential property of the interactions between individuals, but as something that is constructed through the continuous and iterative enactment of friendship norms. This does not mean individuals can fashion meanings of friendship, or other types of human relationship, in any way they desire. Despite the choice exercised by individuals in developing friendships that, for example, contain sexual elements (Nardi, 1999; Weston, 1991), discourses can have a constraining effect. This is noticeable in how they can reinforce and stabilize restrictive norms about how male friendships should be organized and performed. In a published interview, Foucault (1984) argued that the cultural invention of the homosexual figure introduced into men's friendships uncomfortable questions about homosexuality, said by Foucault and others to have a deadening effect on intimate male friendship (Bech, 1997; Nardi, 1992, 1999; Miller, 1983). However, men's friendships have at specific points in time

been regarded as the most noble of human relationships, particularly apparent in the philosophy of Aristotle (Lynch, 2005) and essays penned by commentators such as Michel de Montaigne (1580/1993). Elsewhere, Hansen's (1992) research shows that emotionally intimate friendships between young working-class men in Antebellum New England were possible in the 19th century.

While anxieties of homosexuality still influence understandings of the intimate nature of dyadic friendship bonds between men, 20th-century discourses of male homosexuality also paved the way for the emergence of 'a category of men who loved other men' (Nardi, 1999: 33). Struggling to validate their homosexuality and find acceptance at a time when medical, religious and psychological discourses constructed homosexuality as a disease, a sin and sexually deviant, homosexuals increasingly developed friendships with each other to secure support, acceptance and understanding. Indeed, the perceived importance attached by gay men to sexuality as a basis for close friendship with other gay men remains strong, as other studies indicate (Galupo, 2007; Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991). That being said, understanding gay men's friendships vis-à-vis cultural discourses that valorize gender complexity and the sexually ambiguous (Roseneil, 2000), might throw light on whether gay male friendship is understood and enacted in different ways. One way of gaining traction on this issue is to consider the discursive performance of sexuality and gender within men's friendships, since these friendships are particularly sensitive to wider changes in relations of sexuality (Nardi, 1992).

Men's friendships and the discursive performativity of sexuality and gender

Reviewing the research on friendship and gender at various intervals, Wood (1993, 2009) notes the increasing adoption of discourse perspectives among scholars seeking to challenge how the relationship between gender and friendship has been typically framed as a matter of interest in causal or directional relationships. However, it is important to state that discourse is not understood or applied in the same way by friendship researchers. For example, Rawlins (1991, 1992) theorizes friendship as a series of 'ongoing communication achievements', and interpersonal communication as an important form of 'discourse' between friends. Such an approach, which differs from many Foucauldian interpretations of discourse as structuring areas of knowledge, is fairly typical of scholars within the US-based discipline of communication studies (Mumby, 1997). While Rawlins (2008) draws on the Foucauldian writing of Judith Butler (1990) in later work to consider the performativity of gender and sexuality within friendship, the potential of this approach is not fully realized within studies on friendship.

The merit of Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of performativity for understanding the gendered dynamics of men's friendships is that it demands attention to the idea that gender is a 'performance'. Crucially, performing masculinities and femininities is not a one-off pre-scripted performance; rather, a 'stylized repetition of acts' over time, and it is within the iteration of a series of performances that gender is signified (Butler, 1990: 179). Butler's approach is a radical departure from constructionist and biological perspectives on gender, for it refutes the idea of gender as an act or as the essential property of individuals.

In this vein, gender, sexuality and friendship are enmeshed within power relations that provide normative boundaries within which their performances are made culturally intelligible. Here Butler (1990) uses the concept of the 'heterosexual matrix' to refer to the constellation of norms that constitute a seemingly coherent relationship between sex, desire and gender. The matrix assumes heterosexuality to be the most 'natural' expression of sexuality, and privileges a heteronormative perspective on how individuals make sense of their relationships (Rawlins, 2008).

However, within gay men's friendships power relations can be ruptured (Foucault, 1984), in order to constitute alternative ways of performing masculinity (Fee, 2000; Nardi, 1999). As discussed already, against a postmodern cultural landscape that rejects essentialist accounts of gender and sexual identities, the influence of sexuality and gender on friendship is now less predictable than in the past (Weeks, 2007). As such, there might be opportunities to understand contemporary men's friendships in different ways. In the next section, I pursue this further by discussing the significance of the workplace as a discursive arena for examining gay men's workplace friendships.

Friendship, gay men and organization

Organizations are important discursive arenas in which men's friendships are formed. At this point, it is important to state that I do not regard organizations as bounded sites in which organizational discourses are confined. As Ashcraft (2007: 11) argues, the 'container metaphor' of organization has been shattered by research that shows how organizing can take place within and outside of organizations, and that organizational boundaries are fluid and unstable. Recognizing that organizational discourses can exist as wider cultural formations, I suggest, has a bearing on how workplace friendships can be conceptualized. Friendship in the workplace is not always understood as such simply because it takes place within organizational 'boundaries'. Workplace friendships may be discursively constructed within an array of competing discourses in, around and away from organizational settings. In turn, workplace friendships can have a constitutive effect on forms of organizing and organization, just as organizational settings may cultivate or limit the conditions within which friendship is constituted.

Looked at in this way, we can appreciate the futility in sustaining a public/private dichotomy that views the workplace as a legitimate site of productive acquisition, and aligns emotion and intimate relationships with the private domain (Ashcraft, 2000). Yet concerns persist about the affective dimension to workplace friendships that are structured by an understanding of friendship as a relationship primarily associated with the private sphere. As Kaplan (2005) points out, men's activities often take place in the 'public' sphere and thus have a public focus, which presents a number of challenges for men seeking to incorporate intimate emotions into male workplace friendships. The Israeli soldiers in Kaplan's (2005, 2006) research found ways of conveying closeness through a range of semi-public practices such as joking, use of nicknames, ambivalent forms of communication, embraces and bodily gestures. Structuring these practices were fears about exposing a desire for other men, but many of the activities and interactions between Kaplan's male soldiers were ambiguous, defying clear-cut interpretations about their nature. For gay men, another set of concerns arises from understanding organizations as

arenas that privilege heterosexual sexualities, making some male-to-male friendships hard to establish.

Thus it is no coincidence that the research setting for this study is contemporary organizational life. Gay male sexualities have often been marginalized and excluded within organizational discourses overlaid by notions of normative heterosexual masculinity (Ward and Winstanley, 2006). One result of gay sexualities being Othered is that some gay men have been reluctant to be 'visible' at the level of sexual identity (Humphrey, 1999; Ragins et al., 2007; Ward and Winstanley, 2003). In turn, this may limit the opportunities for friendship making between gay men (Woods and Lucas, 1993). What this does mean is that, in some heteronormative work cultures, the influence of discourses on gay sexualities for helping gay men to establish supportive forms of gay male friendship for dealing with the inimical effects of workplace homophobia may still be salient. However, organizations are not uniformly heteronormative, and it is possible that gay men can develop networked friendship ties to promote empowering organizational discourses on gay sexualities. Furthermore, there might also be gay men who recognize the fluidity of sexuality and gender, and who use workplace friendships with other men as a means to pursue pleasure and thus improve the quality of the workplace experience. Strikingly, many of these issues remain empirically open. Gay men are conspicuously absent from the literature on men's workplace friendships, but whose experiences could nuance further extant knowledge about how men's workplace friendships might be understood in terms other than those prescribed through discourses of heteronormativity.

Research methodology

The empirical material presented below is extracted from a wider project on gay men's workplace friendships, which was guided by a broad and exploratory research question: how are workplace friendships developed, experienced and attributed meaning by gay men? Data were generated on gay men's workplace friendships with gay men, lesbians and heterosexual men and women, and some of this work has been published elsewhere (Rumens, 2008a, 2008b, 2010). No workplace friendships involving bisexual or transgender people were reported. Interview data presented below illustrate the exploratory research question used to frame this article: how might gay men understand and experience workplace friendships with other men?

Participants

The study sample comprised 28 gay men from 19 different organizations. The men were recruited using a snowball sampling procedure. This recruitment strategy was successful, if at times slow and unpredictable. Most participants lived in the Midlands and the southern part of the UK and were employed in work roles at all levels of seniority. The age range of study participants was from 24 to 58, with a mean age of 35. Two identified as 'Asian', the rest as 'White'.[1] Seven participants described themselves as 'working class', the rest identified as 'middle class'. Six had been previously married and were now separated and divorced. Five participants had children. Table 1

Table 1 List of study participants as they appear in the article (information given at the time of interview)

Name	Age	Class	Ethnicity	Work role	Marital status, children	Location in UK
Austin	34	Middle-class	White	Occupational therapist	Partnered, no children	Sussex
Callum	35	Middle-class	White	Lecturer, university	Single, no children, never married	Midlands
Hugo	58	Middle-class	White	Principal lecturer, university	Partnered, no children	Dorset
Jack	50	Middle-class	White	Director, environment consultancy	Single, divorced, 3 children	Dorset
Stafford	36	Middle-class	White	Community support worker	Partnered, no children	London

contains further details of participants who appear in the analysis using a pseudonym to provide anonymity.

   To participate in the study, the men had to identify themselves as predominately or exclusively 'gay', and be willing to talk about their experiences of workplace friendship. Several points are worth making here. Although my intention was to build upon the research on gay men's friendships, which influenced my decision to exclude bisexual men, had bisexual males approached me they would have been included in the study. Research on bisexual men's friendships is rare, so eliciting these viewpoints would have been useful. Second, the study did not specify that participants had to be openly gay. Participants who were not 'out' in the workplace to colleagues and friends would have provided different perspectives on workplace friendships. However, all study participants identified as 'openly gay' at work, and in most accounts a number of colleagues appeared to know the sexual identity of participants. Not all the work friends described to me knew the 'gay' identity of their friend during the early stages of befriending. Unless stated otherwise, the sexual identities of each friend are known to each other in the participants' accounts that follow.

Method

Interviews were semi-structured and tape-recorded, lasted between one and a half and three hours and were mostly conducted in participants' own homes. The research interview was regarded as a socially constructed and performative event (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Rubin and Rubin, 2005). In other words, the research interview is a localized context of discursive activity from which texts are generated and ascribed meaning. A Foucauldian position recognizes that meaning making within the interview

situation is contingent and partially constructed between the interviewer and the inter-viewee (Davies and Thomas, 2003; Linstead and Thomas, 2002). As such, the interview data are not treated as being 'unblemished', since the interviewer does not have unmediated access into the minds of interviewees. Like Davies and Thomas (2003: 686), I treat the interview data as 'living social texts' insomuch as the meanings attached to concepts such as friendship, gender and sexuality are not only fluid and multiple, but also emerge out of co-produced interview-based conversations. For example, I did not approach the interviews with an a priori definition of friendship. To do so would potentially exclude the different meanings given to friendship by interviewees (Wood, 1993), which would undermine a Foucauldian perspective that refuses to fix the meaning of such things. Instead, interviewees were actively encouraged to provide different accounts of friend-ship derived from their everyday experiences of these relations in the workplace. This article presents insights into these localized and partial accounts of workplace friend-ships involving heterosexual and other gay men.

   Crucial to this article were lines of questioning that invited participants to focus on: 1) the contexts and characteristics of workplace friendships with other men; 2) conceptions of gender and sexuality; 3) the importance of developing workplace friendships with other men. Further detail pertaining to interview protocol is contained in the Appendix. Conversations based on these topic areas often continued after the interviews had been concluded, which prompted me to invite participants to take part in a second interview. These interviews followed the same protocol: they were semi-structured, typically con-ducted in the interviewees' homes and tape-recorded. They lasted between one and half to two hours.

Data analysis

Discourse analysis techniques were used to analyse the interview data. Adopting a Foucauldian conception of discourse, language is not taken to be a simple reflection of what it claims to represent. Rather, language helps individuals to construct realities of everyday life (Fairclough, 1992). Using a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis entailed many hours of reading the interview texts to identify, compare, contrast and interpret emergent data categories within the interview findings. Throughout the analy-sis of each transcript, I searched for evidence of discourses used by interviewees to construct and understand their workplace friendships with other men. This part of the process involved analysing the components of different discourses, also noting how they overlap and shift. Table 2 provides selective insights into the broader thematic trends in the study's empirical material. Select close readings of particular aspects of discourses have been drawn from the thematic sub-categories identified in Table 2 and are presented below. Three discourses emerged that appeared to influence how partici-pants understood friendship in the context of their workplace relations with other men: 1) discourses on gay sexualities; 2) discourses of gender and sexual difference; 3) and gender and sexuality performance discourse. As a final point here, the analysis below is not to be regarded as a definitive interpretation of the data. As discourse analysts aver, acts of interpretation are partial, multiple and contingent, and should be treated as such (Fairclough, 1992).

Table 2 Select aspects of the thematic analysis of the main discourses presented in this article

	Main categories	Sub-categories
Discourses on gay sexualities	Positive & empowering	Friendship as a source of support Talking about workplace homophobia Acceptance of sexuality Out and proud at work Acknowledging desire for other men at work Talking openly about gay men's issues
	Emphasis on similarity of interests & needs	Shared sexual identity as basis for friendship Shared experiences of workplace homophobia Engendering closeness
	Negative effects in the workplace	Sharing personal information selectively Struggling to develop a sense of individuality Homogenizing gay men's interests and needs Lack of reflexivity Domination and exclusion
Discourses of gender and sexual difference	Exploring sexual differences	Awareness of sexuality as fluid Friendship as sexual Men talking about sexualities Friendship as fluid and pleasurable
	Gender dichotomies	Gay men as 'feminine' (behaviours & qualities) Heterosexual men as 'masculine' (behaviours & qualities) Friendship as platonic
Gender and sexuality performance discourse	Gender and intimacy	Intellectualizing gender as performative Overt displays of intimacy in the workplace Threat of being identified as 'unprofessional' Providing pleasure
	Gender and workplace friendship	Reinforcing gendered organizational hierarchies Developing different identities and selves Providing pleasure

Discourses on gay sexualities

This section examines how the meanings of workplace friendships involving other gay men are, like friendships between gay men in non-work settings (Nardi, 1999; Weeks et al., 2001), shaped by discourses on gay sexualities that emphasize the salience of sexuality as a basis for meaningful friendship (see Table 2). The following exploration offers new insights into how discourses on gay sexualities influence how friendship is understood at a dyadic level and within the context of gay men's homosocial friendship networks.

Emphasizing similarity of interests and needs was a main thematic category identified in the data analysis process. As Table 2 reveals, emergent sub-categories focused on the importance of shared sexual identities for identifying similar interests and experiences of living openly gay lifestyles that would help to establish relations of friendliness, possibly leading to friendship. For example, Hugo, a senior university academic, was typical of those participants who felt experiences of discrimination based on sexual orientation provided common ground among gay men: 'we help each other to identify as gay men and be proud of it, rather than trying to hide or conceal it . . . as others do in the faculty'. From this position, a distinct understanding of friendship emerged. Workplace friendships involving other gay men were understood and valued highly as relational sites in which positive discourses on gay sexualities are drawn upon in order to provide affirmational support for validating gay identities in the workplace. While this finding is not altogether remarkable, given what we know about how gay men have relied heavily on each other for validation and acceptance (Nardi, 1999), aspects of Hugo's text allow us to nuance further his understanding of gay male friendship.

In talking about his present academic work environment, Hugo suggested:

> . . . the men in the department take being professional at all times far too seriously . . . they're terribly stuffy, quite guarded round each other, like they're reluctant to reveal anything interesting about themselves.

Hugo's friendship with Fraser, another gay academic in the same department, complicates this representation of depersonalized professional workplace relations between men:

> Our warmth and affection for each other spills over into our work life . . . quite spontaneously. Other people in the department are aware of it. In fact one male colleague came up to me some time ago and said how refreshing it was to see two gay guys being openly demonstrative . . . which I think he felt was unexpected in an environment where people are generally a bit cagey about getting personal.

From Hugo's commentary, it is possible to see how gay male friendship can be understood not just in terms of support, warmth and affection, but also as a relationship that has the capacity to rupture organizational discourses on how men (and women) ought to relate professionally to one another. Despite the risk of being (re)positioned as 'unprofessional' by his colleagues, Hugo had little to say about any openly negative responses from onlookers. On the contrary, Hugo felt that colleagues seemed 'intrigued' by his friendship with Fraser, with several heterosexual male colleagues admitting to Hugo they 'admired' the two men's 'public displays of affection'. It might be that gay male friendships can be understood by other men as alternative discursive schemas for developing forms of closeness that are less hidebound to heteronormative forms of masculinity (Fee, 2000; Foucault, 1984).

Hugo's text relates to how gay male friendship is understood at a dyadic level. This begs a question seldom asked about how discourses on gay sexualities might influence how friendship is understood within an organizational network of gay men. Illustrating how discourses on gay sexualities can be positive and empowering (another main thematic

category outlined in Table 2), Stafford, a former housing officer, recalls his experience of being part of a gay male friendship network within a housing department:

> There was a powerful little hub of people in the department. All the senior managers were gay . . . I've never come across it since . . . we were all supporting each other because we were all gay . . . it was well known that we did this. Eventually it got to the stage where we had taken over the department . . . that's what we planned [laughs] . . . that we'd have the management of half the city's housing to ourselves.

From this text there is a sense in which discourses of gay sexualities inform the construction of an empowering gay male subject position. Indeed, Stafford described this professional work site not merely as a 'gay-friendly' workplace but as one that 'promoted gay sexuality as a force to be reckoned with'. Despite perceived anxieties of how homosexuality can threaten how the self is understood as 'professional' (Rumens and Kerfoot, 2009; Woods and Lucas, 1993), Stafford did not appear to be circumspect in the workplace about acknowledging his desire for other men. He reflected on this: 'in the beginning it was harder to talk openly about gay things because there weren't many of us but as more joined the department, chatting about boyfriends and other gay stuff became something we all did openly, like it was no big deal'. Notable here is that topics of conversation which develop privately between men at a dyadic level gradually permeate the dialogue between men at a collective level, enabling Stafford and other gay men to be 'out and proud' about their sexuality.

This represents something of a reversal of the picture painted in accounts of heterosexual men who craft exclusively shared language to convey hidden shared meanings in order to maintain a sense of commonality and closeness within the workplace (Kaplan, 2005). In this case, gay sexualities are openly constructed and expressed through office-based conversations, and therefore seemingly less hampered by restricted forms of communication and representation. Indeed, from this example we can observe how gay male friendship is understood to be a productive form of organizing within the workplace, which stands in stark contrast to the literature that examines how organizational gay sexualities are often marginalized and discredited (Humphrey, 1999; Ward and Winstanley, 2003). Furthermore, unlike research that reveals how gay men's friendships are typically understood as sources of emotional and practical support to help gay men navigate the obstacles of heteronormative life, this example also points to the normalizing effect these friendships can generate. Stafford remarked: 'my time in the department helped me to feel that my sexuality was a normal part of me, like it is for straight people'. By this reading, gay male workplace friendship is understood less as a relational site for coping with the inimical effects of being Othered as 'gay' (Woods and Lucas, 1993), and more as an arena for constructing a form of homonormativity that privileges gay male sexuality. As such, the possibility for demonstrating how gay men can contribute positively to organizational operations is conditioned within a homosocial context.

On that point, the homosocial gay male friendships described by Stafford approximate those men's friendships criticized by feminist researchers for (re)producing masculine values of domination, exclusion and control (Elsesser and Peplau, 2006; Wharton and Bird, 1996). The negative effects of these friendships, identified as a crucial thematic

category in Table 2, is illustrated nicely by Stafford's account, even though he was strangely silent and unreflexive on the exclusive nature of these friendship ties, from which other men and women are seemingly barred. In this example, networked friendship ties among gay men may be understood as offering gay men a position to critique heteronormative definitions of themselves as the Other but at the cost of homogenizing gay men's needs and interests. Furthermore, other sub-themes in Table 2 relating to the negative effects of gay male workplace friendships are present in Stafford's account. Most striking is how gay men's workplace friendships re(produce) gendered modes of organizing based on domination and exclusion. In this regard, while giving the appearance of friendship, most notably in how gay men give one another preferential treatment, the nature of these relationships are less suggestive of how friendship is typically understood at a dyadic level, where individuals have more flexibility to negotiate trust, reciprocity and equality.

Discourses of gender and sexual difference

The second discourse that emerged from the interview texts was the discourse of gender and sexual difference, often presented in accounts of participants' workplace friendships with heterosexual men. This section provides fresh insights into these understudied friendship dyads, focusing on the discursive performativity of gender and sexuality within these cross-sexuality workplace friendships. As shall be seen below, discourses of sexuality and gender reveal insights into how gay men's workplace friendships are ambiguous and conflicted, demonstrating the fluidity and cultural instability of these workplace friendships.

In a cultural context that is said to celebrate the sexually ambiguous and acknowledges the multiplicity of sexualities and genders (Roseneil, 2000; Weeks, 2007), there was remarkable evidence of participants trying to fix 'gay' and 'heterosexual' sexualities as polar opposites. As such, Austin's account of his close friendship with Dominic (another occupational therapist) is illuminating because it highlights some of the tensions arising from overlapping and competing components of discourses of gender and sexual difference, outlined in Table 2 under the thematic categories 'embracing sexual differences' and 'gender dichotomies'. For example:

> Dominic and I agree that we have two sides to us . . . a feminine side and a masculine side. I'm mostly aware of my feminine side because I'm gay, but straight guys are more aware of their masculine side, so there's a big difference between us. I give [Dominic] a more feminine perspective on the world, and I think he likes that coming from a gay man, rather than a straight guy. I think he feels he can open up to me without any worry of being chastised for being soft.

By conceptualizing sexuality and gender in this way, certain subject positions are promoted that appear to provide opportunities for organizing cross-sexuality workplace friendships between men on a principle of 'opposites attract', as Austin put it. Drawing on a heteronormative discourse that polarizes sexuality and gender, Austin generates two subject positions that emphasize distinct and desirable gendered perspectives and qualities such friendships are said to occasion. One troubling implication of this approach to understanding cross-sexuality friendship between men is that it subscribes to a binary

and heteronormative 'gender difference' perspective. In that regard, both men risk (re)producing the cultural norms surrounding sexuality and gender by which, for example, gay men have been over identified with femininity in a negative sense (Rumens, 2008b). However, it would be wrong to dismiss Austin's approach as wholly problematic.

From one angle, this artificial stabilization appears to facilitate friendship between these men as a pleasurable experience. Discursive boundaries are established that have the effect of representing cross-sexuality friendship between men as a worthwhile platonic relationship. There are clear benefits for those men involved in such relationships. Austin's gendered appraisal of what Dominic gains from his friendship resonates with research that also highlights the possibility for heterosexual men to disclose emotionally to their gay friends, without being labelled less of a man for doing so (Fee, 2000; Walker, 1994). That being said, it is hard to deny the possibility that friendships may be experienced as sexual even if they are constructed otherwise at the level of meaning. While Austin's account is less revealing of the potentialities here, other participants felt they had more flexibility in how they understood these components to cross-sexuality friendships in the workplace.

Jack is a director within an environment consultancy firm, and has struck up a friendship with Martin, a heterosexual male who is also one of Jack's subordinates. Despite the hierarchical element to their professional relationship, which might be seen to inhibit the mutual disclosure of personal information, the two men have often conversed about how they perceive differences in their sexual identities. According to Jack, both men acknowledge that sexuality is 'not always a clear cut thing', evident in the 'sexual edge' their friendship has developed. As Table 2 indicates, when gay and heterosexual men embrace sexual differences as fluid and provisional, friendship ties can become sexualized. For example, both men 'flirt' with each other in the context of activities and interactions that provide legitimate reasons for the two men to come together. When Martin approaches Jack for his managerial input, Martin 'sits more closely' to Jack 'than everyone else does', and Jack notices that Martin always 'undoes the top button of his shirt' in his presence. These sexualized interactions are pleasurable, which Jack was quick to defend: 'I'm not going to disguise the fact that I enjoy it . . . I like being playful with another bloke in an erotic kind of way'.

From one perspective, such behaviour could be construed as 'sleeping with the boss' to get promoted, as Jack later pointed out. But their mutual acknowledgement of the fluidity of heterosexuality and homosexuality inspires Jack to come at this from another position:

> It goes much deeper than flirting . . . I've found in Martin an intelligent young man who's prepared to avoid making snap decisions about who people are sexually . . . it's unlike any friendship I've had with another man . . . so it's a bit like being at sea, I'm not sure what direction it will take us. May be to the bedroom, who knows?

From Jack's commentary a strong sense emerges of a friendship that is understood to be ambiguous. Their friendship demonstrates ambivalence in how aspects of daily workplace interactions are understood, which defies a Butlerian heteronormative matrix of discourses that insist friendship is only *authentic* when it is platonic in nature (Rawlins,

2008). Here there is no clear indication about how the friendship will develop. This links nicely with research by Kaplan (2005) that also shows how men can exhibit ambivalent cues about intentions to (de)sexualize friendship, which can have a seductive effect. As in Jack's example, the two men are drawn into and sustain interactions that are both pleasurable and titillating, but they give little away about the future path their friendship will take.

Gender and sexuality performance discourse

This final section examines gender and sexuality performance discourse, which offers a line of analysis on an underdeveloped area of study; namely, how gay men's workplace friendships can encourage experimentation with performing genders and sexualities. As Table 2 suggests, two main thematic categories emerged in regard to this discourse: 'gender and intimacy' and 'negative effects on workplace friendships'. Many participant accounts contained elements of both themes, as demonstrated in the following example.

Callum and Armand, both university academics, appear to enjoy the exchange of scholarly ideas, perspectives and values that are part and parcel of the everyday activities and interactions as academics. This has helped to establish a form of intellectual closeness, which has influenced how they relate to each other as friends and as manager-subordinate. As I elaborate below, it is significant that Armand is Callum's line manager. Equally important is that both men work within an area of the social sciences receptive towards a performative ontology that articulates gender and sexuality in terms of performance, contradiction, play and inconsistency (Butler, 1990, 2004). Both men are familiar with this approach, which has informed their academic writing and research activities. From Callum's perspective, it has spurred Armand into exploring the performativity of gender and sexuality in the workplace.

For example, Armand is said to make a point of being openly affectionate towards Callum, often in front of other academics and students, sometimes during department meetings or on campus. In these situations, Callum is often greeted by Armand with a 'hug' or a 'kiss on the lips', which he often experiences as moments of 'tenderness' and intellectualizes as 'disrupting gendered organizational codes of conduct'. Certainly, the open expression of affection between these male friends is notable within the public arena of work for its potentially destabilizing effect on organizational discourses that promote largely instrumental ways of relating at work. At the same time, however, these gendered performances can be experienced in terms of personal discomfort and ambiguity.

Callum admitted that he has sometimes found 'being kissed [by Armand] on campus in front of undergraduates . . . uncomfortable'. Concerned about how spontaneous displays of affection might jeopardize his sense of self as professional, Callum steers attention to the importance of negotiating the expression of intimacy in public spaces. From one perspective, Armand might be seen to exploit his seniority when engaging Callum in discursive activities that buck normative cultural discourses on the expression of male intimacy within the workplace. Callum seems to be supportive of Armand's unconventional gender performances, but he also appears constrained at times to share his doubts about their consequences. Taking this further, an uncomfortable parallel can be drawn; informed by feminist research, about how senior organizational men can 'do' intimacy

with junior females in ways that reinforce their subordinate position (Cockburn, 1991; Gherardi, 1995). In that respect, Armand's outbursts of affection are enmeshed within gendered power relations that (un)wittingly (re)position Callum as a subordinate male, and thus (re)produce the gendered forms of organizing Armand seeks to undermine.

It is certainly fascinating that doubt appears to collect in Callum's mind about the motives behind Armand's desire to perform 'gender trouble' at the level of identity:

> I do think sometimes that he gives nothing away, particularly as he moves from one identity to the next, making himself ambiguous in terms of gender and sexuality . . . So he moves between those things and I find it intriguing in one sense, but sometimes I wonder if he's performing for my benefit or at my expense . . . it's a conversation I've yet to have with him.

From this excerpt it is possible to see how Callum understands his friendship with Armand within discourses that contain competing and contradictory elements, presented as thematic sub-categories in Table 2. On the one hand, Callum draws upon discourses on the performativity of gender and sexuality to intellectualize Armand's performances of intimate friendship as 'intriguing'. Armand's discursive activities underline the constructed and performative qualities of gender and sexuality, and are certainly not out of place against a cultural backdrop of postmodern sexualities and genders (Roseneil, 2000). The gender as performative discourse informs how Callum understands his friendship with Armand as 'novel' and 'experimental', not least because in the context of work the performance of masculinities is often seen to be 'purposive-rational' in their orientation (Kerfoot and Knights, 1993).

On the other hand, Callum struggles to understand whether Armand's performances of gender are for his benefit or at his expense. On this matter, it is no small thing that friendships are often constructed as relationships in which people can be themselves, without pretence or dishonesty (Allan, 1989). From a friendship-as-performance perspective, Armand's discursive manoeuvring reveals more about playing with and off a multiplicity of selves, and less about revealing a deeper sense of self. This is not to imply that individuals have a fixed authentic self that can be accessed through friendship. Rather it recognizes that one of the pleasures of friendship is about being able to explore who and what you wish to be, as studies on gay men's friendship poignantly illustrate (Nardi, 1999). In this vein, Callum's commentary encourages us to see the potential in cross-sexuality workplace friendship for this kind of discursive activity, but also reminds us that friends need to negotiate and understand each other's discursive performances of gender and sexuality in ways that are intelligible and acceptable to them. One lesson that can be drawn here is that it requires friends actively to confront and reflect on each other's discursive performances as well as their own.

Discussion and conclusion

Previous research on men's workplace friendships has tended to focus on heterosexual men and provides evidence for the continued theorization of men's friendships as emotionally lukewarm and instrumental. This research represents one of the few empirical studies to

complicate how we might understand men's workplace friendships by exploring the perspectives of gay men, who have often been depicted as being skilful in friendship development, and who value friendship highly (Gottlieb, 2008; Nardi, 1999; Weeks et al., 2001). The study suggests that gay men can understand and experience male-to-male workplace friendships as supportive and pleasurable, and as relational sites for interrogating heteronormative definitions of themselves as organizational Others. As such, many aspects of the study data resonate with research that has theorized gay men's friendships in non-work settings as crucibles for inventing alternative identities and new ways of relating less constrained by the heteronormativity of everyday life (Nardi, 1999; Weeks et al., 2001). Indeed, some scholars have evoked classical discourses on male friendship to suggest that gay men's friendships may 'lead all men to a new, more modern, form of the heroic friendships of the past' (Nardi, 1999: 206). However, the findings of this study give us reason to be cautious about trumpeting the potential of gay men to pioneer reconstituted forms of classical male friendship. The study data show how contemporary understandings of male-to-male friendship are revealing of fluid and intimate forms of relating between men that unsettle traditional gender dichotomies, but it also exposes the tensions and discursive struggles involved in negotiating the form and meaning these friendships take in the workplace.

One significant contribution of this study is by reading friendship, gender and sexuality as performative, in a Foucauldian sense, multiple insights are gained about the empowering and disempowering potential of gay men's workplace friendships for contesting heteronormative discourses of gender, sexuality and male friendship. Study participants are constructed as active in choosing to use friendship to explore new forms of organizational sexualities and genders. Notably, research on gay organizational masculinities is underdeveloped, despite an explosion of critical scholarship on men, masculinities and organization (Cheng, 1996; Kerfoot and Knights, 1993, 1998; Knights and Richards, 2003; Collinson and Hearn, 1996). From this research, an understanding is obtained of the inimical effects of 'purposive-rational' modes of masculinity for both the subjects who perform such masculinities and those who are marginalized by them. In contrast with this article, these studies focus primarily on heterosexual masculinities in the workplace and their negative characteristics and outcomes, such as masculine modes of organizing that (re)produce heterosexual male dominance as a source of privilege and power. One result of this approach is that it can present an overly bleak perspective on organizational masculinities. For example, while there is some validity to Kerfoot's contention that as a consequence of a 'concern to maintain control, masculine subjects disavow the possibility of relationships and forms of intimacy that are non-instrumental' (1999: 196–7), this assertion inadvertently obscures the potential for men's workplace friendships to act as seedbeds for growing non-instrumental intimacies and alternative genders and sexualities. Kerfoot's argument refers to managerial forms of masculinity. On the same matter, Roper's (1996) study of men's friendship networks is a contrasting account of how male homosocial forms of intimacy, or 'circuits of desire' (Hearn, 1992: 205), can thrive between male managers in organizational contexts where instrumental forms of masculinity are well established.

This study does not seek to undermine a major claim made by these studies that organizational masculinities and intimacies can perpetuate exclusionary male networks which

(re)produce gender inequalities (Cheng, 1996). Rather, the study data call attention to the need to address the deficit in the critical scholarship on organizational masculinities around exploring how different types of men organize and relate to each other in ways that disrupt heteronormative discourses of gender and sexuality (see Pullen and Simpson, 2009). In that regard, organizational research can benefit from considering gay men's perspectives and experiences in at least two ways. First, investigating how gay men are positioned within work contexts, not just as organizational Others but as men who also occupy positions of gender privilege, can throw new light on how gay men use homosocial forms of relating to cultivate empowering gay masculinities in the workplace. Few scholars have examined homosocial organizational friendship networks between gay men and yet, as this article shows, gay male friendship at a dyadic and network level can influence the performance of gender and sexuality in the workplace, with mixed results. Here, potential opportunities exist for exposing the problems and the positive outcomes when gay men use workplace friendships involving other men to perform gender and sexuality.

Second, gay men's experiences and perspectives on workplace friendships problematize a well rehearsed argument that men's friendships outside and at work are more instrumental and less intimate than women's friendships (Wood, 1993). This article helps to supplant dominant perspectives on men's friendships in particular, showing how men can establish workplace friendships that embody qualities such as intimacy, trust and acceptance. Such friendships can enable gay men to (re)produce empowering identities and selves, suggesting that organizational discourses of heteronormativity cannot fully colonize gay sexualities and genders. Indeed, study findings suggest that gay men's workplace friendships can encourage men to question and explore the limits of heteronormative discourses of gender and sexuality. For some men the supportive and emotional expressive nature of some friendships between gay men might be used as a discursive schema for remodelling depersonalized male-to-male relations in the workplace. Here, then, the article prompts a review of how men's friendships are understood. However, it is not enough that by showing how gay men's workplace friendships might be understood in terms associated with femininity (i.e. support, emotional intimacy), stereotypes of men's friendships are sufficiently problematized. We might inadvertently perpetuate the use of a 'feminine ruler' by which to measure the 'value' of men's friendships (Wood and Inman, 1993). However, using a Foucauldian approach to understanding men's friendships helps us to avoid falling into the trap of treating gender and sexuality as static variables, allowing us to interrogate and potentially move beyond the confines of gender dichotomies for understanding men's (and women's) friendships. As some study participant accounts demonstrate, acknowledging the restrictions of gender and sexual dichotomies can facilitate the opening up of new possibilities for understanding men's workplace friendships. While it is premature to suggest that gendered stereotypes of men's friendships have collapsed, they are being undermined, and not just by gay men as this study reveals.

Thus for those men seeking to develop and sustain healthy workplace friendships with other men, one lesson that can be drawn from all this is the importance of reflecting on the performativity of workplace friendships, exploring and negotiating ways of relating that break out of rigid gender and sexual dichotomies. Indeed, how men's workplace

friendships might be understood and experienced is more ambiguous and varied than much current academic discourse gives credit for. Future research on this matter is to be encouraged, especially if it involves gathering perspectives from different types of men (e.g. bisexual and men of colour) who might cast different light on how friendship, sexuality, gender and organization are interlinked. Here an unorthodox research agenda for organizations also emerges, that has less to do with investigating how workplace friendships can enhance business performance, and more to do with understanding how friendships can help men and women to improve the workplace experience.

Appendix 1: Abridged interview protocol

1. Introduction

Pre-interview issues: introduce self and interest in gay men's workplace friendships, reiterate statements about the purpose of the study, reaffirm confidentiality, anonymity, explain audio recording procedure and indicate length of interview. Interviewee background – questions asked to gather information on: age, ethnicity, class, marital status, children, present employer, job role and location within the UK.

Find out from interviewee what length of time they have identified as gay and how 'open' they are in their current workplace.

2. Main interview questions

(Note: these questions relate only to that part of the interview from which data have been extracted and presented in this paper)

i)   *Characteristics of selected workplace friendships with other men*
     Do you have any workplace friendships with other men?
     Do you prefer workplace friendships with other men or with women?
     Do these men identify as 'gay', 'heterosexual', 'transgender' or 'bisexual'?
     How would you describe this/these workplace friendships?
     (Potential probes: What do you talk about? Has the friendship developed or changed? How? Why?)
     Are there any rules or expectations of workplace friendships with other men?

ii) *Dynamics of gender and sexuality within workplace friendships with other men*
     Have you ever talked to your friend about your different sexual identities?
     Can you describe what you have talked about in these conversations?
     Have you ever found it hard to discuss differences in sexual identities?
     Were they any particular turning points or circumstances when you have acknowledged differences in sexuality? What are they?
     How do certain types of male work friends compare to others – e.g. a gay work friend compared with a heterosexual male work friend?

iii) *Importance of workplace friendships with other men*
     Think of one workplace friendship involving another man that is or has been important to you. How would you describe how important this friendship is or was?

(Potential probes: How do you feel towards this person? What does it mean to have a male work friend?)

Has the importance of this workplace friendship changed? Is it the same or different from when you first met?

3. Close

Ask interviewee if they wish to discuss anything not covered in the interview. Ask interviewee if there is anything they wish to revise or reflect on any aspect of the interview. Ask interviewee how they felt about being interviewed. Reassure interviewee that further discussion can take regarding any aspect of the interview process. Reaffirm confidentiality and anonymity, ask interviewee to select a pseudonym. Ask interviewee to recruit another gay man to participate in the study.

Acknowledgements

Note

1   Given this article's theoretical orientation, it is important to state that profiling study participants according to ethnicity (and class, sexuality, etc.) entails some degree of categorization. In the case of ethnicity, most participants preferred to be identified as 'British' but some also self-identified in various ways as 'White', 'Asian' or 'Cypriot'. As such, despite the use of seemingly rigid identity categories in Table 1, participants' ethnic identities are to be regarded as contingent and open to alteration.

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