human relations
THE TAVISTOCK INSTITUTE

Witnesses on the periphery: Young lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer employees witnessing homophobic exchanges in Australian workplaces

human relations
65(12) 1589–1610

DOI: 10.1177/0018726712457795
hum.sagepub.com
SAGE

Paul Willis
Swansea University, UK

Abstract

Social divisions on the basis of sexuality are continually reinforced and contested in organizational environments. Previous studies have focused on the workplace as a problematic environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer-identifying (LGBQ) workers. In this article, I examine young workers' experiences of witnessing the exchange of homophobic expressions, commentary and humour at work. Qualitative findings are presented from an exploratory study of young LGBQ people's experiences in Australian organizations. Three core themes are discussed: (i) young workers' location as periphery witnesses to homophobic exchanges, discussions and humour; (ii) the constraints experienced by young LGBQ workers in having to 'manage' their sexuality at work; and (iii) young workers' attempts to refute and reject homophobic discourse in work relationships. Based on these findings, I conclude that witnessing the exchange of homophobic commentary can constrain how young workers express their sexuality at work while also mobilizing young workers to question homophobic discourse.

Keywords

employee voice, gender in organizations, heteronormativity, homophobia, sexuality, work environment

Corresponding author:
Paul Willis, College of Human and Health Sciences, Swansea University, Swansea SA2 8PP, Wales, UK.
Email: p.b.willis@swansea.ac.uk

Introduction

Workplace discrimination is conventionally defined as the 'unfair and negative treatment of workers or job applicants' (Chung, 2001: 34) in which there is an intended target or victim of prejudicial treatment. However, discrimination may not always be experienced by employees as targets or victims − it may also be experienced through witnessing the negative treatment of others or listening to oppressive remarks that resonate with elements of the individual's personal and social identity. This article focuses on the experience and impact of witnessing homophobic discussions and exchanges in Australian workplaces. These experiences constitute expressions of discursive violence, which are covert, taken-for-granted and hard to identify in work relationships. Everyday experiences of subtle discrimination in which there are no obvious targets or intentions are far more difficult to recognize and address in organizations (Van Laer and Janssens, 2011). More recent research has begun to show the wider effects of workplace bullying on employees sharing the same work-environment, in particular impact on staff turnover (Houshmand et al., 2012). This article explores the wider impact of homophobic actions on other employees sharing the same work-environment.

'First-wave' research into lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer-identifying (LGBQ) workers' experiences of paid employment has documented employees' stories of discrimination, harassment and bullying on the basis of sexual difference (Ozturk, 2011). An area that appears to be unexplored within this body of research is an examination of the experiences and effects of witnessing the discriminatory treatment of others − being a third party to the exchange of homophobic commentary in organizations. This article responds to this caveat by providing a fine-grained analysis of LGBQ employees' experiences of witnessing the exchange of homophobic discourse. In particular, this article brings attention to the experiences of young LGBQ-identifying workers as new players in the social sphere of the workplace. Research in this area is fundamental for addressing socio-cultural barriers to workplace participation, for developing more nurturing environments for younger employees and for establishing firmer grounds to challenge the segregation of employees on the basis of sexual identity, desires and relationships. Accordingly, the aim of this discussion is to examine young LGBQ-identifying workers' reported experiences of and responses to witnessing the exchange of homophobic expressions and commentary. To address this aim, I report and discuss qualitative findings from an exploratory inquiry into young LGBQ people's stories of employment within a range of organizations.

Conducted between 2005 and 2006, the research focused on young people (18−26 years) who identified as LGBQ and were engaged in paid employment in organizational settings. When describing their sexuality, the majority of participants referred to lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer identities, hence the abbreviation 'LGBQ' is used throughout this article. Based on the findings I discuss how witnessing homophobic exchanges from the periphery can constrain how young LGBQ workers express their sexual identity at work as well as mobilizing young workers to refute and reject homophobic discourse. For the purpose of this discussion, 'witnessing' refers to observing and overhearing verbal exchanges in which non-heterosexual subjectivities are represented in a negative or oppressive light. When witnessing homophobic exchanges, LGBQ workers may not be the intended victim; however they may locate their own sexual identity as the topic of denigration and ridicule.

This article is organized into four sections. First, I present the background literature and outline the conceptual and policy frameworks. Second, I outline the qualitative methods of data generation and analysis deployed in the research. Third, I present key findings based on young LGBQ workers' reported experiences, and finally I discuss the implications of the findings for enabling change in organizations.

Background to the research

Negotiating LGBQ sexualities at work: Homophobic encounters in the workplace

There is growing recognition in sociological and organizational literature that workplaces are sexualized environments in which workers negotiate different, and sometimes conflicting, sexual expressions, values and social identities (Fleming, 2007; Ward and Winstanley, 2003). Similarly, the workplace has been discussed as a gendered environment by feminist authors, and the working body has been theorized as a signifier of sexualized and gendered imagery and norms (Acker, 2012; McDowell, 2004). For non-heterosexual workers, the workplace can be experienced as a problematic social environment − this is evident in early studies, or 'first-wave' research, into LGBQ workers' reported experiences of abuse and discrimination (Ozturk, 2011). Authors from economically advantaged nations such as Australia, the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) have presented empirical evidence to highlight how social divisions between heterosexual and non-heterosexual workers (and, in some research, transgender employees) are maintained in the workplace (Aaron and Ragusa, 2011; Barrett et al., 2011; Colgan et al., 2006, 2007; Irwin, 1999; King and Cortina, 2010; Smith and Ingram, 2004). Narratives about sexuality and workplace inequality have also emerged from developing nations such as Turkey (Ozturk, 2011). More recently, a second wave of researchers has begun to examine the complexities of implementing equality measures and initiating LGBQ employee-led networks for enabling change in both public and private organizations (Colgan and McKearney, 2012; Martinez and Hebl, 2010; Monro, 2010).

While little attention has been given to experiences of witnessing anti-homosexual expressions and actions at work, other authors have examined the means through which homophobic beliefs and expressions are conveyed in work relationships: direct and indirect acts of discrimination (Drydakis, 2009; Irwin, 1999); verbal, physical and sexual abuse (Barrett et al., 2011; Colgan et al., 2006); and the prevailing presumption of heterosexuality (Rondahl et al., 2007; Ward and Winstanley, 2003). In consequence, non-heterosexual workers feel compelled to manage 'coming out' at work and the disclosure of LGBQ identities to others (Clair et al., 2005; Ragins et al., 2007). Following these concerns, other authors have advocated for the organizational benefits of LGBQ employees 'coming out' and the role of LGBQ employees in facilitating wider cultural change (Martinez and Hebl, 2010). Colgan and McKearney's (2012) case study research in the UK suggests that non-heterosexual employees give high regard to LGB (and transgender) company networks as an important mechanism for keeping issues of equality and sexuality on the corporate agenda. However, there are significant variations in the level of support available to LGBQ-employee initiatives across organizations.

The ways in which homophobic discourse is expressed and condoned in work relationships can vary across workplace cultures, environments and occupations. Within male-dominated work cultures, Embrick et al. (2007) and Ward and Winstanley (2006) have discussed how homosexual-oriented jokes can reinforce power inequalities and positions of male solidarity through the representation of lesbians and gay men as the Sexual Other. In a similar vein, McLean et al. (1997) have argued that the expression of sexualized humour in engineering industries fosters a culture of belonging for men by emphasizing the inferiority of 'women, homosexuals, and marginalized racial or ethnic groups' (1997: 147). In another occupational setting, lesbian and gay teachers have discussed how they learn to conceal their sexuality within schools to avoid harassment from students and staff or for fear of being misread as sexually dangerous subjects (Ferfolja, 2007, 2010; Gust, 2007; Morrow and Gill, 2003). Ferfolja (2007) argues that these tensions generate occupational stressors for lesbian teachers in 'managing' their sexualities in schools.

A small number of studies have touched on young LGBQ workers' experiences and indicate some overarching themes. Emslie's (1998) short case study of young lesbian and gay workers in Australia suggests that isolation and hiding are two common concerns for LGBQ youth. The third national survey of LGBQ youth in Australia briefly indicates that 17 per cent of respondents (14−21 years) who reported verbal or physical violence had been targets of abuse in their workplace (Hillier et al., 2010). Based on focus groups and interviews with young LGBQ workers (16–30 years) in the UK, Colgan et al. (2006) report that the majority of participants recounted experiences of homophobia and consequentially believed they could not be 'out' in the workplace. Participants who described 'coming out' early in their careers were often located in organizations in which equal opportunity policies were already enforced (Colgan et al., 2006: 43). The present research expands on this work by seeking to develop a deeper understanding of young LGBQ workers' experiences of witnessing and responding to homophobic exchanges in work-relationships.

Conceptual frames informing the research

This discussion is informed by conceptual frameworks developed in gender studies, communication studies and queer theory. Concepts integral to this discussion include homophobia, heteronormativity and discursive violence. Together, these concepts provide the theoretical tools for understanding how power is exercised between different workplace actors through sexuality as a socially and historically situated construct. This approach aligns with the work of other authors who have examined human relations, sexuality and politics of difference through post-structural and queer perspectives (Ozturk, 2011; Rumens, 2010; Ward and Winstanley, 2003). Within discussions about sexuality and power in organizations, sexuality is often conceptualized as a mechanism of control or as an active means of resistance to organizational norms and cultures. Fleming proposes that it is a 'multi-levelled combination of both' (2007: 252) as staff and management members alike continually negotiate power relations of control and resistance across sexually coded positions. In this discussion, I follow Burrell and

Hearn's (1989) definition of power as a relational force that underpins and constitutes workplace relationships.

Based on Michel Foucault's earlier writing, Burrell and Hearn (1989: 15) argue that power, like sexuality, is not an individual possession brought into the workplace from the outside world. Alternatively, power relations are constructed and negotiated within work contexts (Burrell and Hearn, 1989). 'Relational' in this context refers to power being ever-present and always open to contest in human relationships. Foucault (1978) emphasizes the effects that are produced at the very moments when individuals exercise power within 'the field of application'. In this sense, power is productive; the exercise of power creates or produces particular subjectivities, classifications and forms of knowledge (Foucault, 1978), including knowledge about differences on the basis of human sexuality.

The concept of homophobia, as originally coined by Weinberg (1972, cited in Green, 2005), denoted a clinical problem located in the individual psyche, a 'phobic' response to homosexual individuals and relationships. The definitional boundaries of this term have since expanded to recognize the social and structural dimensions that bolster homophobic attitudes. More recent authors discuss homophobia as the institutional practices, social attitudes and individual actions that convey hostility and intolerance towards homosexual practices, identities and relationships (Green, 2005; Tomsen and Mason, 1997). Noelle (2002) has described the 'ripple effect' of homophobic violence. Noelle (2002) examined the emotional responses of lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals to well-cited media cases of homophobia in the US. Noelle (2002) contends that being an audience member to the reporting of other people's experiences of hate crime can generate responses of vicarious trauma amongst individuals who share a similar sexual identity. National research in the US has concluded that young people attracted to the same sex are more likely to report witnessing incidents of physical violence then their heterosexual peers and are more likely to frequent unsafe spaces (Russell et al., 2001). The lack of safe spaces for LGBQ youth has likewise been highlighted in Australian research (Hillier et al., 2005).

While young LGBQ people in Australia have reported homophobic encounters across school, work and the family home, they are not powerless in speaking back to homophobia. Hillier and Harrison discuss how LGBQ youth 'find the fault lines' (2004: 81) in homophobic discourse − the strategies through which lesbian and gay youth challenge homophobic beliefs and identify the cracks and inconsistencies running through dominant discourse. In this context, discourse can be defined as the language practices that shape the way in which individuals understand and act upon social reality (Ward and Winstanley, 2003). While agency can only be exercised within limited contexts, this does not diminish the possibilities for young people to question homophobic discourse (Hillier and Harrison, 2004).

The concept of heteronormativity describes the saturation of heterosexual norms and values in contemporary societies (Berlant and Warner, 1998) − the social and political landscape in which homophobic beliefs are expressed. Heteronormativity is defined by queer theorists as a ubiquitous body of knowledge in Western worlds that reinforces the privileged status of heterosexuality through unspoken assumptions about heterosexual relations as 'natural' and 'normal' (Berlant and Warner, 1998). 'Heterosexual experience' is equated with 'human experience' and all other forms of sexual expression are

perceived as either 'invisible' or potentially 'deviant' (Yep, 2002: 167). Bruni argues that heterosexuality maintains its privileged status within organizations through a process of 'cathexis': the 'skilful social process of ordering bodies, sexualities, desires, symbols, discourses and artefacts into a coherent arrangement' (2006: 313). The informal social ordering of individuals in organizations gives heterosexuality a naturalized and normalized status.

In seeking to interrogate the 'mechanisms of power' that sustain heteronormative logic, Yep describes the effects of 'discursive violence': 'The words, tone gestures, and images that are used to differentially treat, degrade, pathologize, and represent lesbian and gay experiences' (2002: 170). Everyday speech is a powerful means of reiterating heterosexual norms, for example, through the posing of questions to LGBQ individuals about the legitimacy of their sexual attractions. While this may appear as an innocuous act of 'curiosity', these questions are often posed from a privileged standpoint in which heterosexual identities and practices remain unquestioned. This is an example of what Yep (2002: 170) identifies as discursive violence exercised on an interior-collective level – the patterns of everyday conversations that reiterate collective beliefs about sexuality-based differences and reinforce heterosexuality as the invisible norm. To this extent, 'discursive violence' encapsulates the subtle expressions, gestures and comments that continually differentiate between heterosexual and non-heterosexual bodies.

Legal and national context to the present research

The research participants were located across six Australian states with no response from the two territories. In the Australian labour market, young workers are new players in 'precarious' employment and are frequently located in vulnerable positions of 'low pay, employment insecurity and working-time insecurity' (White and Wyn, 2008: 174). Casual workers in Australia (employees without access to leave entitlements) tend to be overwhelmingly younger people, with estimates of 40 per cent of casual employees aged 15–24 years (ABS, 2009). Younger workers are also represented disproportionally in lower skilled occupations – a condition of precarious employment is the location of young workers in low-skilled and low-paid industries such as retail and service work (White and Wyn, 2008).

Under Australian law, LGBQ employees have limited and varied legal protection from discrimination. Australia is a State Party to the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, no date) and is therefore obliged to uphold principles of non-discrimination (Article 2.1) and equality (Article 26) in legislation. At Federal level, this translates into the Fair Work Act 2009, which protects employees from discrimination on the basis of both 'sexual preference' and 'age' (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011). While 'marital status' is a protected characteristic, the same protection is currently not afforded to people in same-sex relationships (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011). Likewise, there is no legal protection against harassment or vilification on the grounds of sexuality. While each Australian state and territory has separate equal opportunities legislation that includes sexual orientation, recent research suggests that these legal frameworks are not being adhered to in organizational practice (Aaron and Ragusa,

2011; Barrett et al., 2011). This legislation is further weakened by a number of exemptions that grant religious employers permission to discriminate lawfully on the grounds of sexuality (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011). Federal law contains a similar exemption for employers of a 'particular religion or creed' (Fair Work Act 2009, s. 351: 2c). This highlights the need for a unified Federal statute that does not exempt organizations from adhering to principles of equality.

Approach and methods of the research

Methods of sampling and recruitment

Young people were invited to participate if they were between 16 and 26 years of age and were engaged in paid employment on either a fixed (full-time and part-time) or non-fixed-term basis (casual employment) in Australian organizations. Through a purposive approach to sampling, the research was advertised through a range of recruitment sources to ensure a diverse sample across age, occupation, gender and sexual identity. Advertisements were circulated through electronic postings on LGBQ and youth-related websites, email notices circulated through youth health and welfare providers, and hard copy notices displayed in LGBQ social and community venues. Advertisements directed interested individuals to a central website, which invited LGBQ-identifying/non-heterosexual individuals to discuss both negative and positive experiences of the workplace. Stories about negative experiences at work were more prominent in participants' interview accounts; this may highlight research participation as a remedial process for sharing oppressive stories about work relationships.

Overall, 34 young people (18−26 years) participated in the research − in this article, I focus on the stories shared by 20 participants based on their identified experiences of witnessing homophobic exchanges at former and current workplaces. Within this subgroup, there is almost an equal divide between women (9) and men (11). Table 1 outlines key information about the participants discussed in this article, including their age, gender, self-descriptions of sexuality, identified work industries and method of participation. Participants shared their work experiences from a wide range of industries in both the public and private sector. This presents difficulties in developing more nuanced analyses of industrial and occupational cultures. However, the findings do highlight commonalities in young employees' experiences that cut across industries and occupations.

Methods of data generation and analysis

Primary data were gathered through three qualitative methods: online interviews, face-to-face interviews and a web-based questionnaire posted online for self-completion. Online methods were utilized in recognition that the Internet is a prominent technology in the social and sexual lives of LGBQ youth (Hillier and Harrison, 2007) and to enable young people to participate who could not meet with the interviewer owing to geographical distance. During both face-to-face (FTF) and online interviews I followed the same theme list and adopted a focused, active interview approach (Holstein and Gubrium,

Table 1 Participants' key information including self-selected pseudonym, age at time of participation, identified gender and self-description of sexuality, and identified work industry[a]

Self-selected pseudonym	Age	Gender (female = 9; male =11)	Self-description of sexual identity	Identified work industry	Method of participation
Bubbles	19	F	Bisexual	Hospitality and service work	Face-to-face interview
Luke	19	M	Gay	Hospitality and service work	Face-to-face interview
Franky	20	M	Gay	Clerical and administration	Online interview
Michael	20	M	Gay	Hospitality and service work	Face-to-face interview
Trent	21	M	Gay	Manual labour and manufacturing	Online interview
Kat	21	F	Queer	Customer service and retail	Email submission
Aiden	21	M	Queer, bisexual, gay	Hospitality and service work	Email submission
Alexis	21	F	Lesbian	Hospitality and service work	Email submission
Peggie	23	F	Gay, same-sex relationship	Customer service and retail	Face-to-face interview
Ingrid	23	F	Gay	Education, sport and recreation	Face-to-face interview
Moskoe	23	M	Gay	Clerical and administration	Face-to-face interview
Alex	24	F	Queer, dyke, lesbian	Community, health and human services	Online interview
Mia	24	F	Queer, lesbian	Community, health and human services	Online interview
Steven	24	M	Gay	Education, sport and recreation	Online interview
Jack	25	M	Gay	Manual labour and manufacturing	Face-to-face interview
Joseph	25	M	Gay or queer	Public service	Online interview
Bruce	26	M	Gay	Information technologies	Online interview
Nadi	26	F	Bisexual	Community, health and human services	Online interview
Maree	26	F	Gay, lesbian	Customer service and retail	Telephone interview
Jacob	26	M	Gay	Education, sport and recreation	Online interview

[a]These categories are based on participants' descriptions of their work roles and duties in their current or most recent paid employment.

1995) to generate in-depth accounts about young people's work experiences. The theme list was based on recurring themes identified within the literature and from two pilot interviews. Themes included: quality of work relationships; informal work practices; perceptions of management; and formal policies on equal opportunity. Because of geographical distance, one young person participated in a telephone interview following the same format as FTF interviews.

Online interviews required longer periods of engagement because of the additional requirement of having to respond through written text. To ensure consistency across interview methods, I sustained a period of prolonged engagement with online participants. This also assisted in building credible and coherent interview accounts. Online interviews ranged between two and four meetings for an average of 2.5 hours per meeting. Interviews were facilitated through a free-to-download instant messaging programme that provided a platform to meet participants in real time. FTF interviews ran for 1−2 hours in duration and in some cases extended across two meetings. FTF interviews were facilitated with participants living in the researcher's home state in private venues nominated by participants.

The web-based questionnaire contained 11 open-ended questions posted on the website for participants to respond to if they did not wish to participate in an interview. In comparison with hard copy surveys, Trau et al. (2012) conclude that web-based surveys are well-suited for conducting organizational research with invisible and hard-to-reach populations, such as LGBT employees, and can garner higher levels of trust and commitment to participate. The questionnaire contained open-ended questions based on identified themes from the theme list to ensure comparability across methods. Completed surveys were sent to my email account and I then replied with additional clarifying questions to help expand on participants' initial responses. This culminated in a lengthy sequence of discussion via email that in some cases extended over several weeks through email exchange and iterative questioning. Young people's stories gathered through FTF interviews corroborated with the experiences and issues shared through online accounts, indicating consistent threads and initial themes across the three methods.

Interview transcripts and questionnaire responses were returned to participants for their review before the transcripts were analysed thematically. All identifying information, such as names of employers, was removed and participants selected their own pseudonym. A series of coding techniques were applied, from open coding to theoretical coding, with the electronic aid of the computer-assisted data analysis program NVivo7. Coding techniques followed the constructivist grounded theory method detailed by Charmaz (2006); however, the thematic analysis did not adhere to the cyclical approach advocated by grounded theorists. Charmaz builds on Glaser and Straus' approach (1967, cited in Charmaz, 2006) and adopts a more reflexive standpoint that acknowledges the subjective presence of the researcher in data generation. Initial codes were developed through a line-by-line analysis of each transcript. Similar initial codes were then clustered into axial codes. More coherent thematic codes were selected as core themes that told a collective narrative about young workers' experiences and perceptions of relationships in the workplace.

Findings

In this section, I focus on 20 participants' stories of witnessing the verbal exchange of homophobic expressions, comments and humour in the workplace. These stories were selected from the data-set based on three criteria: (i) these stories provided thick description about experiences of witnessing informal exchanges of homophobic commentary in previous or current work-settings; (ii) similar patterns, perceptions and experiences were repeated across other participants' accounts; and (iii) these stories did not detail experiences of discriminatory treatment as a target or victim within the same work setting. Stories about experiences of targeted abuse and discrimination in the workplace are reported elsewhere (Willis, 2009). While located in a diverse range of organizational settings, there were two main threads running through participants' stories − first, their location in work cultures in which they felt isolated as LGBQ employees and second, their location in environments in which they were hesitant to discuss elements of their sexual and intimate lives in fear of receiving hostile responses from other employees or from clients and customers.

Theme 1: Witnesses on the periphery of homophobic exchanges

While participants did not perceive themselves as targets of abuse or discrimination, they did describe themselves as witnesses on the periphery of homophobic conversations. Participants discussed how they had observed and listened to conversations and comments exchanged between staff, and occasionally clients and customers, which compromised their sense of safety at work. Humorous conversations and the exchange of jokes were typically viewed as part of informal work-banter and as a means of fostering good relationships, particularly in male-dominated work environments. However, overhearing humorous exchanges in which lesbian and gay identities were the subject of jokes were agonising moments for LGBQ workers as they recognized facets of their own sexual lives.

During his employment as a kitchen hand, Luke had observed the manager and other male staff joke about the Head Waiter − a gay man from whom Luke had received informal support. Consequently, Luke (19 years) felt pressured to participate in this exchange, while feeling extremely uncomfortable about the subject of ridicule and his own gay identity:

> Luke [FTF interview]: Oh well the stereotypical jokes about like 'Don't be caught in the fridge or the storeroom with him [Head Waiter]!' and just mocking him, because he was pretty flamboyant so just mocking how he walked or how he spoke or how he would deal with situations or customers and stuff like that … I sort of laughed but it made me feel very very uncomfortable …

During a team meeting while employed in a city council as a community project officer, Mia (24 years) had listened to her male manager recount a joke about people living with HIV/AIDS. This was an issue close to Mia's family life, and this mode of joke-telling signalled to Mia that this was not a safe environment to discuss her lesbian identity:

> Mia [online interview]: … we had a team meeting and my manager (male, 65) made a joke about AIDS in a context of health promotion and eating etc. … I was pretty hurt by this as my dad has AIDS and also I felt that these people have no idea of the things some people go through – it's not a distant thing to everyone and of course if he joked about that, what would he say about or think about me being queer.

Unlike Luke's story, Mia was employed in an organization which was not male-dominated and in which homophobic humour was not typical banter. However, like other participants' stories, Mia's account shows the role of senior staff in initiating the exchange of homophobic joke-telling. Fundamentally, these are people whom younger employees may look to as organizational leaders.

Four participants recounted their experiences of being unwilling audience members to the sexualized tales of other staff, typically male staff members. Both Bubbles (19 years) and Luke had been employed in restaurant kitchens and during their employment had frequently listened to the exchange of stories between male co-workers about their sexual prowess and intimate exploits outside of work. Both participants were located in male-majority environments and did not feel confident in sharing stories about their own intimate relationships. Bubbles normalized these stories as 'just the usual' banter but at the same time did not feel comfortable in discussing her own relationships or bisexual identity with the same group of co-workers:

> Bubbles [FTF interview]: … heard a few stories I would have rather not have heard about their [male staff members] sexual adventures because when there's like ten guys working in a kitchen all day they tend to get bored and tell stories … I don't know [laughs], just like women they thought were hot and then slept with and trying to avoid now, and just the usual … [Pause]. It sort of didn't feel comfortable; it didn't feel comfortable joining in with their conversations.

Participants located in male-dominated environments had overheard the routine exchange of violent and homophobic expressions exchanged between male co-workers. Four young men discussed how they felt isolated within highly masculinized environments in which their co-workers engaged in aggressive behaviours, for example, the expression of violent expletives or insults towards each other. This included blue-collar industries such as manufacturing alongside the white-collar industry of corporate finance. While temporarily employed in a manufacturing factory, Jack (25 years) had overhead the exchange of 'anti-gay sentiments' between co-workers:

> Jack [FTF interview]: … I found it really difficult because there was such a strong and very vocal anti-gay sentiment within the workplace … And there probably wasn't a day that there wasn't a comment like 'Fucking faggots, you should kill 'em all!' or some really strong anti-gay sentiment, um and these were all big blokes too [nervous laughter].

Another group of young people had listened to the exchange of homophobic comments between co-workers within the communal environment of the workplace staff-room. This was discussed by four participants − two young people employed in large retail stores and two young people employed as qualified teachers in primary schools. Ingrid (23 years) quickly learnt not to mention her same-sex partner after listening to a conversation between other teachers:

> Ingrid [FTF interview]: … something came up one day, she [colleague] lived with a man and they were in a relationship and his son was gay, and she was speaking about him one day … she said 'Oh if any of my girls [daughters] ever felt like that I don't know what I'd do − I'd have to kick 'em out!'. And just that sort of attitude that you always worry about with your own life and then think − Great! There goes another option of talking to someone and revealing a part of yourself that you'd kind of hoped to.

Three participants employed in retail and service work described how their co-workers would express negative beliefs about lesbian and gay relationships when airing their religious views. These were comments that condemned same-sex relationships as immoral and unnatural from both Christian and Muslim viewpoints. Peggie's co-workers at the photographic shop had frequently expressed their disapproval of lesbians and gay men during work conversations. Consequentially, Peggie (23 years old) was resolute that she was not going to mention her girlfriend at work:

> Peggie [FTF interview]: I think I would have probably become the biggest bitch at work, would have been so frustrated not being able to talk there I would have just been cranky at myself for saying something in the first place … but there's nothing you can do about it, you know, I'm not going to sit there and be in debate with them because I had to work with them …

Participants discussed at length the ways in which their experiences of witnessing homophobic exchanges impacted on the expression of their own sexual identities.

Theme 2: Impact of witnessing − managing LGBQ sexualities at work

Witnessing homophobic exchanges complicated young workers' participation in the workplace. Participants reflected on how these experiences impacted on the ways in which they managed their sexuality at work − the methods through which they regulated their presentation, speech and actions in front of others. Both young men and women described the intricate measures they went through to avoid other employees identifying them as LGBQ individuals. For some participants, careful consideration was given to how much personal information needed to be shared in work conversations, omitting information about same-sex partners. Other participants had used gender-neutral pronouns to disguise their partner's gender or switched the gender of their partner to refer to the different sex.

Male participants employed in male-dominated organizations described how they acted 'straight' to fit in with the normative expectations of other male employees. Heterosexuality was perceived as an identity that could be consciously performed and signified through speech, communicated interests and movements. For a short time, Luke had worked on the coast as a lifesaver with mostly other young men. For Luke, 'playing it straight' meant engaging with other young men's expectations about 'scoring with girls':

> Luke [FTF interview]: … cause neither of the other guys [at work] were seeing girls so it was sort of like, you know, young men always on the lookout for anyway they could get a girl, and especially working on the beach, and that was uncomfortable because it's hard not to look when

there's an attractive person [man] walking past or something like that so your sort of have to keep focused.

A number of participants discussed the use of silence as a protective strategy for keeping LGBQ sexualities hidden from common knowledge. One small group of participants had remained silent about their sexual identities when working with children in fear of negative responses or reprimand from concerned parents and senior staff. This was a concern raised by five participants working with children and adolescents as teachers, support workers or youth workers. Their decision to keep silent in the presence of children was founded on two concerns: first, how parents would respond to knowing that LGBQ employees were working with their children and second, participants' awareness of wider sexual stereotypes, in particular the association of LGBQ individuals with child sexual abuse. Participants were ever mindful of how arising accusations could jeopardise their careers and how they could be potentially positioned as sexual predators or subjects of moral contamination by other staff and parents. While no one had been directly confronted by parental accusations, it was the possibility of facing accusations that had a debilitating effect on their spoken words and actions. This group of participants described how they had altered their actions and movements under the gaze of parents and other staff. As a primary school teacher, Ingrid was deeply concerned about being located on her own with individual children:

Ingrid [FTF interview]: And so I guess I'm conscious of being alone with kids at all, and I mean all teachers really have to be as you know, um but I'm always in sight, I always sit by the window; I try to have more than one person in the room at once, so just automatically … I guess you're just very aware of everything else and your possibly not 100 per cent into what's going on, into what you should be doing.

When undertaking roles of care and responsibility for children, participants felt compelled to erase references to LGBQ sexualities from their everyday speech.

Theme 3: Rejecting and refuting homophobic commentary

Homophobic expressions and comments were not always tolerated by young workers as participants discussed the ways in which they spoke back to homophobia in the workplace by rejecting and refuting homophobic commentary. Participants often rejected the basis or rationale of homophobic beliefs, perceiving homophobic sentiments and stereotypes as archaic, illogical and dispensable. Three young women had dismissed the religious opinions voiced by their co-workers. Participants were not only familiar with these fundamentalist arguments but also the lack of logic contained within these statements:

Bubbles [FTF interview]: I don't know, it seems to me if people would actually think 'Is there anything actually wrong with this?' then logic should say that you come to the conclusion that it [homosexual relationships] is ok, there's nothing wrong with it. But people are still coming to the conclusion that it's weird and freaky and wrong − which has no brain! [Laughs]

Five young people had openly questioned homophobic comments and opinions expressed by other staff members; this strategy was predominately exercised in the third person, in which participants did not refer to their sexual identity. As a waiter, Aiden had openly questioned the homophobic comments voiced by other male staff members working at the restaurant. This was a precarious situation in which Aiden was well aware that questions surrounding his gay identity could arise at any point:

> Aiden [Email exchange]: If I do decide to say something I might say things like, 'Easy does it!', 'That's a bit much, isn't it?', 'Is using that word necessary?', 'They're just like everyone else you know?', 'Who cares man? We're all human' etc… . obviously I wouldn't say something like that to someone who would be likely to reply 'What, are you a poof too?' …

Three young people had challenged the derogatory use of the term 'gay' expressed by children and adolescents in their care and, on some occasions, by co-workers. As part of her role as a teacher, Ingrid described the humorous approach she used to highlight to her students the absurdity of referring to people and objects as 'gay':

> Ingrid [FTF interview]: … you can joke with them and say 'Is that chair attracted to the other one beside it? Is that what you mean?' or make them stand up in front of the class and read the dictionary definition [of 'gay'], but you know at the same time it's still difficult, mainly because if there's other kids in my class that identify as gay or as non-heterosexual in general how are they going to feel?

Ingrid acknowledged that when using this approach in the classroom there was always the impact on other LGBQ-identifying students to consider. Alternatively, observing a teacher challenging homophobic speech expressed by other students could be a highly affirming experience for LGBQ students.

While participants had openly questioned colleagues and students, they did not disclose or refer to their sexuality. This strategy provided a limited degree of protection from targeted abuse. One exception was Trent, who was 'out' to his male co-workers at a chemical warehouse. A number of his co-workers had voiced sexual stereotypes about gay men and in response Trent had sought to challenge their totalizing beliefs: '… the word being gay does not automatically outline a set of behaviours an individual will have. Normally I just bring the point up, "Well am I like that?". And of course they say, "No, but you're different"'. Trent's story is unique because he could challenge the stereotypical views of others through reference to his sexuality and life experiences outside work. However, Trent had also experienced group exclusion and ridicule from his co-workers; these were outcomes other participants had sought to avoid and a situation Trent could not easily ignore or deflect.

No one had attempted to address the homophobic comments expressed by others through formal grievance or complaint procedures. Participants cited a number of reasons for not using formal mechanisms, including feeling deterred by the burden of proof, difficulties in seeking other witnesses and the potential risk to their employment and the way they may be treated in the future. Some participants had difficulty recalling having read organizational policies and protocols that acknowledged diverse staff groups or prohibited sexuality-based discrimination. When several participants did recall equal

opportunities policies that contained references to sexuality, these were often dismissed as ineffectual and insignificant. Based on his experiences in corporate finance, Bruce (26 years) commented on how ineffective these policies were, especially as they were rarely enforced and often given 'lip service' by other staff. Some participants were aware of existing equal opportunities policies; however, the lack of observed compliance to policy rendered these requirements meaningless.

General discussion

Throughout this article, I have sought to shed light on an unexplored topic about the experiences and effects of witnessing the exchange of homophobic commentary in the workplace. The aim of this discussion has been to extend current knowledge about how young LGBQ workers experience, negotiate and respond to homophobic exchanges witnessed in the workplace. The findings presented make a significant contribution to the area by strengthening understanding of the more subtle and covert challenges LGBQ workers can experience in work relationships. Unlike previously reported accounts of targeted abuse and discrimination, participants in this research were located on the periphery of homophobic exchanges. Within the themes reported, there are two prominent threads: first, how witnessing homophobic exchanges can restrict young LGBQ workers from identifying and expressing elements of their sexual identity and place constraints on their work relationships; and second, how witnessing these exchanges can mobilize young LGBQ people to challenge and question homophobic discourse within limited fields.

Identifying discursive violence in the workplace

First and foremost, the findings show how social divisions on the basis of sexuality can be sustained in the workplace through the exchange of homophobic commentary. Through homophobic speech, lesbian and gay sexualities are cast as separate and inferior to heterosexuality as a normative standpoint from which other sexual subjectivities are appraised. The language and expressions exchanged in work relationships, as recalled by participants, position lesbian and gay identities and relationships as sources of moral degradation, ridicule and, in some instances, hate. To this end, participants' accounts highlight how discursive violence can operate in the workplace − informal speech practices through which homophobic beliefs and sentiments are conveyed, from conversations in the staffroom to joke-telling. These practices resonate with Yep's description of discursive violence as the 'words, tone gestures, and images that are used to differentially treat, degrade, pathologize, and represent lesbian and gay experiences' (2002: 170). In particular, the narration of heterosexual men's stories about their sexual exploits, and the notable absence of stories from LGBQ workers about their intimate relationships, illustrates the subtle effects of heteronormativity: the voices of heterosexual workers are amplified over the voices of more marginalized employees.

Previous survey research into lesbian and gay workers' experiences consistently indicates joke-telling and humour as one of the more frequently reported forms of

discriminatory treatment in Australian organizations (Barrett et al., 2011; Irwin, 1999). In previous research, respondents identify themselves as targets of homophobic humour. In the present research, young people identified themselves as reluctant audience members. Like other expressions of discursive violence, the exchange of homophobic humour can reinforce heterosexuality as a normative standpoint and position LGBQ sexualities as the Sexual Other. Joke-telling in work relationships can appear to be innocuous, in good faith and helpful for building rapport with others; however, it can also mask social inequalities and sexual divisions (Ward and Winstanley, 2006). Similarly, Embrick et al. (2007) argue that homophobic humour distances speakers from ideas of sexual abnormality and reaffirms collective solidarity amongst male group-members.

In male-dominated work environments, homophobic expressions were described as overtly hostile in tone towards LGBQ sexualities − these experiences were far from subtle. This suggests that the concept of discursive violence is not applicable to all participants' experiences of witnessing homophobic exchanges. Alternatively, this finding emphasizes the gendered implications of male-dominated work cultures as a site for reproducing homophobic discourse (Embrick et al., 2007). The expression of homophobic violence between male employees can sustain symbolic divisions between male subjectivities on the basis of sexuality − divisions which were felt acutely by younger gay men in this research. For young lesbian and bisexual women in similar work environments their sense of inferiority may be magnified because of their social location as women and non-heterosexual employees.

Ripple effects of witnessing homophobic exchanges

Young LGBQ workers' location as silent audience members brought some protection from direct harm but did not diminish the vicarious effects of exposure to homophobic commentary. In the present study, young LGBQ workers were witnesses to the exchange of homophobic commentary; this proximity could magnify the 'ripple effect' of secondary trauma previously discussed by Noelle (2002). Witnessing these encounters had significant ripple effects as young workers felt compelled to conceal their sexuality through processes of self-vigilance and self-censorship. These are familiar practices for LGBQ youth across other social environments (Hillier et al., 2005) and for LGBQ employees in the workplace (Clair et al., 2005; Ragins et al., 2007). For participants working with children, the fear of being perceived as 'dangerous' employees accompanied them into their early careers. Their anxieties correspond with reported concerns from LGBQ teachers about the risks of being perceived as risky or predatory subjects (Ferfolja, 2010; Gust, 2007; Morrow and Gill, 2003). In the present research, this concern was shared by a number of young people working with children and adolescents, inclusive of teachers. Within schools, lesbian and gay teachers are locked between positions of 'coming out' as a politicized practice vs the occupational hazards attached to being 'out' (Ferfolja, 2007, 2010; Gust, 2007). However, as Ferolja (2007) argues, these positions do not preclude individuals from responding to homophobic discourse.

Speaking back to homophobia in the workplace

The findings show that while young workers within this sample were not immune to the impact of witnessing homophobic exchanges, this did not prevent them from responding to homophobic commentary actively. The present research builds on the evidence presented by Hillier and Harrison (2004) by illustrating young people's capacity to reject and refute the expression of homophobic discourse in work relationships. Participants spoke about keeping silent and remaining invisible as LGBQ subjects – this can be perceived as an active means of protecting themselves and avoiding the sexual stereotyping of other adults and children. Likewise, Ward and Winstanley (2003: 1274) contend that LGBQ employees' silence can be framed as a form of 'passive resistance' rather than a lack of power or agency. Participants' attempts to edit and censor their everyday speech and actions can be interpreted along two lines: as negatively constraining the expression and disclosure of their sexual identity, and as an active means of avoiding the sexual stereotypes and potential hostility of others. However, this strategy leaves the perpetrator's or dominant group's actions unaddressed and limits the scope for LGBQ employees to seek support from others.

Another recurring strategy involved questioning the homophobic expressions of others; this was another means of exercising power. This finding illustrates how witnessing the exchange of homophobic commentary had a counter-effect by mobilizing young people to refute and reject homophobic beliefs. This form of resistance holds theoretical currency with Foucault's description of power networks as always open to contestation – at each point in which power is exercised, there exists a 'plurality of resistances' (1978: 96). Fleming stipulates that resistance to dominant power relations in organizations may not be 'either politically progressive or regressive' (2007: 252) in motivation. In this research, participants' attempts to speak back to homophobic discourse can be viewed in a progressive light because these attempts show young people seeking to deflect negative messages about homosexual subjectivities.

The strength of these strategies lies in young people's capacity to challenge the oppressive discourses expressed by others indirectly without having to identify themselves as LGBQ. There is a limited degree of self-protection that allows small opportunities to trouble and question homophobic speech. Participants' stories also showcase non-adversarial approaches to challenging the comments of others, such as the use of humour; this is a highly resourceful response to potentially volatile situations. However, these opportunities are limited in effect as the person challenging the comments of others can easily become the subject of questioning about their own sexual status and identity. It also remains the sole responsibility of the individual speaking out to challenge others rather than a shared responsibility. Furthermore, there is limited scope for more formal responses as these discriminatory encounters remain unreported and therefore unrecognized and unacknowledged by management.

Implications for enabling change in organizations

The findings present a number of considerations for developing organizational practice and policy and enabling change in organizations. The research highlights the requirement

for equal opportunities and diversity policies to extend beyond recognition of targeted discrimination and to recognize the nuanced ways in which homophobic beliefs and heteronormative attitudes can be woven throughout some work cultures. Informal speech practices can be far more difficult to report through formal mechanisms in comparison with more blatant experiences of targeted abuse or discrimination (Van Laer and Janssens, 2011). Young people in this research indicate barriers to accessing formal grievance and complaint mechanisms and express reservations about the visibility of equal opportunities policies and their implementation into practice. This chimes with the reported accounts of other Australian LGBQ employees who point to perceived gaps between equal opportunities policy and adherence to these frameworks in practice (Aaron and Ragusa, 2011; Barrett et al., 2011). While it is difficult to interpret this finding without closer scrutiny of specific work-sites, it does invite consideration of the efficacy of anti-discrimination policies for responding to peripheral experiences of homophobia. These experiences are hard to report when there is no individual victim to initiate complaints and, as evident in the findings, these practices are seen to be supported by members of management. For young people who are new to organizational environments, these discursive practices may be difficult to identify because they appear to be routinely normalized as everyday workplace banter.

If young workers feel isolated as LGBQ employees, this may further limit their capacity to access formal mechanisms for responding to homophobic speech. This suggests a requirement to promote and protect the rights of employees who witness the exchange of homophobia to reiterate their safety, to encourage witnesses to challenge others (where appropriate), and to report repeated exchanges through clear channels of complaint. This is where LGBT company networks can play an instrumental role in advocating for and providing support to other LGBQ employees in the same organization (Colgan and McKearney, 2012). The research gives further emphasis to the importance of shared responsibility in which all organizational players, including members of management, are invested in identifying and proactively responding to homophobic speech. Martinez and Hebl (2010) likewise emphasize the role of other organizational actors as change agents in supporting and advocating alongside LGBQ employees and networks. On an informal level, there is value in the non-adversarial strategies described by young people to question and refute homophobic commentary. Through a model of mutual learning, there is scope for employers and employees alike to learn from the speech practices deployed by LGBQ workers who have a subjective understanding of the harmful impact of homophobic speech in the workplace.

Limitations and areas for further research

The present study is based on a small non-representative sample that prevents generalizing findings to wider workplace contexts. Participants' social attributes such as ethnicity and income have not been considered; these attributes may shape young LGBQ people's work experiences and capacity to speak back to homophobic discourse. This discussion has evidenced qualitative accounts from a range of organizations and industries and consequently has not provided more tailored analyses of specific fields of work. This remains an important area for future research, particularly for informing the development of local policies that capture and counteract the expression of homophobic

discourse in specific work cultures. The present research has attended to young LGBQ workers' experiences of witnessing homophobic exchanges. Another area to consider is the impact on heterosexual workers, who may also witness the exchange of homophobic commentary, in particular how heterosexual workers seek to challenge and question homophobic speech in work relationships.

Concluding comments

This article has examined the experiences of younger LGBQ workers witnessing the exchange of homophobic messages and humour in their work environments. This is an unchartered area in organizational research, and this discussion makes several significant contributions to the field. On a theoretical level, this research captures how discursive violence is reproduced in the workplace through the exchange of homophobic language and humour. The findings show that while these discursive practices may not be targeted at identified individuals they continue to alienate LGBQ workers and sustain boundaries between heterosexual and homosexual identities in some work environments. In terms of employees' well-being, the findings indicate how witnessing homophobic exchanges can negatively impact on LGBQ workers' actions and place constraints on their relationships with other organizational participants, including co-workers and clients. This potentially compromises their capacity to fulfil their work duties and to build productive working relationships with others. Simultaneously, the discussion highlights how these subtle yet oppressive experiences do not curtail young workers from questioning homophobic discourse. The findings illustrate their capacity to speak back to homophobic speech and as such transcend one-dimensional representations of young LGBQ workers as vulnerable victims or powerless employees. There are limitations to the extent to which young LGBQ workers can challenge others without spotlighting their own sexual identity. To enable organizational change, further developments are required in identifying discursive forms of homophobic violence in workplaces, and strengthening shared responsibility for challenging these oppressive practices.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the encouraging comments and suggestions provided by the reviewers. I would also like to acknowledge the young people who participated in the research − their wisdom and insight is deeply appreciated.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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Paul Willis is Lecturer in Social Work at Swansea University, Wales, UK. His research interests include: equality and social inclusion in the workplace; sexuality, social care and ageing; and the health and well-being of LGBT youth. His work has been published in a number of journals, including *Youth and Society, Journal of Youth Studies, Qualitative Social Work, Educational Research and Evaluation* and *British Journal of Social Work.* For the past three years he has been the Chair of the UK *Sexuality in Social Work Interest Group.* [Email: p.b.willis@swansea.ac.uk]