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Helge Hoel, Duncan Lewis & Anna Einarsdottir

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Duncan Lewis is Professor of Management in the Graduate School of Management, Plymouth University, UK.

Tim Bentley is Professor of Work and Organization in the School of Management, Massey University, New Zealand.

Stephen T. T. Teo is Professor of Work and Performance, Edith Cowan University, Australia.

Debate: Bullying and harassment of lesbians, gay men and bisexual employees: findings from a representative British national study

Helge Hoel, Duncan Lewis and Anna Einarsdottir

Our knowledge about bullying and discrimination in the workplace has grown exponentially over the last decade (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2010). It has been established beyond doubt that a substantial proportion of the working population, varying between 4–20% between studies, is exposed to bullying (for example Zapf *et al.*, 2011), that is, repeated exposure to negative acts, whether work or person-related against which targets find it hard to defend themselves (Einarsen *et al.*, 2011). Bullying had been found to be detrimental to health, wellbeing and job-satisfaction (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2010), with consequences likely to show up on organizations' balance sheets in respect of, *inter alia*, increased absenteeism and turnover rates, and in reduced productivity (Hoel *et al.*, 2011).

With reference to evidence from European studies, it has frequently been claimed that the risk of bullying, particularly for the more intensive and severe incidents experienced often involving social exclusion and ostracism (Nielsen *et al.*, 2015), is higher in the public sector than the private sector, emphasising the high levels of bullying found for those working in public administration, and in the health and social sectors and education (Zapf *et al.*, 2011; Fevre *et al.*, 2012). Still, despite growing knowledge about workplace bullying and its effects in general, relatively little is known about the influence of sexual orientation and the experiences of lesbians, gay men and

bisexual (LGB) employees.

What little has been revealed previously from research, however, paints a bleak picture of realities, with many LGBs reporting negative treatment, such as exposure to verbal abuse and homophobic remarks (ACAS, 2007). Threats of physical abuse have also been reported as have incidences of actual physical violence (Jones *et al.*, 2010). Subtle discrimination may be more widespread (Griffith and Hebl, 2002). In this respect, a study by the UK Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) found that 18% of LGBs reported experiencing 'unfair treatment' at work—a figure double the national average (Grainger and Fitzner, 2007). Furthermore, although not particularly targeted at LGBs, two large-scale UK studies revealed that LGBs were respectively four to five times more likely to be bullied than their heterosexual counterparts (Fevre *et al.*, 2009; 2011).

The representative study reported in this article specifically set out to investigate LGBs' workplace experience of discrimination, bullying and harassment. To properly account for their experience, and given the relatively low base-line of people identifying as lesbians, gay men or bisexuals within the general population, in order to reach a target of 500 LGBs in employment, 73,000 people were screened. Our sample revealed that, when looking at employment sector, heterosexuals were over-represented in the public sector, while lesbians were less likely to work in the public sector. Of the 500 LGB respondents obtained, 147 were gay men, 122 lesbians and 151 bisexuals (40 men and 111 women), with a further 24 identifying themselves as 'other sexual orientation' and 56 as 'unsure'.

In terms of experience of bullying, LGBs were found to be bullied and discriminated against to a far greater extent than heterosexual employees. While 6.4% of heterosexuals reported being bullied over a six month period, the equivalent number for LGBs was much higher, corresponding to 16.9% for lesbians, 19.2% for bisexuals and 13.7% for gay men. When taking the intensity of the experience into consideration, the difference was even more pronounced, with 5.3% of lesbians and 6.6% of bisexual respondents respectively reporting being bullied on a weekly or more frequent basis, compared to 1.4% of heterosexuals and none of the gay men. Altogether, LGBs also reported higher levels of negative behaviour

at work than their heterosexual counterparts (Hoel *et al.*, 2014). As far as the particular nature of this experience was concerned, LGBs were significantly more likely to be exposed to intrusive and sexualized behaviour, such as unwanted banter, jokes or remarks with a sexual undertone, and experiencing unwanted physical contact. They were also more likely to experience social exclusion in the form of being socially excluded from their team and from social activities at work (Hoel *et al.*, 2014).

Taking employment sector into consideration, lesbians, bisexuals, those labelling themselves as 'unsure' and 'other', all reported higher levels of bullying or being exposed to more negative acts in the public sector than in the private sector. The labels 'unsure' and 'other' were included to capture respondents who might be uncertain about their sexuality or for others who might use descriptors such as 'queer' for example.

By contrast, when looking at levels of negative behaviour, the experience of LGBs in the public sector was no different than that reported by LGBs in the private sector. This discrepancy might suggest that lesbians and bisexuals in the public sector are more sensitive to their experience, possibly arriving earlier at the conclusion that they have been bullied than they would do in the private sector. Equally, with public sector organizations more likely to draw attention to the issue, including having in place a bullying policy (see Beale and Hoel, 2010), employees may be altogether more prepared to apply the label of bullying to their own experience. Furthermore, given the traditional, often greater focus on equality and diversity within the UK public sector, which is reinforced by changes to employers' duties *vis-à-vis* protected groups (Equality Act, 2010 and the specific requirement to promote equalities within public sector workplaces), there might be greater expectations within the public sector of being treated in a decent and dignified manner and on addressing behaviours that can harm employees. As our data on employment sector suggests that LGBs are more attracted to work in the public than in the private sector, greater attention to equality and diversity may be one factor which contributes to presenting the public sector as a safe place to work for LGBs and contributing to raising expectations of fair treatment. However, as our results show, many public organizations have still work to do before such perceived

safety may become a reality for LGBs. In this respect we point particularly to the need for training and education. From our focus group discussions with heterosexuals in our six case studies, which formed a key element of our study, it became apparent that line-managers often left it to LGBs to set their own boundaries with respect to negative and undignified behaviour, often being reluctant to intervene. These findings highlight that such education should start with management and management responsibilities.

Altogether, our findings confirm that despite substantial progress being made to public attitudes to homosexuality in many western countries, including the UK (Park *et al.*, 2013), prejudices and social stigma associated with non-heterosexuality continue to affect the working experience of many LGBs. In this respect, one must bear in mind that homosexuality was considered a mental illness according to the American Psychiatric Association as late as the early 1970s (Meyer, 2003) and homosexuals continue to be criminalized in large parts of the world. Moreover, in order to explain why negative attitudes and behaviour towards protected groups such as lesbians, gay men and bisexuals continue to blight LGBs' working experience despite legislative protection, the role of unconscious biases and negative attitudes towards previously stigmatized groups such as LGBs may survive in people's memory and continue to affect behaviour, particularly where there is a process of self-rationalization (Di Marco *et al.*, in press; Jones *et al.*, 2016).

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Helge Hoel is Professor in Organizational Behaviour, University of Manchester, UK.

Duncan Lewis is Professor of Management in the Graduate School of Management, Plymouth University, UK.

Anna Einarsdottir is Senior Lecturer in OBTT, University of York, UK.