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Witnesses on the periphery: Young LGBQ employees witnessing

homophobic exchanges in Australian organisations.

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Abstract

Social divisions on the basis of sexuality are continually reinforced and contested in organisational environments. Previous studies discuss the workplace as a problematic space for lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer-identifying (LGBQ) workers. In this paper, I examine young workers' experiences of witnessing the exchange of homophobic expressions, commentary and humour in the workplace. Qualitative findings are presented from an exploratory study of young LGBQ people's experiences in Australian organisations. Three core themes are discussed: 1) young workers location as periphery witnesses to homophobic exchanges, discussions and humour; 2) the constraints experienced by young LGBQ workers in having to 'manage' their sexuality at work; and, 3) 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 mobilise young workers to question homophobic discourse.

Key words

Workplace, sexuality, young workers, homophobia, heteronormativity

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 individual employees as targets or victims—it may also be experienced through witnessing the negative

treatment of others or overhearing negative commentary that resonates with elements of the individual's personal and social identity. This paper focuses on the experience and impact of witnessing homophobic discussions and exchanges in Australian workplaces as expressions of discursive violence which can be covert, taken-for-granted and hard to identify. Everyday experiences of subtle discrimination in which there are no obvious targets or intentions are far more difficult to identify and address in organisations (Van Laer and Janssens, 2011).

'First-wave' research into LGBQ employees' experiences of organisational life has established a body of research that explores and details self-reported experiences of discrimination, harassment and bullying in the workplaces on the basis of sexual difference (Ozturk, 2011). An area that appears to remain unexplored within this body of research is an examination of the experiences and effects of witnessing the discriminatory treatment of others or being third party to the exchange of homophobic discourse in organisations. This paper responds to this caveat by providing a fine-grained analysis of LGBQ employee's experiences of witnessing the exchange of homophobic discourse. In particular, this paper focuses on the work-experiences of young LGBQ-identifying workers as new players in the field of paid employment. 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 from which 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, commentary and humour. To achieve this aim, I report and discuss qualitative findings developed from an exploratory study into young LGBQ[i] people's stories of workplace participation across a range of organisations.

Conducted between 2005 and 2006, the research focussed on young workers (18-26 years) who were engaged in paid employment on either a fixed (full-time and part-time) or non-fixed basis (casual employment). Based on the findings, I discuss how witnessing homophobic exchanges and commentary from the periphery of these informal discussions can simultaneously constrain young LGBQ workers' expressions of sexuality as well as mobilise young workers to refute and reject homophobic discourse. For the purpose of this discussion, 'witnessing' refers to observing and overhearing verbal exchanges and discussions in which non-heterosexual subjectivities are represented in a negative or denigrating light. When witnessing homophobic exchanges, LGBQ workers may not be the intended victim however may locate their own identities as topics of denigration and ridicule.

This paper is organised 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 organisations.

Background to the research

Negotiating LGBQ sexualities at work: Homophobic encounters in the workplace

There is growing recognition in sociological and organisational literature that workplaces are sexualised environments in which workers negotiate different, and sometimes conflicting, sexual expressions, values and 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 theorised as a signifier of sexualised and gendered imagery and norms (McDowell, 2004). For non-heterosexual workers, the workplace can be experienced as a problematic environment—this is evident in early studies, or 'first-wave'

research, into LGBQ workers' reported experiences of abuse and discrimination (Ozturk, 2011; Williams and Giuffre, 2011). Authors from economically advantaged nations such as Australia, 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 emerged from developing nations such as Turkey (Ozturk, 2011). More recently, a second wave of research has begun to examine the complexities of implementing equality measures and initiating LGBQ employee-led networks for enabling change in both public and private organisations (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 elaborated on the means through which homophobic beliefs and expressions are conveyed in work-relationships: — through direct and indirect acts of discrimination (Drydakis, 2009; Irwin, 1999); verbal, physical and sexual abuse (Barrett et al., 2011; Colgan et al., 2006); and, through 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 organisational 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 LGB employees give high regard to LGB company networks as instrumental means of keeping issues of equality and sexuality on the corporate agenda (Colgan and McKearney,

2012). However, employee-led strategies and initiatives need to be balanced against recognition of the variations in organisational cultures and climates.

Organisational literature indicates variations across workplace cultures, spaces and occupations in the ways in which homophobic discourse is expressed and condoned. In relation to 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 sexualised humour in engineering industries fosters a culture of belonging for men by emphasising the inferiority of 'women, homosexuals, and marginalised racial or ethnic groups' (147). In another occupational setting, lesbian and gay teachers have discussed how they learn to 'manage' and conceal their sexuality within school environments for fear of harassment from students and staff or being perceived as sexually dangerous subjects (Ferfolja, 2007, 2010; Gust, 2007; Morrow and Gill, 2003). Ferfolja (2007) contends that these occupational tensions generate unique stressors for lesbian teachers in 'managing' their sexualities in schools and keeping silent about their social and intimate lives.

A small number of studies have touched on young LGBQ workers' experiences and indicate some overarching themes in this field. Emslie's (1998) short case study of young lesbian and gay workers in Australia suggests that isolation and hiding are two common themes for LGBQ youth. The third national survey of LGBQ youth in Australia briefly indicates that 17% 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 qualitative 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. Conversely, participants

who described 'coming out' early in their careers were often located in organisations in which equal opportunity (EO) policies were 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 and maintained 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, 2011; Ward and Winstanley, 2003). Discussions of sexuality and power in organisational research frequently waver between the conceptualisation of sexuality as a mechanism of control or as an active means of resistance to dominant organisational norms and cultures. Fleming (2007) proposes that it is a 'multi-levelled combination of both' (252) as staff and management members alike continually negotiate power relations of control and resistance across different sexually coded positions. In this discussion, I adopt Burrell and Hearn's (1989) discussion of power as a relational force that underpins and constitutes workplace relationships.

Based on Michel Foucault's work, Burrell and Hearn (1989: 15) argue that power, like sexuality, is not individual possession brought into the workplace from the outside world. Alternatively, power relations are constructed, contested and negotiated within work-

contexts (Burrell and Hearn, 1989). Relational in this context refers to power being ever-present and always in flux and negotiation in human relationships. Foucault (1978) emphasises 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 been extended to recognise the social and structural dimensions that bolster homophobic attitudes. More recent authors discuss homophobia as the institutional practices, social attitudes and individual actions that express 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 to the reporting of other people's experiences of hate crime can generate responses of vicarious trauma amongst individuals who share a similar sexual membership. 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 a 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 (2004) discuss how LGBQ youth 'find the fault lines' (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. Discourse is in reference to the language practices which shape the ways in which individuals understand and act upon social reality (Ward and Winstanley, 2003). While agency can only be exercised within limited situations, 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 societies that reinforces the privileged status of heterosexuality through unspoken assumptions of heterosexual relations as 'natural' and 'normal' (Berlant and Warner, 1998). 'Heterosexual experience' is equated with 'human experience' and all other forms of sexual expression and relationships are perceived as either 'invisible' or 'deviant' (Yep, 2002: 167). Yep (2002) identifies heteronormativity as a mode of violence 'deeply embedded in our individual and group psyches, social relations, identities, social institutions, and cultural landscapes' (168). Bruni (2006) argues that heterosexuality maintains its privileged status within organisations through a process of 'cathexis': the 'skilful social process of ordering bodies, sexualities, desires, symbols, discourses and artefacts into a coherent arrangement' (313). The informal social ordering of individuals in organisational cultures gives heterosexuality a naturalised and normalised status.

In seeking to interrogate the 'mechanisms of power' that sustains heteronormative logic, Yep (2002) describes the effects of 'discursive violence': 'The words, tone gestures, and images that are used to differentially treat, degrade, pathologise, and represent lesbian and gay experiences' (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 social differences on the basis of sexuality and reinforce heterosexuality as the invisible norm. To this extent, 'discursive violence' encapsulates the subtle everyday expressions, gestures, and comments that continually differentiate between heterosexual and non-heterosexual bodies.

Legal and national context to the research

The research participants were located across the 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% of casual employees aged 15-24 years (ABS, 2009). Younger workers are also disproportionally represented 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 bases 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 EO legislation that includes sexual orientation, recent research suggests these legal frameworks are not being adhered to in organisational 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 lawfully discriminate 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 organisations 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 to 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 organisations. A non-representative sample was generated using a purposive sampling approach. The research was advertised through a range of recruitment sources to ensure a diverse sample across age, employment, 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 readers to a central website which invited LGBQ-identifying/ non-heterosexual individuals to

discuss their experiences of the workplace, both positive and negative. Participants tended to speak more prominently about negative experiences at work which may highlight research participation as a remedial process for sharing oppressive narratives about work-relationships.

Overall, 34 young people (18-26 years) participated in the research—in this paper, 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 sub-group, there is almost an equal divide between women (9) men (11) and the age range is 19-26 years. Table 1 outlines key information about the participants discussed in this paper, including their gender, self-descriptions of sexuality and identified work industries. 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 employee's experiences that cut across industries and occupations.

[Inset Table 1about here]

Methods of data generation and analysis

Primary data was gathered through three qualitative methods: online interviews, face-to-face interviews; and web-based questionnaires posted online for self-completion. Each person's method of participation is identified in Table 1. Online methods were utilised 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 due to geographical distance. Both face-to-face (FTF) and online interviews adhered to the same theme list and followed a focussed, active interview approach

(Holstein and Gubrium, 1995) to generate in-depth reflections about young people's work-experiences. The theme list was based on recurring themes identified from the literature and from two pilot interviews. Themes included: quality of work-relationships, informal practices in the workplace, perceptions of management, and formal policies on equal opportunity. Due to 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 to 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 suggested 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 to hard copy surveys, Trau et al. (2012) conclude that web-based surveys are well-suited for conducting organisational 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 the researcher's email account and additional clarifying questions were sent via email to participants to expand on their initial responses. This culminated in a lengthy sequence of email discussions 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 and email transcripts 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 a pseudonym to prevent identification. A series of coding techniques were applied, from open coding to theoretical coding, with the electronic aid of the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program *NVivo7*. Coding techniques followed the constructivist ground theory method detailed by Charmaz (2006) however the thematic analysis did not adhere to the cyclical approach advocated by grounded theorists. Charmaz draws 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 formulated through a line-by-line analysis of each transcript and then clustered into axial codes. More coherent thematic codes were selected as core themes that detailed a collective narrative about young worker's experiences, perceptions and meanings.

Findings

In this section, I focus on 20 participants' stories of witnessing the verbal exchange of homophobic expressions, commentary and humour in the workplace. These stories were selected from the data-set based on three criteria: i) 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 experiencing

targeted abuse and discrimination in different work-settings are reported elsewhere (Willis, 2009). While located in a diverse range of organisational settings, there were two main threads running through participants' stories—their location in work environments in which they felt isolated as LGBQ employees or had little contact with other LGBQ-identifying employees, and, their location in environments in which they were hesitant to discuss their sexual identity or intimate relationships in fear of hostile responses from other workplace participants.

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 customers and clients, which compromised their sense of safety at work as LGBQ-identifying employees. Humorous conversations and the exchange of jokes were typically perceived as part of informal work-banter and as a means of fostering good relationships, particularly so 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 recognised facets of their own sexual biographies. During his employment as a kitchen hand in a restaurant, Luke had observed the manager and other male staff joke about the Head Waiter—a gay man that Luke had received informal support from. Consequently, Luke (19 years) felt pressured to participate in this exchange despite feeling a high level of discomfort 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...

While employed in a city council as a community project officer, Mia (24 years) had watched her male manager recount a joke about people living with HIV/AIDS during a team meeting. This issue was close to Mia's family life; 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 organisation which was not male-dominated and in which homophobic humour was not typical workplace banter. However, like other participants' stories, Mia's account shows the role of senior staff in initiating the exchange of homophobic humour. Fundamentally, these are people who younger employees may look to as organisational leaders.

Four participants recounted their experiences of being unwilling audience members to the sexualised tales of other staff as male staff members re-told exaggerated stories about their sexual prowess in heterosexual relationships. While both working in restaurant kitchens, Bubbles (19 years) and Luke overheard the exchange of stories about employees' sexual 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. While Bubbles

normalised these stories as 'just the usual' banter, at the same time she did not feel comfortable in discussing her own relationships or bisexual identity amongst the same group:

> 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 between male co-workers. Four young men discussed their feelings of detachment from highly masculinised environments in which men engaged in aggressive behaviours, for example the expression of violent expletives directed at each other. This included blue-collar industries such as manufacturing alongside white-collar industries such as 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 observed the exchange of homophobic comments during informal conversations between co-workers. The staffroom was a shared space in which participants had overheard homophobic conversations between other staff. 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 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 young women employed in retail and service work described how their co-workers would express homophobic beliefs when discussing their religious views. These were comments that condemned homosexual identities and relationships as immoral and unnatural from both Christian and Muslim viewpoints. Peggie's (23 years) co-workers at the photographic shop had frequently expressed their disapproval of lesbians and gay men during work conversations. Consequentially, Peggie was resolute that she was not going to mention her girlfriend:

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

Being a periphery witness to 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. Both young men and women described intricate processes 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 or their romantic lives. 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.

For participants working in male-dominated organisations, it was imperative to keep LGBQ sexualities invisible. Male participants described how they acted 'straight' in front of co-workers 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 beachfront as a lifesaver with mostly male co-workers. 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 focussed.

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 LGBQ identities when working with children in fear of negative responses from children or reprimand from concerned parents and senior staff. This was a concern raised by five participants located across several occupations including teaching, residential support and youth work. Their decision to remain silent in the presence of children and adolescents 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 and moral misconduct. 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 members. As a primary school teacher, Ingrid was deeply concerned about being situated 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% into what's going on, into what you should be doing.

In assuming positions of care and responsibility with children, participants felt compelled to erase references to LGBQ sexualities from their everyday speech.

Theme 3: Rejecting and refuting homophobic commentary

Homophobic expressions and commentary 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 and expressions. 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 of moral condemnation voiced by their co-workers. Participants were not only familiar with these fundamentalist arguments but also the lack of logic contained within these statements. From Bubble's perspective, these arguments lacked insight and logic:

> 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 speech and comments expressed by other staff members; this strategy was predominately exercised in 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 working at the restaurant. This was a precarious situation in which Aiden was 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?' or 'What are you, some kind of poofta?'…

Three young people had challenged the derogatory use of the term 'gay' expressed by children and adolescents in their care and, on occasion, by co-workers. In her role as a teacher, Ingrid described the more 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 deploying this approach in the classroom there is always the impact on other LGBQ-identifying students to consider. It could also be interpreted as an affirmative experience to observe another individual speaking out against homophobic comments, or in Ingrid's case, a teacher challenging homophobic speech through a voice of authority.

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' in his workplace at a chemical warehouse. In response to the sexual stereotypes expressed by his male co-workers, Trent had sought to challenge their totalising beliefs about gay men: '…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 exceptional because he could challenge the stereotypical views of others through reference

to his same-sex relationship and life-experiences outside of work. However, Trent had also experienced group exclusion and ridicule from his co-workers; these were outcomes others had actively sought to avoid and a situation Trent could not easily deflect or ignore.

No-one had attempted to address the homophobic commentary 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 organisational policies and protocols that formally acknowledged diverse staff groups or prohibited sexuality-based discrimination. When several participants did recall EO 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 employees. Some participants were aware of existing EO policies however the lack of observed compliance to EO principles rendered these requirements meaningless.

General Discussion

In this paper, 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. In doing so, the aim of this discussion has been to extend current knowledge about how young LGBQ workers experience, negotiate and respond to homophobic discourse in the workplace. Through a qualitative approach, this research makes a significant contribution to the area by strengthening understanding of the more subtle and covert challenges LGBQ workers may 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. However, this does not detract from the impact and effects of witnessing these oppressive exchanges, as evident in the findings. Within the themes reported, there are two prominent threads– first, how witnessing homophobic exchanges can restrict young workers from identifying and expressing elements of their sexual identity and place constraints on their work-relationships, and second, how witnessing these exchanges can mobilise young people to challenge and question homophobic discourse within limited fields.

Identifying discursive violence in the workplace

First and foremost, the findings show how lines of sexuality-based division are established through the exchange of homophobic commentary in work-relationships. Through homophobic speech, lesbian and gay sexualities are cast as separate and inferior to heterosexuality as a normative standpoint from which other sexualities 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 group joke-telling. These practices resonate with Yep's (2002) description of discursive violence as the 'words, tone gestures, and images that are used to differentially treat, degrade, pathologise, and represent lesbian and gay experiences' (170). In particular, the narration of heterosexual men's stories about their sexual exploits, and the notable absence of equivalent stories about LGBQ workers' relationships, illustrates the subtle effects of heteronormativity by amplifying the voices of some workers in higher positions of social privilege over the voices of more marginalised employees.

Previous survey research of lesbian and gay workers consistently indicates joke-telling and humour as one of the more frequently reported forms of discriminatory treatment in Australian organisations (Irwin, 1999, Barrett et al., 2011) in which 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. Humour and joke-telling has functional elements in work-relationships, for example rapport-building, that can mask social inequalities expressed through joke-telling (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 emphasises 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 acutely felt by younger gay men in this research. For young lesbian and bisexual women in similar work-environments their sense of inferiority may be twice magnified through their location as women and non-heterosexual employees.

Ripple effects of witnessing homophobic exchanges

Young LGBQ workers' location as silent audience members bought 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 and cloak their sexuality through processes of self-vigilance and self-censorship. These are familiar practices for LGBQ youth across other social settings (Hillier et al., 2005) and for LGBQ workers (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 as teachers and youth workers. 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 youth, inclusive of teachers. Within schools, lesbian and gay teachers are locked between positions of 'coming out' as a politicised practice versus 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 in this sample-group were not immune to the impact of witnessing homophobic exchanges, this did not prevent them from actively responding to homophobic commentary. Young people felt able to speak back to homophobic expressions in organisational environments within limited boundaries. 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. As a first strategy, 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 employee's silence can be interpreted as an form of 'passive resistance' rather than a lack of power or agency. In this sense, participants attempts to edit and censor their everyday speech and actions can be interpreted along two parallel 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 and validation from others.

A second recurring strategy involved openly questioning the homophobic expressions of others; this was another means of exercising power. This finding illustrates how observed exchanges of homophobic commentary had a counter-effect in mobilising some 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' (Foucault, 1978, p. 96). Fleming (2007) further stipulates that resistance to dominant power relations in organisations may not be 'either politically progressive or regressive' (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 lie in young people's capacity to challenge the oppressive discourses voiced by others indirectly without having to identify themselves as LGBQ. There is a limited degree of self-protection which presents small opportunities to trouble and question homophobic speech. Participants' stories showcase non-adversarial approaches such as the use of humour to challenge the comments of others; 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. In this sense, it is a precarious position to be located in. It also remains the sole responsibility of individuals speaking out to challenge others rather than a shared responsibility. Furthermore, there is limited scope for formal responses to homophobic exchanges as these encounters remain unreported, as evident in the findings, and therefore unrecognized and unacknowledged by management.

Implications for enabling change in organisations

The findings present a number of considerations for developing organisational practice and policy and enabling change in organisations. The research highlights the requirement for EO and diversity policies to extend beyond responding to reports of targeted discrimination and to more definitively recognise the nuanced ways in which homophobic beliefs and heteronormative attitudes can be sustained in some work- cultures. Informal speech practices can be far more difficult to report through formal mechanisms in comparison to blatant incidences of targeted abuse or discrimination (Van Laer and Janssens, 2011). Young people in this research indicate barriers to utilising formal grievance and complaint mechanisms and express reservations about the visibility of EO policies and their implementation into practice. This chimes with the reported accounts of other Australian LGBQ employees who point to perceived gaps between EO law and 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 organisational environments, these discursive practices may be difficult to identify because they appear to be routinely normalised as everyday workplace banter.

When young workers are feeling isolated as LGBQ employees, this may further limit their capacity to access formal mechanisms for responding to homophobic speech. This indicates a requirement to promote and protect the rights of employees who witness the exchange of homophobia to reiterate their safety and to encourage witnesses to challenge others, where appropriate, and to report repeated exchanges through clear channels of complaint. The research gives further emphasis to the importance of shared responsibility in which all organisational players, including members of management, are invested in identifying and speaking out against homophobic speech. Similarly Martinez and Hebl (2010) emphasise the role of other organisational 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 discussed by young people to question and refute homophobic expressions. 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 generalising 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 industries and organisations and consequently

has not provided more tailored analyses of specific industries and occupations. This remains a key area for future research, particularly for informing the development of local policies that capture and counter-act 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 be unwilling audiences to homophobic commentary and how heterosexual workers exercise agency in questioning homophobic speech.

Concluding comments

This paper 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 organisational 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 work-environments. In terms of employees' wellbeing, the findings indicate how witnessing homophobic exchanges can negatively impact on LGBQ workers actions and place constraints around their relationships with other organisational participants, including co-workers and children. This potentially compromises their capacity to fulfil their work-duties and build working relationships with others. Simultaneously, the discussion highlights how these subtle yet oppressive experiences do not curtail young workers from questioning homophobic discourse. The research illustrates their capacity to speak back to homophobic speech and as such transcend monolithic representations of young LGBQ workers as vulnerable victims or powerless employees. There are evident limitations to the

extent to which young LGBQ workers can challenge others without spotlighting their own sexual identity. To enable organisational change, further developments are required in first, identifying and recognising discursive forms of homophobic violence in workplaces and second, bolstering shared responsibility for challenging these oppressive practices.

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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[ii]

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 & 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 & 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

[i] When invited to describe their sexuality, the majority of participants referred to lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer identities, hence the abbreviation 'LGBQ' is used throughout this paper.

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