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TITLE: Connecting, supporting, colliding—the work-based interactions of young
LGBQ-identifying workers and older queer colleagues.

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ABSTRACT

While attention has been given to older employees’ experiences of sexuality-based discrimination and harassment, this paper explores young lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer-identifying (LGBQ) employees’ (18-26 years) accounts of working with queer co-workers and managers in Australian workplaces. Two sets of relationships are evidenced and discussed: 1) relationships of connection, affirmation and support, and 2) relationships of conflict and division. These relationships highlight the multiple points of difference in organisational power and social status between younger and older LGBQ-identifying employees. This sparks a critical appraisal of the limitations of LGBQ employee groups and networks as a strategy for developing inclusive organisations.
INTRODUCTION

The workplace is arguably far more than a site of paid employment and income generation—it also functions as a social space for connecting to significant others, developing notions of citizenship, and engaging in meaningful employment. For non-heterosexual workers the workplace can represent a space of social division, oppression and exclusion founded on sexual hierarchies spanning across work-cultures (Asquith, 1999; Badgett, 1996; Colgan, Creegan, Mc Kearney & Wright, 2006; Humphrey, 1999; Hunt & Dick, 2008; Irwin, 1999; Levine & Leonard, 1984; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Ragins, Cornwell & Miller, 2003; Russ, Simonds & Hunt, 2002; Smith & Ingram, 2004; Taylor & Raeburn, 1995; Waldo, 1999; Ward & Winstanley, 2003; Woods & Lucas, 1993). The collective storyline threaded throughout these studies highlights the interpersonal, financial and institutional challenges faced by non-heterosexual workers across industry and occupation. These challenges vary between work-cultures, occupational settings and work-relationships, from overt experiences of homophobic abuse and discrimination through to more subtle expressions of heterosexist assumptions and beliefs.

This paper concentrates on young people’s vocational experiences within the workplace as a central site of production, human organisation and paid employment. The primary focus is on younger lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer-identifying (LGBQ) workers (18 to 26 years). Young workers are economically vulnerable because they are ‘newcomers’ to a labour market which is increasingly casualised, fragmented and destandardized both in Australia (Burgess & Connell, 2005; White & Wyn, 2008) and in the wider global market (Beck, 2000; Sennett, 1999). Furthermore, young LGBQ people have received scant attention in the workplace and sexuality literature. The few research studies from the UK and Australia that do focus on this cohort suggest that lesbian and
gay youth anticipate and experience discriminatory treatment in their work-relationships (Colgan et al, 2006; Emslie, 1999; Hillier, Turner & Mitchell, 2005).

In previous discussions, the author has explored the exclusionary and inclusive practices and cultures young LGBQ workers can encounter in Australian workplaces (Willis, 2009a, 2009b). In this paper, critical attention is given to the relationships young LGBQ people share with other queer employees, spanning relationships of both connection and conflict. This discussion draws on qualitative data generated from a wider study investigating how young people negotiate LGBQ sexualities across a variety of Australian workplaces and industries. The purpose of this paper is to engender critical thinking of sexuality as an assumed source of support and commonality and to reposition the role of queer peers in providing mentorship to younger LGBQ employees. This paper also illuminates some of the stressors and strengths young employees can encounter in negotiating the politics of sexually diverse and queer-majority workspaces.

This discussion is developed across four sections. In the first section, theoretical arguments centred on sexuality as a basis for collective identity and commonality are considered before turning to the empirical literature on social inclusion, sexuality and the role of queer employees in facilitating change. Then, a summary of the research design and selected qualitative methods is provided. This is followed by an outline of the key findings that describe young people’s varied relationships with older queer employees and perceived patterns of inequality and inclusion. Finally, the theoretical and practice-based implications for developing inclusive workplaces are discussed.

**BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH**

*Theorising sexuality as a source of cohesion and division*

Sexuality as a source of cohesion and division has been a contested topic for theoretical debate in historical, cultural, and sociological studies. Within the sociological literature,
sexuality is recognised as a divisive social hierarchy in Western worlds (Scott & Jackson, 2000), as well as a basis for political affiliation and civil change (Burkitt, 1998; Kirsch, 2006). Jeffrey Weeks (2003a) emphasises how sexuality, politics and power are irrevocably enmeshed as sexualities are a ‘product of negotiation, struggle and human agency’ (p. 19). According to Michel Foucault (1978), sexuality represents a framework of social and political regulation and institutional intervention in Western societies.

Developing a historical analysis, Foucault (1978) discussed the science of sexuality (or scientia sexualis) as an expert knowledge-base that came into fruition in the nineteenth century through institutionalised methods for charting and regulating the erotic body.

From this framework of knowledge, a series of culturally-circulated identity statements have evolved that continue to inform modern constructions of individual life-narratives (Pini, 1997).

Identifying statements, such as ‘I am gay’, constitute the individual embodiment of normative ideas about essentialised sexualities. Essentialist perspectives situate sexuality as a fixed human quality: sexuality is premised as a natural and universal force, which denies the social and cultural significance of sexual relationships (Rubin, 1984). Essentialist ideas are reflected in the identity-based politics of the lesbian and gay rights movement in the 1980s as lesbian and gay activists assumed an ethnic model of identity that mirrored the appearance of other minority collectives in clamouring for civil rights (Epstein, 1998). Underpinning the notion of collective ethnicity is the assumption that lesbians and gays share ‘the same fixed, natural essence, a self with same-sex desires’ (Gamson, 1995, p. 391).

From a poststructuralist position, Judith Butler (1990, 1991) has sought to ‘trouble’ the apparent stability, essentialism and coherence of sexual identity categories. Butler (1991) repositions identity categories as ‘instruments of regulatory regimes’ (p. 13) that produce cultural templates on how the sexual self should be and act in the social
world. In this sense, identity categories function as totalising templates that can deny individual differences across other social systems of power. Echoing Butler’s concerns, queer theorists have expressed wariness of sexual and gender identities as master categories that constrain the expression of individual life-experiences and differences (Sedgwick, 1990; Yep, 2003).

Simultaneously, authors in the social sciences have argued that identity categories can produce social collectives for facilitating political agency (Burkitt, 1998; Kirsch, 2006). This is evident in the 1970’s liberationist movement in which gay identities were firmly ‘embedded in the legitimation and gay liberation ethos’ (Grierson & Smith, 2005, p. 54). Social collectives are rooted in political and personal alignments with identity markers and have been fundamental to achieving social and legal change (McPhail, 2004). Weeks (2003b) proposes that identity-narratives bring a sense of coherence to individual lives and enable the expression of values and morals collectively shared with others. While identity categories may be fictitious, they can be reconceived, as Weeks (2003b) describes, as ‘necessary fictions’ in cultivating a sense of belonging and recognition.

Arguably, LGBQ identities resonate with many same-sex attracted young people in Australia (Hillier et al, 2005). However, sexual identity may not always be the definitive feature of their biographies as LGBQ young people negotiate multiple social identities across gendered, classed and ethnic lines (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2000). Young people’s patterns of self-disclosing LGBQ identities suggest that friends and peers are preferred candidates, followed by family members (Hillier et al, 2005). ‘Naming’ LGBQ identities to significant others, such as family members, can be a highly distressing process with potentially violent repercussions ensuing post-disclosure (D’Augelli, Hershberger & Pilkington, 1998; Telford, 2003).
From early adolescence, many young queer people learn to conceal LGBQ identities in response to the pervasiveness of heterosexual presumption and the potential threat of homophobic hostility (Britzman, 1997; Emslie, 1999; Hillier et al, 2005). Homophobic violence is an everyday reality for many young LGBQ people in Australian society. From the second national survey of same-sex attracted youth, 44% of 1,749 respondents (aged 14–21) reported experiences of verbal abuse, including name-calling and insults. Fifteen percent (15%) of respondents reported physical abuse perpetrated on the basis of sexuality (Hillier et al 2005, p. 37). Consequently, the practices of concealment young people undertake to hide non-normative identities can weaken young queer people’s sense of self-worth and impair their capacity to build support networks (D’Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger, 2002; Emslie, 1999; Poteat, 2007). While some young people may continue to hide LGBQ identities in paid employment, this does not prevent young workers from establishing support networks through other LGBQ-identifying colleagues. The present study focuses on the potential for queer colleagues to provide support and sexual affirmation for younger workers engaged in formal (taxed) waged employment.

The development of sexually inclusive work-environments

Workplace studies detail numerous measures for developing inclusive work-environments in which LGBQ-identifying workers frequently play a pivotal role as an educational resource and source of peer support. Lesbian and gay speaker bureaus or guest speakers have been flagged as a valuable training resource in the delivery of education on workplace diversity (Creed & Scully, 2000; McNaught, 1997). Creed & Scully (2000) argue that the deployment of identity through speaking practices such as disclosure and dialogue can be instrumental in achieving interpersonal and attitudinal change. This measure must be cautiously balanced against the danger of speakers...
recycling formulaic ‘coming out’ stories that do not recognise the diversity of individual life-experiences (Crawley & Broad, 2004).

Measures for enhancing inclusion and equal opportunity on the grounds of sexuality may depend on the visible presence of LGBQ-identifying workers, for instance, through the active appointment of queer-identifying managers or through the establishment of LGBQ and transgender groups and trade union networks (Button, 2001; Colgan, Creegan, McKearney & Wright, 2007; Poverny, 2000). Colgan et al (2007) identify the establishment of LGBQ and transgender networks as a measure of ‘good practice’ in ensuring equality in workplace relations, alongside other measures such as the sponsorship of external queer-related events and representation in internal diversity teams. Githens and Argon (2009) point to the varying foci of LGBQ and transgender employee groups, from a more radical social change agenda that encompasses workplace relations to a more conservative focus on addressing organisational effectiveness. On an interpersonal level, friendships between gay men at work can foster feelings of belonging while validating their presence as non-heterosexual employees (Rumens, 2008).

Following on from his discussion of gay men’s friendships at work, Rumens (2008) calls for further exploration into how queer employees relate to each other in organisational settings.

LGBQ and transgender networks and trade union groups can fulfil pivotal functions including offering social support, facilitating the development and implementation of policy, and providing a voice in the negotiation of equitable workplace relations (Colgan et al, 2006). Concerns have been raised by UK employees that LGBQ groups and networks are typically staffed by gay men in professional and managerial roles. Representatives can lack insight in articulating the needs of lesbian-identifying women, workers with disabilities or employees in manual labour-based occupations.
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(Colgan et al, 2006). They may also be inaccessible to queer employees who are not ‘out’ at work.

Despite the attention given to the development of sexually-inclusive work-cultures, little consideration has been given to the experiences of younger queer workers as new entrants to the labour market. In Australia, Emslie’s (1998) short case study suggests that isolation and hiding are two common barriers for young LGBQ workers while Hillier et al’s (2005) national survey of same-sex attracted youth suggests workplace discrimination is a sobering reality: ‘It was not uncommon for young people to describe work-based discrimination in which they were sacked, denied promotion or treated differently because of their sexuality’ (p. 34). This paper seeks to address this knowledge gap.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The data reported in this paper is a sub-set developed from an exploratory enquiry into how young people (18-26 years) present, discuss and disclose LGBQ-identities in Australian workplaces. The aims of the original research were 1) to learn how young people experienced their place of employment as LGBQ-identifying workers, and 2) to examine how organisational dynamics impact on their working lives. Thirty-four (34) young people between the ages of eighteen to twenty-six (18-26) self-selected to participate in the research. Adopting a purposive approach to sampling, the project was advertised through a number of recruitment sources to ensure a diverse sample across age, employment, gender and sexual identity, including queer and youth-related websites, youth and health service providers, and hard copy advertisements displayed in LGBQ-social and community venues. Potential participants were directed to a central website that outlined the research and criteria for participation.

The original age parameters were set at 16 to 26. Despite slight variances across state and territory legislationii, sixteen years of age was recognised as a legal baseline for
young people to undertake full-time employment. The age range was extended to twenty-six to grant older participants who had pursued tertiary education sufficient time to accumulate experience in post-education employment. No participants under sixteen contacted the researcher. Their absence from the research could reflect a need for more targeted recruitment strategies or indicate a reluctance of younger people to participate in a project in which they were required to ‘come out’ to the researcher. It may also suggest a lack of confidence in young people in their mid-adolescence, and as new entrants to the job market, to speak about their workplace experiences, let alone speak about their sexual identity at work.

Participants (18–26 years) were located across all Australian states with no responses from the two territories (Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory). The average age of participants was twenty-two (22) with a skew towards an older population. However, this did not prevent older participants from reflecting on their earlier work experiences. There was an almost equal number of men (n=18) and women (n=16) and the majority of young people (29) identified their current residential location as ‘urban’. When invited to describe their sexuality in their own words, the majority of young people referred to conventional identity descriptors lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer or a combination of these identity positions. The sample encompassed a varied range of occupational groups and industries. Ten (10) major industries were identified from participants’ stories of current or most recent employment, extending from ‘customer service and retail’ in the service sector through to white-collar industries such as ‘public service’ and ‘education, sport and recreation’.

To maximise participation of an invisible and frequently hard-to-reach population (Valentine, Butler & Skelton, 2001), multiple methods were deployed both online and in person—Table 1 outlines each method. Online interviews and web-based surveys were utilised in recognition that the Internet is a prominent technology in the social and sexual
lives of LGBQ-identifying youth (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). Online interviews were facilitated through a free-to-download instant messaging program. The majority of interviews ran between two to four meetings over the course of several hours of prolonged engagement. Face-to-face interviews were facilitated with participants primarily located in the home state of the researcher and in some cases required several meetings to give participants sufficient time to discuss their work-history at length.

Face-to-face and online interviews were led by a focussed, active interview approach (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). This proved beneficial in generating detailed reflections from young workers about their previous and current experiences of organisational cultures, relationships and practices. All interviews commenced with a broad opening statement and question that was conducive to storytelling: ‘Tell me about your experiences of the workplace… What it is like as a non-hetero / not straight worker in your workplace?’ This then led into a recursive series of questions that was guided by a list of topics from a pre-prepared theme list. Themes were developed from topics prominent in the literature and from two pilot interviews: an online interview with a gay-identifying youth worker and a face-to-face interview with a lesbian-identifying teacher. Topics included in the theme list were formal /informal roles, disclosure at work, perceptions of organisational cultures, significant relationships within work, relationship to members of management, and life/work balance. The web-based survey consisted of open-ended questions, developed from the same theme list. This survey was uploaded onto the website with expanding text-boxes underneath each question to allow participants space to compose their responses. Completed surveys were sent to the researcher’s secure and private email account.

To enhance young people’s participation in the research, transcriptions were returned for their review and approval before being analysed thematically. Likewise, initial themes were shared with participants to gather their views on emerging findings.
This is in line with the process of ‘member checking’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to ensure that the researcher’s reconstruction of the data appears to be a fair and trustworthy representation of participants’ stories and meanings. When analysing the data, emphasis was given to the development of theoretical themes through inductive coding techniques that included open and theoretical coding methods. These techniques were applied following the constructivist grounded theory method detailed by Charmaz (2006). From a constructivist position, this approach locates the researcher as actively and subjectively engaged in the generation of findings while acknowledging the co-construction of interview data between researcher and participants (Charmaz, 2006). Thematic codes were collated and organised through the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program NVivo7 (QSR, 2006) to produce a transparent audit trail of the coding process. Findings generated from significant theoretical codes are presented as themes to protect anonymity and to reduce the likelihood of identifying participants and employers named in the data.

**RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Throughout their working lives many participants had, at some point, shared the same workplace as other LGBQ-identifying workers. In this sense, the workplace was experienced as a sexually diverse space. Furthermore, some young people were employed in organisations in which most employees visibly identified as non-heterosexual, reflecting queer-majority spaces. This section examines young people’s experiences and perceptions of relating to and interacting with other queer employees across both sexually diverse and queer-majority workspaces. These findings reflect two kinds of relationships prevalent in young people’s work-stories: 1) Relationships of connection, affirmation and support; and, 2) Relationships of conflict and division. Table 2 provides a summary of the findings.
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Relationships of connection, affirmation and support

i) Extending networks of friendship, support and companionship

For some young people, going to work brought new opportunities to connect with other LGBQ-identifying individuals; these opportunities may not have arisen in other social spaces. At some point in their work history, eleven (11) participants had struck friendships with their queer co-workers. Knowing that other queer employees were visibly present in the workplace provided reassurance that it was ‘okay’ to identify as LGBQ at work. Ingrid (23 years) appreciated knowing that there were gay-identifying men working across other departments during her casual employment in a department store:

_Ingrid—I mean I didn’t have anything to do with them [queer colleagues] because I never worked in those areas but it was nice just to have a bit of a smile and a friendly face any old day of the week really. Just knowing that there were other people around if an issue ever came up… so yeah, I guess it was good just to know that there was someone else and if I really really needed to I could talk to someone that knew how it would feel._

The shared commonality of identifying as LGBQ was a source of validation and affirmation for these young workers. Just knowing there were others in the same organisation and witnessing how these other people were shown respect brought reassurance about being located in a seemingly safe environment.

For some young people, entering the workplace had been advantageous for extending their social networks through other LGBQ-identifying individuals. For example, through work Jack (25 years) had met another gay male waiter who provided an entry point into accessing local gay venues and a mate to accompany him out: ‘... _we’d sort of formed a really good professional and personal relationship through work. And he introduced me to the gay scene in [city location] so socially after work we’d go out ..._’
Sometimes, the opportunity to connect with other LGBQ employees enabled the exchange of support. Luke (19 years) had welcomed the support of an older gay mentor during his time working in the hospitality industry as a kitchen-hand; a tense work-environment that Luke described as gruelling. In retrospect, Luke believed this person ‘impacted on [his] life in a big way’:

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\text{Luke—He was a lot older than I was, and a really nice guy. I didn’t tell him that I was gay or anything, maybe he could tell or something, but like he sort of took me under his wing and helped me deal with the chefs and stuff like that... But he also made me feel like—[pause] like ever since then I really wanted to come out to all sorts of different people... he didn’t mind that people knew that he was gay or whatever so it was an eye-opener in one way because it made me see that it’s alright to be gay.}
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Through this work-relationship Luke learnt that it was ‘alright’ to be gay, further illustrating how relationships between queer peers at work can cultivate feelings of self-affirmation.

On some occasions participants provided support to other LGBQ-identifying employees. During his employment in an electrical manufacturing company, Kheva (23 years) had been quietly approached as a trusted confidant by two older lesbian women:

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\text{Kheva—I felt honoured actually when they [older women] approached me and explained it to me ... I know what that was like when I first came out so I could tell them ‘Look I can appreciate, I know exactly what you’re going through—your secret’s safe with me’.}
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While Kheva conveyed a sense of mutual understanding, he remained puzzled as to why these two women felt they could not speak out in the same environment in which he felt respected as a young gay-identifying man. Kheva attributed this difference in experiences to age in which he believed it was harder for queer employees of an ‘older generation’ to be ‘out’. An alternative interpretation is based on intersecting differences in age and gender; identifying as a young gay man could be perceived as more acceptable than identifying as an older ‘lesbian’ woman in this male-dominated workplace. Kheva’s story also exemplifies how queer workers can experience the same work environment in
variant ways, bringing into question the cohesiveness of LGBQ-identities as a basis for shared understanding.

ii) Queer-majority workplaces as inclusive and protective spaces

Queer-majority workplaces were likewise experienced as inclusive and supportive environments in which ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ identities were normalised within the work-term environment. Most of these organisations were small and correspondingly low in staff numbers. Five (5) participants had been or were currently employed in workplaces in which the majority of employees visibly identified as LGBQ. This is best encapsulated within Kat’s (21 years) description of work-life as a bar attendant in an inner city gay venue:

*Kat—I don't have to worry about being out (it's almost assumed); I don't have to worry about the reactions or consequences. I don't have to worry about being hit on. I'm in the centre of the [inner city] gay community. I work with some awesome people as well. ...It's funny at my current workplace; one of my closest workmates is a very attractive straight man—very butch.*

Queer-majority workplaces provided a limited degree of sheltered protection from the exclusionary or homonegative actions of others situated outside these workspaces. Two (2) participants were employed in large corporations that had numerous worksites across different locations and offices. While working for a bank firm, Bruce (26 years) appreciated participating in a queer-majority work-team that made him feel both ‘proud’ and ‘good’ about himself as a gay-identifying employee. Bruce was later moved to an ‘all-straight’ male team in the same organisation. This was a stark contrast to former team dynamics:

*Bruce—Most of the guys in my old team were gay also, including my boss who I became close friends with during my time there. I felt very comfortable working there, and I always looked forward to coming to work. It was a very social place to work. I then got on to the graduate programme, and then everything changed... The first department I worked had a very macho work culture. My graduate buddy came across as being quite*
homophobic. There was a strong management hierarchy. This made me feel frightened about disclosing my sexuality to management, even my own manager(s).

Similarly, Pearson (22 years) had felt included and valued in his crew as an on-board flight attendant for an airline company, particularly when identifying as a gay male was perceived to be ‘the norm’ in this work-environment: ‘... Gay guys definitely outnumber the straight guys, and it’s definitely a more open workplace. It was weird to be in an environment where people initially assume you’re gay, and it's in no way an issue.’ At the same time, Pearson recalled numerous incidents of verbal abuse and harassment from passengers:

Pearson—‘I’ve been slapped and pinched on the bum by guys travelling in drunken groups, I’ve been called fag, poof, homo, every name under the sun, I’ve even had quite a number of people from various religions completely ignore me’.

In this sense, LGBTQ work-teams can act as buffer zones that provided limited protection from homonegative harassment and discrimination. However, as Bruce discovered, once you move outside the protected circle, the same level of support and validation may not be available. This bears implications for the organisational welfare of young LGBTQ people transitioning between teams and departments within large organisations, especially if directed to move against their preference.

iii) Distances between queer colleagues

It is important to acknowledge that not all participants connected with other queer staff members in their workplace. Six (6) young people reflected on how their connections with other queer staff did not extend any further beyond mutual recognition as LGBTQ-identifying individuals who happened to work in the same organisation. These relationships were strictly work-based, as both parties shared little in common. While Diego (20 years) had enjoyed working alongside another ‘gay guy’ during his employment at a plant nursery, he also recognised that they were two different people
who shared dissimilar motivations to their work. There was no shared point of commonality other than their mutual identification as ‘gay’ men:

Diego—... I think he was not the sort of person that I liked—he was a nice guy but he didn’t like—cause I always liked nature and stuff like that, he was just there because he was between degrees... he was really nice but he liked sort of things that I wasn’t really into, he was more into I guess appearance-type things and stuff like that, if that makes sense [laughs].

To reiterate Rumen’s (2009) sentiments, it would be highly dubious to expect that all non-heterosexual employees will automatically befriend each other on the shared basis of LGBQ identities. In this sense, LGBQ identities do not always function as a basis for connection and commonality. In the following stories queer colleagues and managers were sometimes positioned as perpetrators of abuse and discriminatory behaviour against younger employees.

*Relationships of conflict and division*

i) Experiences of discrimination and harassment from management

Work-relationships with other LGBQ-identifying workers were sometimes experienced as a source of difference and inequality, signifying relationships of conflict and division. Some young people had experienced discrimination and harassment from their older managers, as evident in Kat’s and Joseph’s stories. Kat (21 years) explained how her ‘closeted’ queer boss had fired her from a previous job at a pet store:

Kat—It sucked! Especially because part of the reason was because I was friends with the owner—an extremely closeted gay man. He identified as gay to few people and lived out his homosexual relationship in secret, he publicly identified as straight and lived his heterosexual relationship in the open. I was an out queer and constantly asked about my and his sexuality by co-workers (he’s an effeminate man so everyone makes the assumption, in this case justified). I did not reveal his sexuality but it’s that gay by association thing again. The heat got too much and my co-workers (heterosexual identifying women) were too uncomfortable with me so after two weeks I was fired.
Kat’s story illustrates not only a divided relationship between her ‘closeted’ boss and herself but also their varying relationship to the workplace closet. Kat’s visibly queer presence at work threatens the layer of invisibility provided by her boss’s closet. In consequence, it is Kat who is punished for her visibility. This illustrates the cultural ubiquity of homonegativity as queer individuals are not immune from reiterating the pervasive logic of homonegative attitudes (Russell & Bohan, 2006). All social actors, regardless of sexuality, both ‘receive’ and ‘transmit’ the collective meanings of homonegativity that convey anti-homosexual beliefs and attitudes (Russell & Bohan, 2006): ‘…homonegativity is simply everywhere, like oxygen—in the air and in each/all of us, without differentiation …’ (p. 349).

During his employment in a public sector office, Joseph (25 years) had received unwelcome sexual attention from his gay-identifying manager. Joseph did not appreciate the high level of sexual interaction between his ‘gay boss’ (unit manager) and himself in which he felt treated like a ‘play thing’:

*Joseph—He [unit manager] slaps me on the arse, and calls upon me to entertain him throughout the day with tales of my weekends. The other girls notice this, and they think its favourable treatment; I disagree and think it’s just annoying but not favourable, since he’s more inclined to snap at me than anyone else. I guess that’s the price one pays for having a gay boss.*

In spite of perceiving these experiences as ‘annoying’, Joseph did not construe this relationship as abusive. To a certain extent, Joseph appeared to accept his manager’s actions as ‘the price one pays for having a gay boss’. This ‘price’ included his manager kissing him on two occasions outside of work and entertaining his boss with sexual tales of his weekend adventures. To Joseph, these were means by which he had been able to exercise power and accrue permanent employment from their relationship:

*Joseph—I started here as a temporary officer, and felt I needed his continued support for promotion to permanent officer. Now that I’ve received that promotion, I’m starting to*
In his story, Joseph made occasional references to agency by suggesting that he was in control of this erotically-charged relationship. However, his story equally suggests that this was an ongoing negotiation of power between his boss and himself. Joseph’s story resonates with wider discussions of young LGBQ people’s capacity to transcend victim identities and position themselves as resourceful and creative agents in speaking back to oppressive experiences (Blackburn, 2007; Hillier & Harrison, 2004). Simultaneously, there are also clear constraints within work-relationships and work-cultures on how far young employees can extend their power as autonomous agents.

One young person had felt extremely constrained in her employment in a queer-owned and operated business. Alexis (21 years) quickly discovered that working for a queer-owned business was not always a problem-free ride. This was despite the sexually inclusive attitudes expressed by her lesbian employers while working as a waiter and kitchen-hand in a local café: ‘I was out and it was ok due to the type of café. I met amazing people and overall it was a positive experience for my sexual identity.’ However, Alexis’s original expectations were soon dashed as she became the target of what she perceived to be bullying. This place of inclusion became a site of intimidation and criticism:

Alexis—I was tired of the bullying from the owners, I wasn't allowed to make the juices or handle any money, I had to carry heavy outdoor umbrellas and their stands up some narrow stairs and got very odd jobs such as cleaning the dirty marks on walls with a toothbrush. They [owners] mentioned that I wasn't taking initiative and needed to start doing things on my own instead of asking. In reality I was shy still and wasn't exactly sure of their routine. When I realised I started dreading work and my cold was lasting more than two weeks, I tearfully handed in my resignation and ran out the door with the feeling of guilt but also relief...

Alexis experienced a number of bullying acts, such as being continually held back late after the completion of her shift and often being refused days off when requested.
These three stories from Kat, Joseph and Alexis poignantly illustrate the differences in organisational power between LGBQ employees and managers and the instances in which this relationship can be used to hold power over younger employees. While this relationship may be contestable, the greater authority and capacity to exercise power over others, both formally and informally, lies with their respective managers. In particular, Alexis’s story of mistreatment resonates with literature on workplace bullying, more so than focusing on sexuality and gender as mitigating factors.

Workplace bullying has been flagged as a concern for many young people in the Australian labour market, across industry and employment status (McDonald et al., 2007). Hodson, Roscigno & Lopez (2006) discuss the concept of relational powerlessness in which social positions of lower status in organisations heightens vulnerability to bullying behaviours. In the context of this research, youth and limited experience are two potential markers of vulnerability to bullying at work.

ii) Observed inequalities in the workplace

Queer colleagues were not always treated as equals in the workplace as young people voiced their concerns over notable social divisions between other LGBQ-identifying colleagues and themselves. Returning to previous Kheva’s story, Kheva identified age as a source of significant difference between his older lesbian co-workers and himself. Two young women pointed to gender as a more apparent source of division in sexually diverse workplaces. Shirley (25 years) had noted the favourable attention directed towards young gay male employees while working in a hospitality setting in which youth, masculinity, and physical appearances were highly-valued aesthetic qualities. In other words, Shirley believed it was more glamorous to be young, male and ‘gay’ in service industries:
Shirley—"I think they [other staff members] found it easier to accept a gay man just because it appeared to be more glamorous, I don't know, that's just how I think of it—it just appears to be glamorous—young, healthy, attractive men who are well-read, good jobs, talk well... the package is more attractive to be 'gay' and 'male' to some people and it was in that case.

In her current workplace at the call-centre, Shirley had also noted how lesbian-identifying women, indeed women in general, were mostly employed ‘on the phones’ while gay male employees generally did not take long to march through the ranks to supervisory or managerial positions. These observations indicate inequalities in gendered positions of organisational authority and power. It also reinforces recognition that ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ identities do not always function as a shared basis of commonality or equality. Similarly, sexually diverse spaces are not immune from gendered patterns of inequality.

Queer-majority workplaces were likewise experienced as exclusive environments across observable gendered divisions. Ruby (24 years) identified gender as a marginalising factor whilst working in a community-based organisation as a youth worker. As a queer-majority workplace, this organisation embraced sexual diversity. Working with and supporting people from sexually marginalised groups was core business: ‘Well the [organisation] is brilliant. I am surrounded by queer people; my sexuality is never an issue at my current workplace.’ In the same account, Ruby described what it sometimes felt like as a woman in an organisation in which the majority of workers were gay-identifying men:

Ruby—"There is sometimes some very sexist language and attitudes. Lesbian health and services to women are under-funded and under-recognized. We are overlooked. Often the overly sexualised nature of [work] can have its affects as it is mostly men that work here and most of them are attracted solely to men so women often don't even get recognised for being in the room ..."

Feminist author Joan Acker (1990) has previously argued that workplaces constitute gendered spaces organised around definitions of ‘the worker’ as a rational,
emotionally-neutral male that feeds into wider gender-based hierarchies. Similarly, the working body has been discussed as a signifier of sexual and gendered imagery through which workers embody sexual and gendered norms and practices (McDowell, 1995, 2003). Both Shirley’s and Ruby’s observations highlight the gendered dynamics of organisations that confound commonalities in sexual identity and sustain notable inequalities between male and female employees.

DISCUSSION: NEGOTIATING SUPPORTIVE AND FRACTURED RELATIONSHIPS WITH QUEER COLLEAGUES AND MANAGERS

This paper has sought to advance understanding of how young LGBQ workers can relate to and interact with other queer colleagues and members of management across both sexually diverse and queer-majority workspaces. This is a field that has received little attention, particularly the work-experiences of younger LGBQ employees. The research findings reflect two distinct kinds of relationships: relationships of connection, affirmation and support, and relationships of conflict and division. The variance in these relationships invites rethinking of shared identities as taken-for-granted sources of support and it demonstrates how sexually diverse workplaces can operate as both validating and exclusionary environments.

The workplace functioned as a site of self-affirmation for some young LGBQ people as queer colleagues provided a sense of connection, companionship, sexual affirmation and support. This finding emphasises the validating benefits these relationships can bring for the social and sexual development of young people in their late adolescence and early twenties. This may be particularly beneficial for young people during a critical time when they are making sense of their sexual differences in a hetero-centric world. Alternatively, mutually identifying as LGBQ in the workplace did not automatically provide a shared point of commonality or a guarantee of protection from exclusionary treatment.
Seidman (1993) asserts that ‘Queers are not united by a unitary identity but only by their opposition to disciplining, normalising social forces’ (p. 133); this statement emphasises the heterogeneity of queer populations whose only common basis is the shared impact of heterosexual hegemony. Sexual identities cannot always be relied on as stable or unifying subject positions; social identities can equally function as points of exclusion and difference as well as points of unity and collective action (Butler, 1993; Kirsch, 2006; Weeks, 2003b). Therefore, the potential for queer employees to connect, unite and provide each other with support should not be taken for granted. This is a critical consideration as it troubles other studies that advocate for the advantages of queer-support networks, groups and mentoring programs in large organisations (Button, 2001; Colgan et al, 2006; Poverny, 2000; Ragins et al, 2003). LGBQ groups and networks may not always be sufficient or reliable providers of support or meet the requirements of individual employees. It is important to recognise that for some young workers the knowledge that such networks and groups exist, and the awareness of other visibly LGBQ-identifying colleagues, may be reassuring in itself. This may be particularly meaningful for newcomers to unfamiliar workplaces and for young workers located in fragmented work-cultures in which some work-relationships may be more problematic than others. However, queer colleagues are by no means the only source of support.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The findings of this research bear implications for future development of LGBQ groups and networks in organisations. Given the discriminatory barriers and homonegative expressions LGBQ-identifying workers can encounter at work (Colgan et al, 2006; Hunt & Dick, 2008; Irwin, 1999), additional support and inclusive mechanisms are paramount. Furthermore, having experienced sexuality-based oppression first-hand, LBQ-identifying employees can play a pivotal role as bearers of informal knowledge about how socially
exclusive processes can operate at work. To help progress and monitor the implementation of inclusive policies and practices, organisations that are sufficiently resourced could establish broader diversity groups: advocacy and educational groups and networks that are not configured around a singular identity. These groups could encompass a range of employee groups that affiliate with socially marginalised identities and communities, including LGBQ representatives. Diversity groups could be founded on a common commitment to valuing diversity and addressing processes of workplace exclusion.

It is important for diversity groups to be non-subjective, that is to say, not organised around a single identity affiliation. This is in recognition that minority workers rarely identify with a singular source of social marginalisation, such as youth, gender or sexuality. Other community and identity-based affiliations on the basis of ethnicity, Indigenous culture and religious belief may also intersect with young people’s gender and sexual identities. Indeed, some minority workers may be vulnerable to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination at work, for example on the basis of ethnicity and sexuality or physical and sensory disabilities and sexuality. There is potential for employees from varying social and ethnic backgrounds to work collaboratively in addressing organisational issues that thwart the respect of social diversity. Diversity groups may have ‘queer’ representatives that other LGBQ employees can access in confidence and trust if required. However, it should not be the sole responsibility of queer employees to always provide support and sexuality-related education.

The present study is exploratory and idiographic in nature and speaks to theoretical considerations of an intricate depth moreso than generating findings that can be generalised to other organisational contexts. Therefore, wider research is warranted on related topics that extend understanding of how processes of sexual inclusion can be strengthened for both younger and LGBQ workers. This research stimulates interest on a
number of interrelated issues such as the connections young LGBQ employees may form with other young people; the significance of cross-gender friendships as foundational support for LGBQ employees; and, the sources of support and affirmation available to transgender employees. Trans workers straddle the marginal spaces of being both invisible through their silenced status in the social margins yet highly visible while undergoing gender identity transition during paid employment (Davis, 2009; Schilt & Connell, 2007).

This paper has not set out to displace queer workers from participating in the development of inclusive workspaces but to reposition their assumed status as automatic sources of support and friendship for younger employees. All organisational players hold responsibility and a degree of ownership in the development of inclusive work-environments. First and foremost, organisations need to ensure that safe environments are possible and sustainable to facilitate the genuine involvement of LGBQ-identifying workers. This is an overriding priority for younger employees who represent new players in having to negotiate the complexity of sexual and gendered politics and divisions in organisations.
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\(^1\) For the purpose of this discussion, the term ‘queer’ is deployed as an overarching term that recognizes individuals who may identify with lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer identities or who situate themselves outside normative constructions of gender and heterosexuality (Filax, 2006; Hylton, 2006). The terms lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer (LGBQ) are used in line with the preferred identity descriptors specified by the research participants when invited to share how they would describe their sexuality.

\(^\text{ii}\) Across Australian states and territories, there are small variances in legally permissible ages for young people to enter the workforce. For example, at the time of the research in 2006 permissible ages were set at fifteen years in New South Wales (*Children and Young Persons Act 1998*) and Victoria (*Child Employment Act 2003*) and sixteen years in Tasmania (*Education Act 1994*).