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RESEARCH ARTICLE

From exclusion to inclusion: Young queer workers’ negotiations of sexually exclusive and inclusive spaces in Australian workplaces.

Abstract

Equal participation in paid employment is regarded as a basic entitlement within human rights discourse. Recent organisational studies highlight how the workplace can operate as a socially divided space for queer (or non-heterosexual) workers, depicting the workplace as a problematic site of sexuality-based discrimination and abuse. The aim of this paper is to locate the experiences of young queer workers as newcomers to the Australian labour market and to shed light on how young people negotiate sexually exclusive and inclusive workspaces. The findings from this qualitative study were developed from a series of interviews with thirty-four young people (18-26 years old) who primarily identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer (LGBQ) and were employed in a diverse range of industries. Based on their stories, this paper will argue that workplaces can function as both sexually exclusive and inclusive spaces. Within exclusive spaces, young people experienced a series of symbolically and materially violent practices that reinforced the boundaries of sexual normalcy in the workplace. Within inclusive spaces, young people gave weight to everyday ‘micro-practices’ of inclusion over wider workplace policy and procedures. Findings from this research hold significant implications for informing organisational change.

Key terms: young queer people, sexuality, the workplace
1. Introduction

The workplace, or place of paid employment, is more than a site of productivity or financial reward; it also serves as a source of community and identity. Participation in work connects people to notions of social citizenship and identity, as active and positive contributors to their communities and the state (Hearn & Lansbury 2005). Young people occupy a unique social position in the contemporary Western workforce as new players in an increasingly fragmented, destandardised and casualised labour market that no longer promises occupational certainty, job security or longevity (Bauman 1998; Sennett 1998; Beck 2000; Burgess & Connell 2005; White & Wyn 2008). Precarious employment is a fundamental reality of young people’s participation in the workforce, signifying their location in economically vulnerable positions of ‘low pay, employment insecurity and working-time insecurity’ (White & Wyn 2008, p. 174). Precarious employment is underpinned by wider structural changes in the contemporary labour market including the growth of casual and temporary employment (Gaston & Timcke 1999; Campbell & Burgess 2001) and consequently, the rise of the student-worker: young people participating in tertiary education while working part-time (McDonald, Bailey, Oliver & Pini 2007).

Participation in the workplace is also shaped by sexuality as a source of social division and structural inequality. In reviewing the literature on lesbian, gay and bisexual-identifying employees in the workplace, a common storyline emerges that depicts the workplace as a problematic setting for non-heterosexual workers. Workplace studies from economically advantaged nations, including Australia, United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), convey collective accounts of abuse, discrimination and harassment against non-heterosexual employees (Woods & Lucas
From exclusion to inclusion

From exclusion to inclusion 4 1993; Shallenberger 1994; Fassinger 1995; Badgett 1996; Powers 1996; Spradlin 1998; Asquith 1999; Humphrey 1999; Irwin 1999; Waldo 1999; Chrobot-Mason, Button & DiClementi 2001; Ragins & Cornwell 2001; Griffith & Hebl 2002; Rostosky & Riggle 2002; Russ, Simonds & Hunt 2002; Ragins, Cornwell & Miller 2003; Ward & Winstanley 2003, 2006; Smith & Ingram 2004; Colgan, Creegan, McKearney & Wright 2006; Ragins, Singh & Cornwell 2007). Within this body of research, the workplace is represented as a site of social inequality founded on hierarchical divisions between heterosexual and non-heterosexual workers. These reported divisions stand in stark contrast to human rights discourse on the right of equal participation in employment: Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment (UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, ‘Article 23’).

The aim of this paper is to locate the experiences of young and queer workers as newcomers to the Australian labour market and to shed light on how young people negotiate non-normative sexualities in what they perceive as sexually exclusive and inclusive workspaces. Findings from this qualitative study were developed from a series of in-depth online and face-to-face interviews with thirty-four (34) young people (18-26 years old) from across Australia who identified as primarily lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer (LGBQ) and were employed in a diverse range of industries[1]. Conducted in 2006, this interpretive project was guided by the following question: How do young people experience the workplace as queer workers? This paper is divided into three sections. First, I elaborate on how the workplace is represented in previous studies of non-heterosexual employees and their participation in the workforce, providing the organisational context to this discussion. I then outline the methodological approach to the research before canvassing participants’ stories of the
workplace as exclusive and inclusive spaces and elaborating on the theoretical significance of these findings. I conclude by discussing the implications of this research for informing organisational change.

2. Divisions and diversity in the sexualised workplace

The workplace is a sexually charged environment in contrary to the popular managerial myth that organisations function as asexual, rationalised and non-intimate spaces (Schultz 2003). From the discipline of human geography, Gill Valentine (2002, p. 146) argues that social environments are sexually coded spaces in which gendered and sexualised interactions occur on an everyday basis. For queer people, everyday spaces are often experienced as ‘heterosexualised spaces’ that are imbued with heterosexual practices, expressions and implied values of nuclear family arrangements (Valentine 1993, p. 410). Heterosexuality can be understood as both a cultural arrangement and a social institution whose norms and rules are explicated across the majority of individual lives throughout the human lifespan (Ingraham 2002, p. 74). The workplace is no exception. Social relationships between co-workers involve sexualised performances in which heterosexuality is regularly privileged as the dominant norm (McDowell 1995, p. 86).

Heterosexuality is heavily accentuated in the workplace through language, text and symbolism. Signs that symbolise heterosexuality in the workplace are visible through the imagery of wedding rings on fingers and displayed photographs of spouses (Valentine 1993; Ward & Winstanley 2003). The romantic and familial lives of heterosexual workers are common currency at work as evident in frequently exchanged accounts of leisure activities shared with opposite-sex partners and the
confiding of relationship difficulties (Valentine 1993). The subtle signifying of heterosexual metaphors and the repetition of heterosexualised discussion in the workplace accentuates the absence of non-heterosexual expressions (Humphrey 1999; Sykes 1998).

Organisational studies from the UK, US and Australia highlight the multiple forms of abuse, discrimination and harassment reported by queer workers. A small collection of Australian surveys indicate that it is an organisational reality for many non-heterosexual employees to encounter discrimination and homophobia at work (GLAD 1994; Asquith 1999; Irwin 1999; Pitts, Smith, Mitchell & Patel 2006). While diffuse in definition, the term homophobia typically denotes expressions of disapproval and animosity towards homosexuality, same-sex relationships and same-sex desires (Tomsen & Mason 1997, p. vii). Likewise, heterosexism has many conceptual faces however it can be broadly defined as the ‘privileging of heterosexuality over homosexuality and its assumed normality’ (Fish 2006, p. 7). Fish (2006) asserts that heterosexist attitudes and presumptions rest on the social and institutional privileging of heterosexuality and the routine silencing of homosexual desires and identities.

A key finding from Jude Irwin’s (1999) national survey of over 900 queer employees was the widespread existence of heterosexism and homophobic expressions in Australian workplaces: experiences of discrimination occurred across all workplaces, regardless of industry, occupation or type of organisation (Irwin 1999). Over half the survey respondents (59%) reported some kind of homophobic treatment in their current and/or previous workplace (Irwin 1999, p. 28). Indirect forms of discrimination were also reported in the context of workplace policy as non-heterosexual staff and their same-sex partners were denied entitlements granted to
heterosexual employees (Irwin 1999, p. 36). Psychological studies have drawn attention to the negative mental effects of labouring in heterosexist and homophobic work-cultures, indicating increased psychological distress and depression (Driscoll, Kelley & Fassinger 1996; Waldo 1999; Smith & Ingraham 2004). Encounters with homophobic abuse and discrimination can adversely affect queer employee’s participation in the workplace indicated by factors such as high absenteeism, expressed motivations to quit and general dissatisfaction with work (Waldo 1999); extended sick leave (Irwin 1999); and compromised productivity and ability to focus on work-duties (Powers 1996).

Within Australian states and territories, there is limited legal recourse for pursuing complaints of discrimination and harassment on the grounds of sexual orientation. Equal opportunity (EO) legislation prohibits discriminatory treatment in various fields, including employment, across state and territory jurisdictions (Maddison & Partridge 2007). There is no federal legislation with equivalent powers for protecting queer employees from work-based discrimination, the exception being the Workplace Relations Act 1996 (Commonwealth). This Act has restricted powers in instances such as the prevention of employment termination on the grounds of ‘sexual preference’ within workplaces that employ over a hundred workers (Maddison & Partridge 2007).

At present, state and territory EO laws are riddled with exemptions that can excuse particular parties from abiding by anti-discriminatory requirements. For example, EO laws in Victoria and New South Wales list provisions for exemption on the grounds of religious doctrine and affiliation (Anti-Discrimination Act 1977 [NSW]; Equal Opportunity Act 1995 [Vic]; Maddison & Partridge 2007). To initiate EO proceedings, complainants are required to give primacy to one aspect of their
social identity. This requirement does not adequately reflect the complexity of what can be a multi-dimensional experience of discrimination. Discriminatory treatment can be based on a number of intersecting attributes, for example lesbian workers encountering discrimination based on gender and sexuality (Asquith 1999; Kendall 1996).

The politics of ‘coming out’ and self-disclosure at work can have momentous implications for the social and economic status of queer workers. ‘Coming out’ is a career-long, and often exhausting, process for queer workers in a never-ending cycle of dispelling heterosexual presumptions with each new work audience (Humphrey 1999; Ward & Winstanley 2005, 2006). Within developmental studies, ‘coming out’ is defined as an individualised process of self-realisation in ‘accepting, revealing and affirming one’s identity as a gay man or lesbian’ (Grierson & Smith 2005, p. 54). Alternatively, sociologist Ken Plummer (1995, p. 131) argues that the ‘coming out’ story stems from a broader culture of sexual storytelling and speaking about the ‘sexual self’ in late modernity. The ‘coming out’ narrative has a historical and political basis in the identity-based politics of the gay liberation movement during the 1970s (Plummer 1995; Grierson & Smith 2005). In the work context, queer employees are often required to assess whether to ‘reveal or conceal’ their potentially-stigmatised identity and to maintain a degree of selective control over the disclosure process (Clair et al 2005), what some authors refer to as processes of ‘identity management’ (Woods & Lucas 1993; Anastas 2001; Chrobot-Mason et al 2001).

Patterns of disclosure are dependent on organisational climate and work-culture, for example, supportive organisations with anti-discrimination policies and other inclusive policies have been positively correlated to queer workers’ disclosure status as ‘out’ employees (Griffith & Hebl 2002; Rostosky & Riggle 2002).
The workplace is not always experienced as a heterosexist or homophobic environment. Numerous studies have highlighted how the workplace can function as a sexually inclusive and supportive environment (Irwin 1999; Day & Schoenrade 2000; Button 2001; Colgan et al 2006; Wright, Colgan, Creegan & McKearny 2006; Huffman, Watrous-Rodriguez & King 2008). Implementing non-legally mandated policies and procedures that are affirmative of sexual diversity can be highly symbolic for queer workers, particularly policies that grant equal recognition and entitlements to same-sex partnerships (Button 2001; Ragins & Cornwell 2001). Proactive policies that exceed legislative requirements signal to queer workers the value of their labour. This includes policies and practices such as the extension of domestic partner benefits to same-sex partners, the provision of bereavement and sick care leave for queer employees in recognition of their familial responsibilities, and the public support of lesbian and gay community events (Spielman & Winfield 1996; Appleby & Anastas 1998; Button 2001; Clair et al 2005; Colgan et al 2006).

To my current knowledge the voices of young queer workers are chiefly absent from literature in both fields of youth participation in the workforce and sexuality in the workplace. Historically, young queer people have been perceived as either non-existent or rightfully hidden within social sciences and youth studies (Miceli 2002; Cohler & Hammack 2007). During the last twenty years, social and psychological studies have drawn attention to the homophobic abuse, bullying and heterosexist assumptions young queer people routinely encounter, and anticipate, across social settings such as educational institutions and the family home (D’Augelli, Hershberger & Pilkington 1998; Hillier, Dempsey, Harrison, Beale, Matthews & Rosenthal 1998; Russell, Franz & Driscoll 2001; Telford 2003; Hiller, Turner & Mitchell 2005; Barron & Bradford 2007). As an outcome of living in heterosexist
environments, young queer people have reported numerous social and emotional stressors including increased risks of homelessness (Irwin, Winter, Gregoric & Watts 1995; Van Leeuwen, Boyle, Salomonsen-Sautel, Baker, Garcia, Hoffman & Hopfer 2006); self-harming and suicidal behaviours (Nicholas & Howard 1998; D’Augelli, Hershberger & Pilkington 2001; Remafedi 2002; Wichstrøm & Hegna 2003); mental health effects such as lowered self-esteem and depression (D’Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger 2002; Ueno 2005); and, excessive alcohol and other drugs use (Smith, Lindsay & Rosenthal 1999; D’Augelli 2004; Ziyadeh, Prokop, Fisher, Rosario, Field, Camargo & Austin 2007).

Several Australian studies suggest some tentative themes for young queer people’s participation at work (Emslie 1998; Hillier et al 2005; Colgan et al 2006). These studies suggest that, like their older counterparts, social isolation, homophobia and discrimination are common foes for young non-heterosexual employees upon entering the workplace. These themes sensitised me to the potential stressors faced by young people in the present study. Following an inductive approach to the research, I was interested in drawing out alternative accounts that transcended the dominant representation of the workplace as an oppressive and problematic space. This is not to marginalise the challenges young queer people may face as new entrants to the labour market. Instead, it is about marking out space for a wider repertoire of workplace stories. More recently, the singular depiction of queer youth in social research as suffering and suicidal subjects ‘at risk’ has been questioned as totalising and limited in representation (Russell, Bohan & Lily 2000; Harwood 2004; Talburt 2004; Blackburn 2007). This point of critique has generated a demand for a wider representation of young queer people that recognises the diversity of their life-worlds.
2. Approach to the research

This research relied on qualitative methods to develop a detailed understanding of how organisational arrangements affect the social and sexual relationships of young queer workers. From a constructivist position emphasis was given to the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants throughout the research process (Charmaz 2005, 2006). The aim was to build an understanding of how and why young people constructed meanings in particular ways within situated work-contexts.

Thirty-four (34) young people between the ages of eighteen to twenty-six participated in the research. The criteria for participation in this study were: i) young people who were aged between sixteen and twenty-six (16–26); ii) who defined their sexuality as non-heterosexual/not straight; and iii) who were willing to share stories from their current or previous paid employment in a workplace setting located in Australia. The selected age range was based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) definition of youth as 15 to 24 years of age as a critical time-period in which young people are financially dependent on others while transitioning into the labour market (ABS 2005b). The minimum age was set at 16 years in line with university ethical requirements for young people to be able to consent autonomously to research participation. Parental consent for participants under eighteen was wavered in this instance on the basis that this is not a realistic option for many young LGBQ people who are not ‘out’ to their family members, as previously argued by Hillier, Turner & Mitchell (2005). The maximum age was lifted to 26 years in recognition that these extra two years would allow a greater time-period to have elapsed for young people who had recently completed tertiary education and were newcomers to continuing employment.
Using a purposive approach to sampling, young people were invited to participate by advertising through a range of recruitment sources that included: queer and youth-related websites such as website postings and email lists; youth and health service providers; and hard copy advertisements displayed in social and community venues and on campus locations. All participants were directed to a central research website that outlined the purpose of the project and methods of participation. Sampling recruitment continued until a substantive data-set had been generated to convey an in-depth and well-evidenced account of participants’ experiences.

The sample group (18–26 years) were located across all Australian states with no participant responses from the two territories (Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory). The average age of participants was twenty-two (22) with the sample skewed towards an older population. This did not prevent older participants from discussing their earlier experiences of work-life. There was an almost equal divide in gender between men (n=18) and women (n=16) and the majority of young people (29) identified their current residential location as ‘urban’. The sample was spread across a range of occupational groups and industries; participants had been employed on a part-time, full-time and casual basis. Ten (10) major industries were identified based on participants’ current or most recent employment—Table 1 outlines the number of participants in each identified industry group and examples of job positions within each industry.

Young people elected to participate through one of three methods: 1) web-based surveys; 2) online interviews; and 3) face-to-face (FTF) interviews. Multiple methods ensured that young people had several options for participation. Online methods provided a high level of control and autonomy and can offer a greater assurance of anonymity to participants who are not required to speak directly to the
researcher. Participants have a high degree of control over how they wish to present themselves to the researcher (Markham 2005; McCoyd 2006). Online methods are also useful for accessing ‘hard to reach’ populations who are not readily visible in the public arena. The Internet provides an expansive research field for making contact with dispersed and hidden populations (Mann & Stewart 2000). This is pertinent to young people who may not identify as non-heterosexual in the public arena. Prior studies indicate that the Internet is a prominent technology in the social and sexual lives of young queer people in Australia (Hillier, Kurdas & Horsley 2001; Hillier & Harrison 2007).

Online and face-to-face interviews were led by an unstructured interviewing approach in which interviews were conversational in tone, centred on participants’ understandings of social reality, and were guided by the telling of the story (Alston & Bowles 2003; Liampbuttong & Ezzy 2005). The web-based survey consisted of a series of open-ended questions uploaded onto the research website, which were developed from the theme list referred to during online and FTF interviews. Online interviews were facilitated through the instant messaging program MSN (Microsoft 2005) and generally ran between two to four hours across several meetings. FTF interviews were facilitated with participants chiefly located in XXX in close proximity to the researcher, typically consisting of a ninety-minute discussion across one to two meetings in an agreed private location.
Table 1. Number of participants in each identified industry group and examples of current or most recent job positions within each industry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified work industries</th>
<th>Number of participants within each identified work industry (N=34)</th>
<th>Examples of job positions occupied by participants in current or most recent employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Customer service &amp; retail</td>
<td>Eight (8)</td>
<td>Car salesperson, computer salesperson, call centre consultant, sales assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community, health &amp; human services</td>
<td>Eight (8)</td>
<td>Additions counsellor, youth worker, family support worker, community project officer, out-of-school carer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical &amp; administration</td>
<td>Five (5)</td>
<td>Administration assistant, library officer, insurance claims consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality &amp; service work</td>
<td>Five (5)</td>
<td>Bartender, waiter, kitchen hand, flight attendant, gaming attendant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education, sport &amp; recreation</td>
<td>Three (3)</td>
<td>Primary school teacher, swimming instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual labour &amp; manufacturing</td>
<td>Two (2)</td>
<td>Cleaner, manufacturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public service</td>
<td>Two (2)</td>
<td>Legal advisor, ministerial writer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information technologies</td>
<td>One (1)</td>
<td>Technology (interface) designer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ‘Most recent employment’ refers to participants who were not employed in paid work at the time of interviewing due to other life-factors such as parenting responsibilities, tertiary education or transitions in employment.
Interview and online transcriptions were returned to the participants for their review to maximise young people’s authority over the content and structure of their story. The transcripts were analysed thematically by applying the coding methods developed by Charmaz (2000, 2006) through the constructivist grounded theory method. 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 (QSR 2006). Findings were collated into themes to decrease the risk of participants and their employers being identified by other audiences.

In the following discussion, I elaborate on the research findings that demonstrate how young LGBQ people in this study experienced the workplace as sexually exclusive and inclusive environments. While I present these two spaces as discrete for the purposes of analysis, it is important to note that young people did not discuss these working environments as mutually opposing spaces. Indeed, some young people had encountered inclusive and exclusive environments and work-teams within the same organisation. This illustrates the multifaceted composition of work-cultures and relationships and the potential for organisations to foster both inclusive and exclusive spaces.
4. Research findings: Negotiating exclusive and inclusive spaces

The workplace as a sexually exclusive space

Across their short work history, the majority of young people (30) in this research had encountered some form of exclusionary behaviour on the basis of sexuality. Participants described a range of symbolic and material practices and discriminatory actions by which co-workers, managers, clients and customers attempted to exclude and single out non-heterosexual subjects, configuring the workplace as a primarily heterosexual space.

i. Symbolic practices of exclusion

Young people described a range of symbolically violent practices that repeatedly reinforced the normalcy and ‘taken-for-grantedness’ of heterosexuality in work-cultures. These practices were indirect gestures and expressions which generated considerable distress and uncertainty for young LGBQ people as to whether they legitimately belonged in their work environments. Barron and Bradford (2007) have discussed symbolic violence against young gay bodies as taken-for-granted expressions of violence that are frequently sanctioned within institutional settings, such as schools. The intended effect is to ‘designate [normative] boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate sexualities, signalling the body’s value and status’ (Barron & Bradford 2007, p. 244). This conceptual frame is derived from Pierre Bourdieus’s (1977, p. 191) sociological explanation of symbolic violence as a socially sanctioned and therefore unrecognisable expression of violence exercised through language, social exchange and the imposition of meaning. The present study extends the concept of symbolic violence to the workplace setting in which many young people relayed
symbolic gestures and expressions which left them feeling excluded, uncomfortable and unwelcome.

Many participants discussed the exclusionary practices they encountered within established group cultures: group-cultures that appeared to be primarily *heterosexual* and *male* in membership. Four (4) young men had felt detached from highly masculinised environments in which they were often excluded, or sought to exclude themselves, from informal conversations between other men about heterosexual attractions, casual sexual liaisons and the sexual objectification of women. Trent (21 years) elaborated on his experiences of being the ‘only gay male’ within his work-team at a chemical warehouse:

Trent—Sure, as a lot of ‘straight’ guys do they will spend hours on end talking about women, you try and participate but knowing you can't really, and eventually they will just leave you out, it’s easier for them. A female client will walk in and their jaws drop and everyone thinks they are normal but if a guy walks in and I get a twinkle in my eye, then it’s ‘pathetic’. I think although they [guys at work] don’t directly treat me bad it’s just not an even playing field…

This included blue-collar industries such as manufacturing and hospitality as well as the white-collar industry of corporate finance. Three (3) participants noted how LGBQ sexualities and same-sex relationships were visibly discomfiting topics for conversation. Similarly, four (4) young people described incidents in which other staff members had not openly expressed homophobic sentiments however their actions, such as ignoring LGBQ employers, signalled exclusion. Young people who had not spoken about their sexuality were often presumed to be ‘straight’ by other staff. Four (4) young people lamented the numerous times in which other staff had presumed they were heterosexual or in different-sex relationships. Maree (26 years) could no
longer tolerate her co-worker continually enquiring about her relationship status and seeking to set her up with a man. To end this repetitive discussion, Maree eventually told her that she identified as ‘gay’:

Maree—I think after the third or fourth time I said ‘I’m actually gay’ and she just said, ‘Oh I didn’t know’, and I said ‘Well that’s ok, I haven’t told you’ but I just did because it had got to the point where it was uncomfortable and I didn’t want to—Yeh, I didn’t want to be asked that anymore really.

Six (6) young people reported repeated questioning over their sexual attractions and relationships. These moments of inquisition were experienced as a primarily invasive practice. While working at a sports store, Moskoe (23 years) had faced a barrage of questions from his co-workers about his ‘gay’ identity. These questions signalled to Moskoe his ‘abnormality’ as a gay employee in a heterosexual work setting:

Moskoe— … so they didn’t understand me being gay and that, there was one guy there who was talking about it all the time, just going on about it… At first I was a bit upset about these jock guys that knew nothing about being gay and were just drilling me as if I was a [pause] not a freak, but just abnormal, so ‘Why do this? Why do that?’ things like that.

Another form of symbolic violence included witnessing the exchange of sexualised humour that centred on lesbian and gay subjects in a deprecating manner, as discussed by four (4) young people. Mia (24 years) had witnessed her manager make a joke about people living with HIV/AIDS during a team meeting—an issue that was close to her family life. Hearing this ‘joke’ signalled to Mia that this was not a safe zone to discuss her sexuality:
Mia— ... 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.

Twenty (20) young people had witnessed the exchange of homophobic expressions between co-workers, customers and clients and the discriminatory treatment of other non-heterosexual employees. Within these stories, participants were positioned as ‘silent witnesses’ to the discriminatory comments of others as hearing these comments and expression reinforced their decision to stay silent about their sexuality. The staffroom was frequently experienced as a particularly uncomfortable environment when having to witness the homophobic conversations of other staff members. Ingrid (23 years) quickly learnt not to mention her same-sex partner after an arduous conversation with a teaching colleague in the school staffroom:

Ingrid— ... something came up one day and she [teaching 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 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 I guess.

While working in a large retail store, Kat (21 years) had painfully witnessed the ostracism of an older lesbian co-worker through claims of sexual harassment in the workplace. Witnessing this form of exclusion sent a clear message to Kat that lesbian sexualities were not welcome, and indeed punished, in her place of employment:
Kat— I spent my lunch hour with the older dyke as she cried from hurt and sheer frustration. She’d joked and flirted with this girl for months (she joked and flirted with all the girls) but now the girl was making a complaint. The older dyke never behaved in a way I believed to be unprofessional and her flirting was never any better or worse than all the hetero flirting that went on—it was just more scandalous because she was a butch dyke. I felt for this woman, I was outraged for this woman.

Witnessing her colleague’s torment placed Kat in an agonising position in which she did not feel safe in ‘coming out’ or publicly supporting her colleague, amplifying her position within the workplace ‘closet’. In modern Western cultures, the closet metaphor has symbolised a space of shelter and protection from homosexual oppression; it represents what Eve K. Sedgwick (1990, p. 71) situates as the ‘defining structure for gay oppression’ in the twentieth century. Sedgwick (1990, p. 68) discusses the closet as a ‘fundamental feature of social life’ for many non-heterosexual people. The closet was a fundamental feature in young people’s stories of witnessing homophobic expressions and discrimination at work as it provided limited shelter from the direct effects of symbolically violent expressions.

ii. Material violence and discrimination

Some participants (9) recounted the painful effects of material violence in the workplace—direct violent attacks such as physical assault and verbal abuse. Material practices included the expression of verbal abuse, public accusations of paedophilic intent, repeated bullying actions and on one occasion physical assault. Expressions of material violence were experienced as direct attacks that intended harm against young LGBTQ workers because of their sexual identity. The most disturbing finding was that the majority of perpetrators were employed in senior and managerial positions. As newcomers to the labour market, young employees should expect direction,
Homophobic violence can be an effective means of what Gail Mason (2002, p. 68) describes as spatial management: the use of hate violence to reclaim territories as heterosexual and masculine spaces. The reported incidents of homophobic violence in this study suggest attempts by chiefly male perpetrators to designate hetero-masculinised territories at work.

The expression of material violence held wider effects than simply punishing young workers because of their sexuality. Verbally abusive terms targeted at young people, such as ‘pussy licker’, ‘faggot’ and ‘paedophile’, conveyed sexually subordinate messages about their sexual and gender identity. During her employment at a bookstore, Peggie (23 years) had been frequently addressed in a humiliating manner by her older male manager:

Peggie—And when he found out that I was gay he just started to say the most rudest comments and I just thought ‘You’re a disgusting old man’… just stupid things like on our daily schedule he’d put me down as ‘pussy-licker’ rather than write my name and um before we’d open up the shop he’d go ‘Could the lesbi-bite please come to…?’ [Over loudspeaker system].

Mason (2002, p. 116) has argued that homophobic violence can operate as a process of subjectification. Violent acts construct particular kinds of oppressive knowledge-claims about the individual victim as well as the wider collective group to which the victim is believed to belong. Through the term ‘pussy licker’, Peggie is associated with what Mason (2002, p. 46) discusses as feminised and sexual discourses of dirt and uncleanliness; these discourses represent female, homosexual bodies as a source of bodily disorder.
Verbal abuse in the workplace held subjectifying effects for young gay men. While working at a department store, Michael (20 years) had heard his male manager repeatedly refer to him under his breath as a ‘fucking faggot’. This kind of material violence was also perpetrated by customers and service recipients. During his employment as an air-steward, Pearson (22 years) recalled numerous incidents of abuse and harassment from passengers: ‘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…’. Expressions such as ‘faggot’ and ‘poof’ target both the gender and sexual status of young male workers, situating their sexuality outside normative understandings of masculinity and heterosexuality. R.W. Connell (2005, p. 78) has discussed how such gender attacks re-affirm the gender status of gay men as ‘subordinate masculinities’. Similarly, David Plummer (1999) has argued that terms such as ‘poof’ and ‘poofter’ expressed by men towards other men are a discursive means of marking out ‘unacceptable male difference’ (p. 78). This source of differences poses a threat to the social status of hegemonic masculinities (Plummer 1999).

Five (5) young people recounted their experiences of being treated unfairly at work, describing discriminatory actions perpetrated on the basis of what they perceived as their sexuality. This encompassed oppressive experiences such as having one’s work performance criticised, being refused leave entitlements or being unfairly dismissed from employment. This degrading treatment was again typically executed by male staff in senior positions, as evidenced in Franky’s story:
Franky—My former boss was a total arsehole! I still don't know how, but someone allegedly told him I was gay and as he is an evangelical [Christian] he made things very difficult. E.g. would not let me leave work, had a ‘gay’ chair for me and everyone else used a normal office chair... It was truly horrible.

Franky (20 years) was one of three (3) young people who believed they were unfairly dismissed on the grounds of sexuality. While Franky believed this was the ‘true’ reason, the official reason provided was that he was ‘unable to do his work’. Franky’s capacities as an office administrator were criticised and he was labelled as an incompetent, and dispensable, worker. Franky’s story is a poignant illustration of how discriminatory actions can convey denigrating messages about participants’ work performance, capacities and, accordingly, identities as paid employees. Ultimately, experiences of discrimination affix identity labels to young people as ‘bad’ workers, conveying sociocultural ideals about what a worker ‘should be’ in the eyes of their workplace leaders—not homosexual. In doing so, it reiterates Eve K. Sedgwick’s (1990, p. 1) theoretical assertion that the binary division between heterosexual and homosexual subjects infiltrates all aspects of modern Western culture, including the politics of the workplace.

External legal bodies and trade union groups were not a source of support for young employees in this study. Two (2) young people were aware of the union as a support-provider if needed however no one had directly contacted their union representatives regarding their experiences of abuse or discrimination. In some respects, this is not surprising when considering that young people in Australia are reported to be the lowest age group (15–24 years) to hold union membership (McDonald et al 2007). Similarly, no one had pursued complaints of unfair treatment
or dismissal through external legal mechanisms such as equal opportunity commissions, though ten (10) participants communicated their awareness of workplace discrimination and harassment as unlawful actions. Franky considered taking up his concerns with the EOC and sought counsel from a solicitor. He later reconsidered this to be a futile exercise based on the burden of proof: ‘I thought about going to the [Equal Opportunity commission] however, it was his word against mine and my fellow workers shared his views.’

Choosing not to pursue legal action does not mean that these young people were acquiescent to discriminatory treatment. Several young people expressed their willingness to seek out justice against their former employers however, after leaving their workplaces they no longer wished to revisit these negative experiences and preferred to focus on their current employment. This finding fits with reported barriers from other LGBQ-identifying employees who have considered pursuing claims of unfair treatment (Colgan et al 2007; Irwin 1999). Similar barriers have been discussed in wider critiques of legal mechanisms in equal opportunity law, in particular the immense responsibility placed on the shoulders of individual complainants to initiate proceedings and to ‘prove’ discrimination (Thornton 1994, 1995, 2000).

The exclusionary practices encountered by young people, both symbolically and materially violent, consolidated the workplace as a heteronormative environment. From queer theoretical studies, heteronormativity is discussed as the cultural saturation of heterosexual norms and values in contemporary social and political life (Warner 1993; Berlant & Warner 1998). Heteronormativity is a ubiquitous body of knowledge that has bled into all aspects of social and cultural life, reinforcing the privileged status of heterosexuality through its inscription as ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ (Yep 2003). The exclusionary practices encountered by young people in this study
illustrate how heteronormative boundaries are both subtly and painfully enforced through the conversations, expressions and violent actions of other organisational actors.

**The workplace as a sexually inclusive space**

The workplace was not always experienced as a monolithic culture of heterosexual normalcy. Young people’s accounts conveyed an alternative story in which the workplace was also experienced as an inclusive space. Inclusive spaces were work-cultures in which young people felt included, supported and valued as LGBTQ-identifying employees across a wide range of industries, from retail and sales settings to community and welfare-based organisations. There were a number of critical aspects to the experience of inclusive spaces.

*i. The symbolism of supportive relationships*

The majority of participants (28) indicated that during the course of their work-lives they had shared supportive relationships with at least one other staff member, including members of management, colleagues and workmates. While not all work-cultures were experienced as safe or inclusive spaces, this did not remove the possibility of forming supportive relationships. Sometimes co-workers provided support in the face of shared adversity which broke the sense of social isolation. Michael appreciated the support of a workmate who shared his dislike for their aggressive department manager, validating his own perceptions of victimisation: ‘...so that kind of validated my feelings, that kind of felt like well I’m not the only one that’s had these experiences with this particular person.’
Trust and feeling valued as non-heterosexual individuals were two significant factors for twelve (12) participants in their relationships with supportive co-workers. Kheva (23 years) reflected on the trusting relationship he had formed with his workmate Shaun, a ‘straight’ guy who made him feel accepted as a gay-identifying man:

Kheva—... so you let it out [sexual disclosure] and then the gate comes up to block out anything that might come back negative and when it doesn’t it— ... you think ‘What’s happened?!’ and it feels really awkward, not a bad awkward obviously but yeah it’s good. And that’s why I have a much better relationship with [Shaun], like I feel like I can trust him more because he’s instantly accepting, like there is not even a flicker of doubt when someone goes ‘Oh, that’s cool!’

In counterbalance to the previous stories of exclusion, nine (9) young people acknowledged the supportive relationships they had shared with former and current managers. Support was provided to young LGBQ employees’ experiencing personal difficulties in their day-to-day life, from mental health issues through to troubled personal relationships. Jacob (26 years) recounted how his boss had assisted him with his workload at a point when he expected to receive a reprimand over his recently lapsed performance:

Jacob—I had a particularly difficult period during that time, and my boss noticed a drop in my work performance, and me turning up late and leaving early. He hadn't known about my history with depression… When I told him, he was totally supportive. He gave me more of his time to supervise and guide me, and helped me set manageable goals to get me back on track, and somehow thru [through] all this, he increased my motivation and confidence.
This finding echoes the results from several workplace studies that indicate how senior staff and managers can be a significant provider of support for non-heterosexual employees (Huffman et al 2008), and how their positive attitudes can be fundamental to the experience of inclusive work-cultures (Irwin 1999; Colgan, Creegan, McKearney & Wright 2007).

Fourteen (14) young people had participated in supportive work-teams that had enhanced their experiences of the workplace as an inclusive environment. Sometimes supportive work-teams were a source of validation. For two (2) young men participating in supportive work-teams provided a temporary escape from estranged family relationships. When Diego (20 years) was seventeen years old, it was a relief to be able to go to work as it brought respite from family life. Diego described this time as ‘almost like two different lives in a way’, considering his co-workers at the plant nursery a supportive group of people whom he could talk to about sexuality-related issues that he could not discuss at home:

Diego: ... I guess it was more of a relief going to work really, if you knew you had someone to talk to, you knew you had someone to talk to at work...

This suggests that workplace relations can play a vital role in affirming the sexual development of young LGBQ people. This degree of validation may not be available in other social settings, such as in the home or at school. Indeed, social settings such as the home and school have been previously identified by young people as hazardous environments for identifying as non-heterosexual (D’Augelli et al 1998; Hillier et al 1998; Hiller et al 2005).
ii. Micro-practices of inclusion

Intrinsic to participants’ accounts of inclusive workplaces were the subtle and informal ways in which other staff members demonstrated attitudes of inclusion and respect towards young LGBQ employees. Participants described the spoken expressions and gestures from both co-workers and managers that made them feel included, appreciated and respected. One set of micro-practices involved witnessing co-workers and people in senior positions take a stand against homophobic expressions. Madeleine (20 years) had witnessed her boss speak out against homophobia in her workplace at an out-of-school care centre. It was reassuring to know that a senior member of staff did not tolerate prejudice from service consumers, including children:

Madeleine—I have a new boss and she is very anti-homophobic. More so than me, even... and she's said multiple times how she gets mad when people say homophobic things. And if any of the kids says something is “gay”, she always tells them off.

Another micro-practice entailed the use of inclusive language in everyday conversation, especially when other staff actively avoided the presumption of heterosexuality. Other young people (6) identified the inclusion of partners in workplace conversations and social functions as a significantly affirming experience. These inclusive gestures conveyed a shared understanding of equality amongst staff. While the inclusion of same-sex partners was not formalised in policy, it was still extended through informal invitations. Diego discussed how his current team of co-workers at the coffee shop acknowledged and respected his relationship on equal terms:
Diego—At [coffee shop] I mean I guess it’s like everybody, I think almost everybody at work has some sort of relationship, so I think its kinda one of the things where everybody says ‘Oh, we’d like to meet him or we’d like to meet her! Bring them in!’... They’ve asked me to bring him [boyfriend] in but we’ve also had some of the other people asked to ‘Bring in your new boyfriend, or bring your new girlfriend in!’

A significant message within all of these inclusive expressions is the recognition of young LGBQ workers as equal and valued employees. In contrast, workplace policies and procedures on diversity management and social inclusion held little significance in young people’s accounts of what constituted an inclusive environment. Some participants had difficulty in recalling the sighting of policies and protocols that formally acknowledged diverse staff groups or prohibited sexuality-based discrimination. One participant reflected on how their private employer had ‘just the standard discrimination/equal opportunity stuff’ but could not recall sighting any mention of sexuality and gender as sources of discrimination. When several participants did recall sighting equal opportunity (EO) policies that included references to sexual and gender-based discrimination, these documents were often dismissed as ineffectual and insignificant. Michael questioned the value of anti-harassment policies, which he believed had not been enforced during his employment at the department store:

Michael—... [We] had all those policies, procedures, harassment things, and all those policies, but it comes down to what is the policy worth? It’s one thing to for someone in the Head Office to write something on a piece of paper that says harassment is not tolerated; it’s another thing for a person in that situation to go and mention it to someone...
Previous studies have given weight to the role of non-discriminatory policies and practices in reducing discrimination and homophobia and generating more inclusive work environments (Button 2001; Colgan et al 2006, 2007). In the present study, young people attributed little significance to formalised policies and procedures of social inclusion and EO. Instead, participants gave greater weight to more informal practices of inclusion and meaningful relationships of support, equality and respect. These relationships and informal gestures may be demonstrative of a more meaningful organisational reality that has observable, tangible and affirmative outcomes for these young people.

**iii. Participating in broader inclusive work cultures**

Seven (7) participants in this research identified several primary factors that they considered foundational to inclusive work cultures, describing inclusive work cultures as ‘good’ places in which they felt they could ‘be themselves’. Participating in these work-cultures provided both permission and encouragement for young LGBQ people to express and present their preferred sexual self. For Kristy (22 years) this meant she could be ‘herself’ as a lesbian woman: ‘In my current workplace, being me is very easy :) [smiley face] I don't really have any trouble from anybody—they all know me and they know where I stand.’ Similarly, other young people referred to their workplaces as ‘open’ spaces in which it felt safe for their sexuality to be common knowledge amongst staff. Jack (25 years) reflected on his former employment in an inner city restaurant. He described the workplace culture as ‘alternative’, and pointed to the welcoming attitude of his boss towards socially diverse diners and employees:
Jack—It was a good working environment … my boss he was great, he was really quite accepting, he had a lot of gay friends so there was never any sort of ill sentiment towards anybody who was different who worked in or came to the restaurant, that’s what I mean by alternative, it welcomed everybody.

This suggests that the beliefs and values of organisational leaders play a substantial role in how receptive work cultures are to sexual diversity, confirming earlier arguments by Poverny (2000) on the importance of organisational leadership in leading sexual inclusion measures.

5. Implications for young queer workers and organisational change

This paper has sought to shed light on the experiences of young workers in negotiating non-normative sexualities across work settings that have the capacity to operate as both sexually exclusive and inclusive environments. Findings from this study bring acute attention to the structural barriers some young LGBQ people face upon entering the labour market. This study builds on existing workplace literature by articulating how dominant ideas of sexual normalcy are sustained in organisational environments through the expression of symbolic and material violence and discrimination. Negotiating these contrasting environments presents distinct challenges for young people in building productive work-relationships, confidently moving between workplaces and in planning career pathways. For example, how do young workers develop trust and confidence in their co-workers when some relationships are experienced as exclusionary while others are experienced as inclusive? This contrast can generate vocational anxieties for young queer workers in feeling prepared for entering new work-environments. This is further complicated
when young workers may receive conflicting messages about the value, validity and status of their sexuality, or experience the subjectifying and oppressive effects of symbolic and material violence. These effects potentially thwart the development of an affirmative sense of self and identity. Likewise, these oppressive effects may also constrain the career plans of young queer workers as they begin their work trajectories.

This study has provided evidence that workplaces need to concentrate on dismantling heteronormative work-cultures to ensure that queer employees feel not only included and safe but also on equal standing with other staff. This entails troubling the hetero-centric culture of organisational life. This is not to contend that all heterosexual expressions and signifiers should be banished from organisational cultures in an attempt to ‘desexualize’ work relations. Instead, increasing attention needs to be given to how heteronormative work-cultures generate interpersonal boundaries for non-heterosexual employees; cultures in which queer employees feel they cannot openly discuss their sexuality with others. The micro-practices of inclusion, outlined by the young people in this research, provide a solid foundation for beginning to dismantle heteronormative work practices. The descriptions provided by young LGBQ people show that these are not complicated or resource-intensive practices for organisations to implement.

At the same time, it is not sufficient for workplaces to rely solely on informal expressions and gestures of inclusion. These practices are based on work-relationships that can easily change, depending on the movements and turnover of staff. Policy implementation is required to cement inclusive values and practices into organisational frameworks; these formal requirements need to be brought to the attention of all employees and carefully monitored. Likewise, senior staff and
managers need to be appointed not only on the basis of their skill-level but also on their capacity to uphold the inclusive values and policies of the organisation. Findings from this study indicate that some young workers look to their organisational leaders for supportive and responsive action; they should not be greeted with violence and discrimination.

There may be value in extending to a federal level what Colgan et al (2006) identify as the ‘legal compliance approach’ to workplace diversity—mandating diversity management strategies through stronger legislative measures. At present anti-discrimination and equality laws are inconsistently governed across separate state and territory jurisdictions in Australia (Maddison & Partridge 2006). An alternative picture could be to implement an overarching federal EO Act that consolidates existing state and territory laws, overrides religious and other institutional exemptions present in existing EO laws, and introduces mandated standards on diversity management. Similar legislative measures have been implemented in the UK under the *Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003* albeit with some exemptions still in place (Stonewall 2008, ‘Employment Rights’). Human services and welfare practitioners working with queer youth must ensure that their clients are supported in the transition from schooling to paid employment, fully informed of their legal rights and responsibilities at work, and can confidently query how their organisation provides a safe and discriminatory-free space for all its employees, regardless of sexuality.

The present study has relied on the self-reported accounts of young LGBQ-identifying workers. While this in itself is not a limitation, it does mean that more layered accounts of sexual diversity and sexuality-based violence and discrimination in the workplace, and its effects on young workers acclimatising to these
environments, are not acknowledged. Hence, an area for future research could be to widen the scope of the present study to include how young people, regardless of their sexual identity, experience the workplace as a sexualised and gendered space. A more specific focus would be to invite young people who do not identify with LGBTQ identities to discuss how heteronormative practices may affect, both negatively and positively, their work-lives. While young people who identify as transgender may have participated in the research without my awareness, for instance through online participation, no issues relating to transgender identities emerged through the data generation process. Other authors have identified unique challenges for transgender employees in negotiating the exhausting process of gender-transitioning while seeking to retain paid employment (Anastas 1998; Chung 2003; Schilt & Connell 2007). These issues warrant further investigation in research that honours the experiences of younger transgender-identifying people negotiating the workplace.

6. Conclusion

This study has illustrated the labour of negotiating queer sexualities across work settings that have the capacity to operate as both exclusive and inclusive environments. This can present profound challenges for young queer people as newcomers to the labour market. Within sexually exclusive spaces, young people encountered a range of symbolically and materially violent practices which reiterated the normalcy of heterosexual relations. These practices illustrate how the modern cultural divide of the heterosexual/homosexual binary can permeate workplace relations and preserve social divisions between heterosexual and non-heterosexual workers. Conversely, discussion of inclusive workspaces demonstrates how
organisational relationships, teams and cultures can transcend these divisions and how employees and organisational leaders can foster respect and appreciation for sexual diversity. The valuing of human diversity in the workplace, inclusive of diverse sexualities, is a complex phenomenon that mirrors the intricacies of a socially diverse workforce. Nevertheless, embedded within this complexity is the potential to construct more equitable workplace relations and to generate more supportive and nurturing work-environments for younger entrants to the labour market.
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1 As an umbrella term, ‘queer’ can represent sexual expressions and subjectivities that stand outside the assumed normalcy of heterosexuality. ‘Queer’ theory is also discussed as a poststructural approach to troubling normative ideas about sexuality and gender and deconstructing the cohesiveness of the modern sexual self (Jagose 1996; Sullivan 2003; Warner 1993). In the context of this paper, the term ‘queer’ broadly refers to young people who describe their sexuality and gender as situated outside the gendered and sexual norms of heterosexuality (Filax 2006; Hylton 2006). I use the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer (LGBQ) when referring specifically to the young people who participated in the present research. When asked to describe their sexuality, the majority of young people referred to the terms ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’, ‘bisexual’ and ‘queer’ or a combination of these identity markers as preferred descriptors of their sexuality.

2 This paper is developed from a qualitative project funded by a PhD research program through the University of XXX. The original project was an exploratory inquiry within the discipline of social work.

3 To increase anonymity identifying details, such as business or organisational names and locations, have been removed from the data; the first names are pseudonyms nominated by participants.