

**Beyond Recognition and Redistribution:  
A case study of lesbian and gay workers  
in a local labour market in Britain**

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## **Abstract**

The UK Government recently introduced new anti-discrimination laws to comply with European Employment and Race Directives outlawing unfair discrimination on various grounds, including sexual orientation. There is currently very little nationwide data on the employment status of lesbians and gay men. Nonetheless, numerous small-scale studies indicate that lesbian, gay and bisexual workers experience discrimination at work (e.g. Stonewall, 1993; Snape et al, 1995). This study seeks to explore the strategies used by lesbians and gay men working in Brighton and Hove to cope with homophobia in their worklife. Findings suggest that lesbians and gay men employed in lower level jobs in the new economy chose to change employer if they encounter difficulties at work. Workers in the higher echelons of the labour market often chose careers in sectors that appear to have a more tolerant environment. Sexuality therefore shapes employment choices and experiences in significant ways. Unions were however rarely viewed as a potentially helpful resource for lesbian and gay workers facing discrimination.

## Introduction

There is increasing acknowledgement of the impact of homophobia and heterosexism in all areas of social life and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) movement has made substantial gains in recent years. This is reflected in recent legislative changes in a number of European countries, which for example prohibit discrimination against LGBT workers in employment and extend partnership and parenting rights to all LGBT people<sup>1</sup>. In the UK, a proposal to enable adoption by all unmarried couples – heterosexual and gay – was supported by MPs in 2002. The government also recently introduced new anti-discrimination laws in December 2003 to comply with European Employment and Race Directives outlawing unfair discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, religion and belief and increased measures to combat race discrimination. Despite the existence of a large literature on discrimination and employment with regard to gender, ‘race’ and ethnicity, there is currently very little nationwide data on the employment status of lesbians and gay men. Nonetheless, numerous small-scale studies indicate the existence of homophobic discrimination in employment. In these accounts, discrimination takes various forms, including verbal and physical harassment, a wage differential and a glass ceiling (e.g. Stonewall, 1993; Snape et al., 1995). This study seeks to explore the employment experiences of lesbian and gay workers in Brighton and Hove, a city with a reputation for being gay-friendly and where lesbian and gay workers constitute the largest minority group. The strategies they deploy to cope with homophobia in their worklife are also

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<sup>1</sup> For example, partnership rights for same gender couples exist in Denmark (1989), Norway (1995), the Netherlands (1996), Sweden (1996), Germany (2001) and Switzerland (2002). Sweden and the Netherlands also allow adoption by same gender couples. These countries also prohibit sexual orientation discrimination in employment (ILGA World Survey, 2002).

explored. Initial findings suggest that sexuality influences employment choices and experiences, therefore shaping employment possibilities in important ways. Despite ideological support for the existence of unions, participants were generally sceptical about unions as a potential resource for lesbian and gay workers facing discrimination. It is suggested that increased understanding of the complex dynamics of sexuality and employment will enable the further development of appropriate mechanisms for countering homophobia in the workplace.

### **Sexuality, economics and social movements**

The dismissal of homophobic oppression as ‘merely cultural’ in social theory has been criticised by Judith Butler (1997), in response to Nancy Fraser’s (1995) work on the politics of recognition and redistribution. Butler highlights the material dimensions of cultural politics. With reference to the queer movement, she notes that ‘*whereas class and race struggles are understood as pervasively economic, and feminist struggles to be sometimes economic and sometimes cultural, queer struggles are understood not only to be cultural struggles, but to typify the ‘merely cultural’ form that contemporary social movements have assumed*’ (1997: 33). For Butler, the notion that lesbian and gay rights do not have a material dimension is based on the assumption that claiming a particular identity is a solely symbolic act. The material and practical consequences for those with subjugated identities are therefore overlooked. Furthermore, the pervasive view that lesbian and gay struggles are ‘merely cultural’ endorses the assumption that lesbians and gay men are a wealthy social group for whom redistributive politics are irrelevant.

This latter view is illustrated with the emergence of the concept of the 'pink economy', or lesbian and gay consumer base, in which the queer population is constructed as a group with ample disposable income. This group is increasingly targeted by both advertisers and service providers (Bell & Binnie, 2000). Chasin (2000) explores the dynamics of race, gender, and class that inform both commercial and political practices in the lesbian and gay community in the United States. She argues that identity-based consumption and identity politics are closely related and when combined act in opposition to progressive social change. However, she also points out that many lesbians and gay men are unable to participate in these consumptive practices. She further notes the way recent advertising campaigns targeted at the gay community in the U.S. evoke images of assimilation and national identity by utilising images of the U.S. flag or the Statue of Liberty. She argues that advertising and commercial media images often create the impression of an all-white, predominately gay male community, while reproducing sexualised racial stereotypes in the few images of racial minorities. She thus concludes that the contemporary marketing of gay culture resonates with the way consumption has historically privileged whiteness.

The conflation of a queer identity with the commercial scene may prevent awareness of the possible material impacts of homophobia and inhibit dialogue between LGBT workers and left-wing groups, such as trade unions. Edge (1995) points to a potential clash between left-wing movements and queer activists. He experienced such conflict when involved with the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), which considered lesbian and gay commercial spaces to be representations of capitalism. Smith (1993) and Fraser (1997) have both suggested that capitalism is not necessarily hindered by homophobia. Fraser uses the pink economy as an

example of capitalism incorporating gay interests. However, Young (1997) argues that Fraser's position is based on a binary distinction between culture and society. It therefore undermines the role of cultural recognition as a necessary part of the struggle for economic, social and political justice. These spheres are interrelated in complex ways that arguments which invoke a dichotomy between recognition and redistribution overlook.

Young argues that this dichotomy between the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution is unhelpful because political economy and culture are mutually implicated. In her view, the tensions between recognition and redistribution that Fraser outlines are theoretically induced as a result of Fraser's binary categorisation. The extent to which it is a political reality is therefore overstated. Further, Fraser's dichotomous distinction is problematic because it does not consider those who may experience economic marginalisation on the basis of their identity. As Binnie & Bell (2000: 71) note, lesbians and gay men on low incomes are excluded from the '*urban commercial scenes that represent the most visible and intelligible manifestations of gay culture to the straight onlooker.*' The conflation of a gay commercial scene with lesbians and gay men as a materially privileged group overlooks the material impact of homophobia and the fact that not all lesbians and gay men have equal financial resources. This is not to deny the existence of some lesbians and gay men who are economically privileged. However, the existence of this group - who may well be a minority among all LGB people - does not invalidate the impact of homophobia on economic status. It should also be noted that material privilege is further mediated by and reflects complex interaction between a variety of other characteristics, such as gender, 'race', age, class and disability.

## **The legal context**

Under the terms of the Sex Discrimination Act in England, if for example a woman argues that she has suffered discrimination, she has to identify a ‘comparator’. This is a man, either a real man with whom she works, or a hypothetical man. She asks the court to compare her treatment with the treatment this man received, or would have received. The ‘relevant circumstances’ of this man have to be the same. For example, if the woman were refused a job, her comparator would be a man with the same skills, experience or qualifications. A man can also claim sex discrimination, by comparing his treatment to a woman’s. The problem with using this particular act to protect lesbian and gay workers is that in the case of a lesbian filing a complaint for example, the comparator is a gay man. As he is likely to experience similar discrimination, the law cannot be invoked for the worker’s protection, as any discrimination is not judged to be on the grounds of sex.<sup>2</sup>

The recent legislation covers pay, conditions and benefits for lesbian and gay employees.<sup>3</sup> However there are two areas that have been criticised by lesbian and gay employment rights campaigners. Firstly, pensions applying only to married couples are not considered discriminatory, as the European Directive on which the legislation is based says that compliance is “without prejudice to national laws on marital status and

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the MacDonald case concerns a gay man who was dismissed from the RAF. An Employment Appeals Tribunal (EAT) in Scotland ruled in 2001 that Mr MacDonald had been discriminated against under the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) because he was dismissed as a result of his sexuality. This was an important decision, as it changed the interpretation of the Sex Discrimination Act. If the decision had been upheld it would have been binding on all Employment Tribunals in Great Britain. Unfortunately his appeal in the Scottish Court of Session was turned down and he also lost his appeal against this ruling the House of Lords. Nonetheless, due to the EU directive, the government was obliged to introduce legislation prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation by December 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003.

the benefits dependent thereon”.<sup>4</sup> As lesbian and gay couples are currently unable to marry in the UK, they are therefore legally excluded from this type of pension provision. Lobby groups such as the Lesbian and Gay Employment Rights group (LAGER)<sup>5</sup> argue that this is discrimination and have called for full recognition of pension rights for same sex couples. Secondly, the new legislation also allows for employers to specify a required sexual orientation of an employee where they can argue a case on the basis of occupational requirement, for example in work dealing with particular client groups (Section 7). Under this provision, religious organisations and individuals are given scope to legally discriminate against lesbians and gay men on the grounds of religious doctrine or conviction.<sup>6</sup> This latter provision is currently being challenged by several unions, including UNISON.

### **Previous studies of lesbian and gay employment issues**

There is a remarkable lack of national data about the lesbian, gay and bisexual population in the UK. The Government’s National Census is carried out every ten years, but only records those in same-sex relationships within the same household. Thus, the National Census of 2001 did not contain a direct question about respondents’ sexual identity. Gay men, lesbians and bisexuals therefore go unrecorded if they do not live with a partner. As a result, millions of lesbians and gay men fail to be represented in statistical surveys. Yet sexuality can influence choice of employment, geographical location and spending patterns. Survey

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<sup>4</sup> DTI (2003) Towards Equality and Diversity: Implementing the Employment and Race Directive (Consultation document), p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> LAGER is an information and activist organisation based in London.

<sup>6</sup> Further details of the recent equality legislation can be found at the DTI website: <http://www.dti.gov.uk/er/equality/>

research since the mid-1980s suggests that many lesbians and gay men have experienced discrimination in employment. Most of the respondents in Greasley's (1986) study of lesbian and gay experiences in the workplace worked in the public sector and 'white-collar' jobs. These were workplaces with equal opportunities policies that were inclusive of sexual orientation. Nonetheless, the majority of respondents felt that most colleagues would be unsupportive of their sexuality. Over 75 percent did not disclose their sexuality when applying for a job, although more than 90 percent would have liked to. A survey carried out by lobbying group Stonewall (1993) highlighted widespread discrimination. Snape et al. (1995) found that half of lesbian, gay and bisexual participants were subject to discrimination at work, in accommodation, or in access to services. These findings are particularly worrying given that it is only very recently that legal protection for workers discriminated against on the grounds of their sexuality has been introduced. As already noted, this does not cover all areas of potential discrimination (LAGER, 2002).

A growing body of literature in cultural geography and social science addresses the centrality of heterosexuality to working life (e.g. McDowell, 1995, 1997; Adkins, 2000). Skidmore (1999) points out that post-Fordism and the continual growth of the service sector has contributed to the collapse of the distinction between 'job/worker/product/service' (p. 511), so that contemporary consumers may perceive the worker as part of the service. For example, the physical attractiveness of a retail worker is increasingly utilised to sell the product. Further, as McDowell (1995) vividly illustrated in a study of London bankers, socialising and entertaining activities based on presumptions of heterosexuality are often required to sell services to clients. Workers who did not comply with homophobic banter were quickly labelled

lesbian/gay by colleagues. Thus, lesbian and gay workers are at a particular disadvantage in environments where heterosexuality not only predominates, but constitutes a necessary part of the 'ideal/model' employee 'package'. Some studies also suggest that many lesbian women avoid workplaces where a hyper-femme appearance is expected because of the heterosexual norms and beauty ideals attached to that particular presentation of self (e.g. Dellinger & Williams, 1997; Crawley, 2002).

Despite such evidence to the contrary, advertisers increasingly target gay couples as an affluent consumer population (Bell and Binnie, 2000). They are assumed to be earning dual incomes without the financial costs of raising children. Many advertisers and businesses therefore believe that lesbians and gay men make a disproportionate economic contribution to society. This consumer population base and the burgeoning businesses catering to lesbian and gay customers are often referred to as the 'pink economy'. Badgett (1997, 2001) has strongly criticised the concept of the pink economy, arguing that lesbians and gay men do not form an economic elite. Her research in the U.S. outlines how the myth of income and wealth has remained in force largely through the paucity of comprehensive, demographic studies of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people nationally. In fact, her research (1995) suggests that lesbians and gay men do not earn more than heterosexuals or live in more affluent households. According to her study, gay men and bisexuals earn between 17% and 28% less than similarly qualified straight men. Lesbian and bisexual women make the same as heterosexual women, despite being less likely to interrupt their careers for children, and lesbian couples are much worse off than heterosexual couples because of the disparity between male and female incomes.

A recent paper by Arabsheibani et al. (2002) analysed the earnings of lesbian and gay co-habiting couples in the UK based on the Labour Force Survey. This research is the first large scale study in the UK to examine pay differentials between heterosexuals, lesbians and gay men. Their results indicate that although gay men on average earned more than heterosexuals, they still experienced discrimination in the form of a wage gap between what they earn and what they should be earning, based on their qualifications. According to this study, lesbians earn more than heterosexual women. Lesbian women in the study also appear to be disproportionately in full-time employment. However, the relatively small number of lesbian women in the sample (n = 231) limits the possibility of drawing any firm conclusions from this.

There is another possible explanation for the higher earnings of lesbian women in Arabsheibani et al.'s study. Interestingly, Fassinger (1995) has argued that a lesbian identity may in fact have a positive impact on lesbians' career choices. Fassinger partially attributes this to the fact that many lesbians are feminists, clearly a problematic assumption. In addition, many of her research participants are white, highly educated and middle-class – a problem characteristic of much research in this area. Dunne (1997) also suggests that there is a positive correlation between an adult lesbian identity and financial independence. Unlike heterosexual women, who may anticipate financial dependence on a male partner (for example upon becoming a parent), lesbian women are less likely to make vocational and life choices based on accommodating men or conforming to traditional gender roles.

In the US, several studies have examined career interests and aspirations for lesbians and gay men. The literature often concludes that both

lesbians and gay men are more likely to work in non-traditional occupations in terms of gender (Morgan & Brown, 1991; Fassinger, 1995; Chung & Harmon, 1994). Occasionally authors have suggested that this is related to lesbian and gay people's perceived lower scores on scales of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' respectively. Typically, these studies utilise a positivist approach to the production of knowledge and treat gender and sexuality as external variables that exist independently of discourse. Much of this work takes the separation of gender and sexuality as a starting point, reinforcing the notion that lesbian women are more 'masculine' or androgynous than heterosexual women and that gay men are more 'feminine' or androgynous than heterosexual men. However, vocational research positing this 'finding', which utilises psychological tests such as Bem's (1978) sex role inventory, does not suggest that a lesbian or gay identity can lead to a questioning of heteronormative ideologies, thus resulting in a less gender-determined lifestyle. Rather, lesbian and gay identity is constructed around a binary model whereby gender and sexuality are essentialised, either explicitly or implicitly.<sup>7</sup>

Chung & Harmon (1994) suggest that lesbians and gay men are more likely than heterosexuals to have non-traditional career interests and that career counsellors need to be more knowledgeable about the difficulties faced by lesbians and gay men in pursuing non-traditional careers. I would add that the barriers in traditional careers also need to be addressed. Some authors have highlighted the problems experienced by lesbians and gay men in specific professions, for example teaching professions at primary and secondary level, which are often considered to

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<sup>7</sup> See for example the special issue on the Vocational Issues of Lesbian Women and Gay Men (1996) in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 48 (2). The articles by Lonborg and Phillips and Boatwright et al. in the volume are notable exceptions.

be less conducive to being out in the workplace than many other occupations (Epstein & Johnson, 1998).

Very few studies examine poverty among lesbians and gay men in the UK. One exception to this is a report produced in 1999 by the Glasgow Women's Library, looking at poverty and social exclusion among lesbians and gay men in Glasgow. Their findings suggest that lesbians and gay men in Glasgow are excluded from the opportunities that are regarded as essential in the prevention of poverty and social exclusion because of the pervasive homophobia that they face. The lasting impact of the denial of these opportunities, which include basic educational skills, are documented in the research. Most studies of economic status among lesbians and gay men have focused on employed workers. The poverty and marginalisation faced by the unemployed and homeless for example are overlooked in these studies. Dunne et al. (2002) suggest that a significant proportion of young homeless people may be lesbian, gay or bisexual. In their study of homeless LGB youth, they found that this group of young people were particularly vulnerable and conclude that choosing a lifestyle 'against the norm' may have material implications. Thus, homophobia may exacerbate difficulties faced by economically marginalised lesbian and gay people, further limiting their prospects of escaping poverty.

### **Trade unions and LGBT members in the UK**

Unions in the UK have become significantly more aware and proactive with regard to sexual orientation discrimination issues in recent years. In 1991 the Labour Research Department carried out a survey addressing sexual diversity issues within unions. The survey elicited responses from

twenty-five unions, representing 65 percent of the total TUC-affiliated membership. Of these, twenty-one had a policy in place supportive of lesbian and gay rights, or a reference to 'sexual orientation' included in an equal opportunities statement. Twenty of these unions had taken action in response to Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act (a section that explicitly prohibited local government authorities from 'promoting' homosexuality). More than 50 percent of the twenty-five union respondents had introduced measures to counteract homophobic harassment. In addition, over half of the unions had '*produced and distributed educational materials on sexual orientation*' (Greasley, 1997: 255). By the early 1990s a few unions were lobbying for recognition of same-sex relationships in benefit packages negotiated with management. This was successful in the case of employees at the British Council and the British Library. In general the record of male-dominated unions was less impressive than that of unions with a substantial female membership, although there were exceptions to this (Greasley, 1999).

A 1997 survey<sup>8</sup> conducted for the Labour Research Department received responses from thirty unions, constituting 75 percent of the TUC's total affiliated membership. Twenty-eight of the responding unions had an equal opportunity policy or statement that was inclusive of lesbians and gay men. The survey also revealed an increase in activity by those unions who had begun work on sexual diversity issues, manifested through the sponsorship of conferences or development of educational courses. Twenty-one of the unions who took part in the survey had full-time equality officers. In all but two cases, the equality officer's role included a concern with lesbian and gay rights issues.

Another survey (Greasley, 1997) examined the implementation of equality policies relating to sexual orientation within trade unions. The survey of TUC-affiliated unions addressed the unions as employers of staff. It elicited twenty-six responses. These included most of the UK's largest unions, who in total employed more than 5,000 staff. All twenty-six unions had a national-level equality policy in place. The majority – with one exception – also had policy statements that included sexual orientation, the same number as included race and sex explicitly. These twenty-five unions represented approximately 5.5 million members - more than 80 percent of the TUC total affiliates. Greasley (1999: 257) argues that this suggests that unions are equally as likely to include sexual orientation in equality policy as they are to include gender and 'race', two other grounds for discrimination given statutory recognition in British law.

In comparison to a study carried out by LAGER in 1989, the results of the 1997 survey are encouraging. LAGER's earlier survey found that the equal opportunities policies of a majority of unions representing male manual workers were not inclusive of lesbian and gay workers, or else did not respond. In 1997, the unions with policies inclusive of lesbian and gay workers had a total membership that was 60 percent male<sup>9</sup>, representing a significant expansion of recognition of sexual diversity issues within trade unions. In addition to statements outlining a commitment to equality in general, sixteen of the unions also established either a specific policy targeting homophobic discrimination or included lesbians and gay men within equality policies aimed at strengthening their equal employment statements. In response to a question about the

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<sup>8</sup> Wright, T. (1997), cited in Greasley (1999)

monitoring of such policies, six unions reported that such responsibility fell under the remit of an equal rights or equal opportunities committee, or a lesbian and gay network.

Twenty of the unions stated that they provided the same benefits regarding compassionate leave and bereavement to all employees, regardless of sexuality. Fourteen unions had pension schemes that enabled lesbian and gay couples to nominate their partner as a recipient of benefits. A further three unions reported that they were negotiating pension benefits for lesbian and gay employees. However, benefits related to parenting were more controversial. Only six unions offered parenting benefits to co-parents, although another two unions stated that this was currently under review (Greasley, 1999).

It appears therefore that unions' own employment practices have changed significantly in relation to lesbian and gay employment issues in recent years. The number of unions with policies recognising sexual diversity has increased substantially from the predominantly public sector unions – particularly those with a substantial female membership - that began addressing these issues in the 1980s. UNISON has been particularly innovative and active in this area (Colgan, 1997, 1999). Most of the country's largest unions act to prevent homophobic discrimination in recruitment and employment within the unions themselves. Many even have policies recognising same-sex relationships, despite the lack of legal recognition for these relationships within the UK.

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<sup>9</sup> Gender breakdowns were known for only twenty-two of the twenty-five unions. Cited in Greasley (1999).

However, much room for improvement remains. Many unions did not respond to the survey request. Greasley (1999) suggests that this could be interpreted as a weak commitment to lesbian and gay equality issues. He further points out that even when a union has a formal policy commitment to equality, this may not be followed through with the production or dissemination of relevant literature or the introduction of awareness training. Strikingly, less than half of the unions responding to Greasley's (1997) survey indicated that discrimination against lesbian and gay employees would be considered a disciplinary offence. Less than a quarter reported that lesbians and gay co-parents were given equal benefits as parents. Reflecting on these results, Greasley (1999) concludes that the absence of fully equal policies for sexual minorities reinforces discrimination within the wider social and political context. Furthermore, insufficient information and training for union members and employees makes it unlikely that members and employees will be active in challenging homophobic discrimination. While some unions have made tremendous progress as employers and as campaigners for equality, the majority of unions require substantial effort to improve their performance in this area.

I would further argue that the relative invisibility of bisexual and transgendered workers from the union agenda until very recently is an indication of a less inclusive agenda than that advocated by most contemporary activist non-union groups. Transgendered members were finally included in the TUC rubric at the annual Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual conference as late as 2001, after a heated debate.<sup>10</sup> Although UNISON is frequently extolled as a model union with regard to sexual

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<sup>10</sup> This event was renamed the annual Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Conference for its next meeting on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 2002.

diversity (and has made significant advances in this area), it has denied motions to include bisexuals within its self-organised lesbian and gay group and there is no self-organised group that includes or deals specifically with transgender issues (Motion from National Committee, 2001). Nonetheless, unions in the UK have recently begun to play an active role in demanding equal treatment for workers vulnerable to discrimination on the grounds of their sexuality. Indeed, Amicus, UNISON and the NUT are involved in challenging Section 7 of the recent legislation concerning equal rights in the workplace.

### **A case study of a local labour market**

This research explored the issues affecting lesbian, gay and bisexual workers and the strategies they use to combat homophobic discrimination in the workplace. It also considered to what extent participants see trade unions as an effective or sympathetic resource. The research project used Brighton and Hove as a case study.<sup>11</sup> Lesbians and gay men constitute the largest minority group in Brighton and Hove (Webb & Wright, 2001). It is therefore particularly suited to a study of the employment issues faced by lesbian and gay workers. There are no figures to demonstrate the contribution made by the LGBT community to the economy of Brighton and Hove. However, numerous lesbian and gay businesses and the considerable number of lesbian and gay tourists indicate that it plays a significant role. A recent study of 1,145 lesbians and gay men living in Brighton and Hove revealed that 25% of respondents had experienced homophobic bullying at work. Others were convinced that their career

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<sup>11</sup> This research is part of 'The Future of Unions' project group at the Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics and Political Science and forms part of a wider study of employment and equality in the new economy.

progression had been damaged because of attitudes towards their sexuality. The report did not indicate the percentage of participants who were out at work. Almost 40 percent of the total sample reported to be a member of a union or a professional body (Webb & Wright, 2001). This is higher than the national level for all workers, which is 29-30 percent (Sneade, 2001). LGB workers in Brighton and Hove were therefore more likely to be unionised than the general population. In addition to exploring issues of discrimination, the study sought to uncover workers' strategies for dealing with problems at work and mechanisms that could be developed to address these issues.

### **Methodology and sample:**

Questionnaires and in-depth interviews were carried out with workers in several sectors of the local economy. This paper is based on 45 questionnaires completed by lesbians, gay men and bisexuals for the study and 15 in depth qualitative interviews with lesbian and gay workers.<sup>12</sup> Participants were recruited through advertisements in lesbian and gay press and organisations and snowballing. The composite picture emerging from a particular locality enables an exploration of the complexities and contradictions of previous research in the area. Focusing on several different employment sectors with a range of occupational levels facilitates a more balanced sample of lesbian and gay workers. Interviews were also carried out with trade union officials and members of self-organised lesbian and gay groups within trade unions.

The quantitative component of our study reveals that the LGB workers surveyed have relatively similar levels of satisfaction with their

workplace experiences, compared to their heterosexual counterparts. With regard to questions concerning the amount of influence they exerted over their job, pay rate, sense of achievement, respect from supervisors/line managers, LGB respondents scored similarly to heterosexual participants. Given that this is a group likely to experience discrimination and harassment, how can this relative degree of job satisfaction be explained?

Firstly, LGB workers have other considerations that influence their overall sense of well being at work, specifically the degree of support for their sexuality. It is possible that their level of satisfaction with this aspect of their working life may therefore mediate their attitudes towards other employment factors. Secondly, the interviews conducted with LGB workers for this study indicate that people often choose workplaces and careers that they perceive as tolerant and open-minded. Having chosen less lucrative but more supportive professions, participants had already reconciled themselves to certain limitations of their employment setting. Finally, many of the participants recounted very unpleasant experiences of harassment and other difficulties in previous employment. These experiences may perhaps lower their overall expectations in the workplace, where a more supportive environment becomes a primary objective/concern. One of the advantages of qualitative analysis is that it enables a more in-depth exploration of issues emerging from numerical data. In the following sections, themes arising from interviews with 15 LGB workers will be outlined. Employment choices and experiences, strategies for combating homophobia and attitudes towards unions will be discussed.

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<sup>12</sup> Nine women and six men participated in interviews.

## **Choosing workplaces – the impact of sexuality on employment choices**

Homophobic bullying can adversely affect people's experiences of education and therefore influence their career prospects (Dunne et al. 2002). Similarly, people are now more likely to come out at an earlier age than in previous decades (Bell & Binnie, 2000). This may have material consequences in that it can increase the likelihood of family confrontation as a contributing factor to homelessness. In addition, young LGBT people in care may encounter homophobia from their peers. Furthermore, the strong association of cities with LGBT spaces, may encourage LGBT youth to seek out communities in urban areas, particularly if they are from an area with a less visible LGBT presence and are experiencing family difficulties. So, in the context of a homophobic society, a queer identification can impact on people materially in multiple ways.

For all participants interviewed for this study, concerns relating to geographical place and work spaces influenced their choice of place to live and their career paths. Some participants had made a conscious decision not to pursue certain careers, because of perceptions that workplaces associated with that career were more likely to be homophobic. This was not usually the sole factor affecting their choices, but it often played a significant role in participants' decision-making. Mary, a participant in our study, made a decision not to pursue a law career, largely because the work environments associated with a legal career were not, in her view, conducive to being out at work:

I think I've made deliberate choices not to go into certain professions because of that...I do, I do...I think I've made decisions based on the fact that, you know, I can't be who I am, and I know that in terms of money I could have gone off and earned a lot of money somewhere else.

This strategy is particularly interesting because it demonstrates that sexuality shapes employment experiences and possibilities *prior to entering a workplace*. Rather than homophobia becoming manifest in a particular work environment, perceptions of homophobia inform people's employment decisions and therefore influence their career trajectory. Another participant, Patricia, explained why she had chosen to live in this locality in the following way:

I think the fact that I chose Brighton means wanting a gay-friendly community, employees and a gay-friendly university had a lot to do with it.

There was a marked preference among participants for sympathetic workplaces. The closet was never seen as an easy or ideal option. In several cases, participants who had been closeted in previous jobs, made a decision never to situate themselves in a similar environment again, because they had experienced it as particularly alienating and oppressive. When seeking alternative employment, they attempted to ensure that sexual diversity was not a problem for potential employers. This was achieved by looking for work in public sector jobs with a tolerant image or where equality policies were in place. Other strategies included putting details of relevant voluntary experience in LGBT organisations on their curriculum vita, something they would have been careful to omit when applying for jobs where they anticipated being closeted.

The experiences of LGB workers cannot be adequately addressed, without considering the ways that *paths* to employment are shaped by

sexuality. Interviews with participants in this study indicate that sexuality affects career choices – so people are aware of and actively seeking to avoid potential prejudice prior to entering a workplace, by deliberately choosing workspaces that seem more likely to be tolerant, or by being closeted. Issues around sexuality and employment therefore appear to happen *prior* to joining a new workplace, because they shape the career trajectory of many LGB workers beforehand.

### **Negotiating visibility/the closet at work**

The issue of (in)visibility at work was something that participants consciously (and continuously) (re)negotiated. Whether or not to be open about their sexuality at work was an issue that required considerable thought. Perceptions of the degree of homophobia in the workplace were most often the deciding factor in whether or not participants chose to be out at work. Workplaces that expressed a commitment to diversity and equality were viewed as more sympathetic than workplaces where equality rhetoric was absent. Participants had often chosen to remain closeted at some point in their working lives for fear of how their colleagues would react and in case it would affect their chances of promotion.

All participants who took part in in-depth interviews for this study were currently out at work, but all had experienced being in the closet in a workplace at some point. The decision to be open or closeted strongly influenced their experiences of social interaction with colleagues and their level of ease in the workplace. Being closeted at work necessitated constant vigilance. Those participants who had experienced not being out at work, reported having to be secretive about their relationships and

social life outside of work and feeling alienated from colleagues as a result. Participants referred to a number of strategies deployed to enable themselves to remain closeted. In order to avoid disclosing their sexual identity, participants in relationships either avoided referring to their partners at all, or pretended that their partner was a 'flatmate'. The lengths taken to maintain this fiction was poignantly highlighted in the case of one participant who worked in the same office as her partner for a number of years. They travelled together to work, but her partner would alight from the car one street before they reached their office building and walk the remaining distance. In this way, it did not appear that they arrived together. In addition, during their time at the same workplace, this couple had to individually rebut advances from heterosexual male colleagues who were unaware of their sexuality or relationship to one another. Blumenfeld (1992) has discussed the stress that negotiating the closet can induce for lesbian and gay people. The research findings of this study suggest that being unable to be openly lesbian or gay at work is not only stressful, it requires considerable energy and effort. Furthermore, homophobia in the work environment isolates lesbian and gay workers from their heterosexual colleagues on a number of levels.

For closeted employees, jobs where you could work without much interaction with colleagues were favoured. Work therefore became a place to avoid social contact, an environment where self-protection in the face of homophobia necessitated considerable reserve. A clear division between work and 'private' life emerged in this situation. In addition to remaining discreet about their love lives, participants could not mention the queer clubs and bars or events they had attended to colleagues, in case they recognised them as queer venues and therefore realised that the participant was lesbian or gay. This happened to one respondent, who

was seen entering a queer venue by a heterosexual colleague. At the next staff meeting, the colleague in question outed her to the entire staff group. She had been closeted in that workplace for five years and found the abrupt, entirely unanticipated and public nature of her outing traumatic.

For all participants, being unable to interact freely or on an equal basis in the workplace was very inhibiting. Several interviewees referred to a feeling of ‘constantly holding back’ or being on their guard, a continual sense of reserve around their work colleagues. In one case, a participant mentioned this as a deterrent to seeking promotion:

The biggest way I'd say that it's [sexuality] influenced anything to do with my career is that I have never pushed myself forward for promotion because I am a lesbian [...] in order to get on, I think in any job, you've got to be more friendly perhaps than I have been, more sociable. There is a certain level of socialising you have to do in order to get on. And because I wasn't out, wasn't prepared to come out, was too frightened of how people would react if I did, so I didn't and therefore I never pushed myself forward for promotion. And even when it was said to me, you should go for promotion, I didn't, because of that.

When participants did come out at work, this was not experienced as a singular event, rather it was an ongoing process. Heteronormativity renders the normative subject as straight. Although heteronormative assumptions about gender appropriate dress codes for example, may render a person's sexuality suspect if they deviate from those codes, the pervasive assumptions of heterosexuality often means that many heterosexual people may be oblivious to the possibility that a colleague may be lesbian or gay. The queer gaze may enable the LGB population to recognise each other, but is something that many of their heterosexual counterparts are unaware of. For many lesbians and gay men therefore, constant assumptions of heterosexuality must be continually corrected.

‘Coming out’ thus becomes an ongoing process, which must be repeated over and over. It is not a disclosure that instantly generates a universal awareness of that person’s sexual identity, no matter how active the office grapevine. The ongoing dynamic of coming out is often experienced as difficult:

You’re always really sort of careful. It is a constant coming out process really. You come out every day to different sorts of people...I think it is difficult.

Even when respondents felt reasonably comfortable in being open about their sexuality at work, this did not mean that they felt equally free to discuss their personal relationships to the same degree as heterosexual colleagues:

I know other people who are married with kids and they just talk freely about their husbands and what they get up to. I would never dream of coming to work and saying - I did this with my girlfriend last night - or talk about sex or something like that [...] I think I feel, I suppose it is a bit of an internalised kind of phobia as well; I’d feel on show, like some kind of freak. I suppose I’d feel a bit rejected as well.

Being open about sexual identity at work not only necessitated the awkwardness of repeatedly coming out, it required frequently confronting people’s prejudices. Another participant, Jane, witnessed a lesbian colleague being verbally abused in a homophobic manner by a co-worker and confronted him assertively about it. He backed down and apologised (to Jane, not her colleague). Unfortunately, she found both personnel and unions very unhelpful. Eventually the pressure of constant harassment took its toll and she requested a transfer to another office. Finally she opted to move to a different work sector altogether, one that she perceived as far more gay-friendly.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual workers are often viewed as less vulnerable to discrimination at work, due to the fact that sexuality is not seen as inscribed on the body in the same way that, for example, gender and 'race' are (Badgett, 2001). The interviews with LGB workers for this research study that the dynamics of coming out and the complexities of the closet suggest that both options - being out or closeted at work - carry potential costs and penalties.

### **Perspectives on unions from LGB employees**

All of the participants interviewed for the qualitative part of this study expressed ideological support for the existence of unions. Three interviewees had even been actively involved in unions in the past, in various roles including shop steward. In addition, all interviewees had experienced difficulties at different points in their careers relating to homophobia at work. These difficulties took the form of harassment, failure to achieve promotion, overtly homophobic attitudes in the work environment, or a sense of isolation.

Rather than approach a union, alternative strategies for dealing with difficulties at work were often initially explored by employees. This was partly because going to a union for advice or help was seen as taking a grievance to a formal level and people preferred to try and resolve issues on a one to one basis if possible. In these cases it seemed personnel played the role of mediator perhaps more traditionally filled by unions.

The 'peripheral nature' of unions was described by numerous participants, who believed in the abstract value of unions but had no real

belief in their performance at a more practical level. Julie, who works in the service industry, had this to say about unions:

I really agree with trade unions we have to have them because they're a body that look after people at work but I have never felt them applicable to me, it wouldn't occur to me.

There was also some indication that some participants, particularly those in the low-paid service industry sector, deployed a strategy of 'exit rather than voice' (Hirschman, 1970). If unhappy with their workplace or work colleagues, they were likely to move on rather than confront discrimination or resolve problems through formal channels. This is undoubtedly related to the nature of their employment sector, working in jobs of a similar nature with little or no possibility of advancement but a steady supply of employment opportunities. Given that unions did not seem to loom largely in their work environments or in relation to LGBT equality issues, it may be that increased cooperation with local LGBT activist groups and organisations could improve the profile of unions for workers who would otherwise be unlikely to approach a union.

For those participants who did have personal contact with unions, they usually expressed dissatisfaction in terms of their experiences of unions and their opinions of union performance. Jane previously worked in the public sector for ten years, in a work environment that she described as very sexist and homophobic. Despite this, she was one of the very few openly lesbian women in her workplace and also became one of the first female union reps there. She was very disappointed by how the union reacted to a colleague's difficulties related to a homophobic incident at work. The union workers were unsupportive and it was even suggested to her that she should not represent lesbians, because she was herself a

lesbian. Eventually she experienced burnout and left the workplace and the union. She attributes her departure from activist politics directly to her experience with the union. However, she conceded that they may have improved since her contact with them in the early 1990s and she retains a sense of allegiance to unions:

They're almost like dinosaurs to me. But maybe I need to look at that again now, and see what unions are like now, and what would the union be like here if I joined. I think it's UNISON, somebody at work has joined UNISON. And I must admit, I did feel guilty about not joining. I do feel kind of an alliance to it.

It is interesting that this group of interviewees were generally supportive of the role of unions, despite in several cases their personal disillusionment with unions. As has been discussed, sexuality has a pervasive impact on employment trajectory and experiences. All participants interviewed articulated awareness of discrimination in employment. It is possible that this group of workers is particularly likely to hold positive views of the potential contribution of unions. The multiple strategies for dealing with employment problems by workers must be recognised by unions if they are to play an effective role for LGB workers.

### **Beyond Recognition and Redistribution: findings & implications for unions**

The research findings suggest that concern about potential and actual discrimination affect the employment choices made by lesbians and gay men and their decisions about whether to be open about their sexuality at work. Interviews with workers in low paid service industry jobs suggest that this group tends to be closeted at work and relies on the transient

nature of many jobs in the new economy to deal with difficulties in employment. Trade unions did not feature very positively in the accounts of participants overall. However, while trade unions were perceived to be largely peripheral to their work lives, most participants expressed support for trade unions on an ideological level. Trade unions can potentially play an important role in combating homophobic discrimination at work. Although trade unions have made considerable efforts to raise awareness of lesbian and gay issues within their own organisations in recent years, clearly much work remains to be done. Given participants' views of the peripheral nature of unions, perhaps one helpful strategy in addition to focusing on greater awareness and support from unions, would be to reach out to the broader LGBT community through greater co-operation with queer activist groups and organisations.

To return to the theoretical debates referred to at the beginning of this paper, LGB employment experiences are more complex than current debates regarding recognition and redistribution acknowledge. It appears that *sexuality changes the context in which employment possibilities, choices and experiences occur*. Increased understanding of the diverse and complex influence of sexuality on employment trajectories and experiences will enable greater dialogue and communication between unions and workers and the provision of appropriate legislation and other measures.

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