



Student essay: Heteronormativity: the impact on lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* individuals` workplace experience

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Heterosexuality plays a crucial role in explaining how the society is constructed, especially the belief that there are two and only two sexualities, thus only two genders, which has been termed heteronormativity (Coston and Kimmel, 2012; Eliason, 2011). Furthermore, the normative binary and hegemonic meaning of gender is often associated with the dualistic and binary assumption of women as feminine and men as masculine (Button and Worthen, 2014). As such, it is recognized that workers act according to the standard script of heterosexuality, which allows sexual routines to be used as an asset for preferred ends (Watkins et al, 2013). This contributes in privileging and normalizing heterosexuality, which results in stigma for workers identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* (Bell et al, 2011). The shift from heteronormativity is the focus of queer theory, which emphasises the social construction of identities and argues that sexuality cannot be classified into categories such as gay, bisexual or straight because both sexuality and gender is performative (Tindall and Waters, 2012; Butler, 1999). As such, this essay will fist outline key theories such as gender performativity (Butler, 1999), 'doing' gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and intersectionality (Chrenshaw, 1991), followed by a critical evaluation on the workplace experiences of LGBT employees. Finally, a conclusion will be provided to sum up the main points from the critical evaluation above.

Judith Butler's (1999, 2004) theory on 'Gender performativity' is based on the assumption that gender is not biological given; it is rather enacted through repetitive acts and can be re-done and undone. In this manner, Butler (1999) suggests that 'drag' is the true model of gender as it indicates that 'reality' is not as fixed as it is assumed to be. The theory of gender performativity is linked to West and Zimmerman (1987) concept of 'doing gender' where gender is an accomplishment that is `done` through routines and everyday interactions. Furthermore, Chrenshaw's (1991) theory of 'intersectionality' is important in explaining the workplace experience of LGTB employees as it uncover how certain social divisions such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity and age intersect and how these affect one another in various situations and locations (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Hegemonic masculinity shapes the heteronormativity of sexualized labour, and is based on the concept that permits the collective domination of men over women; in certain contexts men may therefore engage in fierceness to stabilize their dominance (Skidmore, 2004; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). This is evident in Denissen



and Saguy's (2014) study, where 63 in-depth interviews were conducted with tradeswomen and apprentices in the US, where 28 of the participants identified as either lesbian or 'queer'. Findings revealed that by assuming that all tradeswomen were lesbians, the tradesmen could reinforce the idea of construction work as 'men's work' as lesbian women were not seen as 'fully women' and were thus regarded as 'one of the guys' (Denissen and Saguy, 2014:p.399). As such, the women were expected to act as men, and were forced to do dirtier and unsafe work to prove that they were one of the men (Denissen and Saguy, 2014). In this manner, the women had to adapt masculine traits and 'perform' as men, in other words re-do their gender in order to 'do' construction work (Butler, 1999, 2004; West and Zimmerman, 1987). This is related to queer theory, which discards the essentialist explanations of sexuality as a 'fixed' or 'natural' property of the individual and contributes to the understanding of how sexuality is lived and done within workplaces (Rumens and Broomfield, 2014).

In addition, sexual harassment can be utilised in order to promote gender normativity (Butler, 1999). This is seen in a study by Miller et al (2003), who utilised an in-depth survey to investigate the experiences of both gay and lesbian police officers in a Midwestern city. Findings show that police work is both sexualized and gendered is built on the notions of hegemonic masculine norms (Miller et al, 2003; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). For example, regardless of gender and sexual orientation, all police officers were expected to develop 'masculinity' at work, and most gay men in the study felt that once their sexuality had been disclosed their masculinity was questioned (Miller et al, 2003). Similarly, lesbian police officers had to 'do' gender by establishing more masculine traits (West and Zimmerman, 1987), while some of the gay men overemphasized on their toughness to fit the hegemonic norm built around the ideal policeMAN (Miller et al, 2003; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). In this case, the gay men embodied a hypermasculine style in order to ensure that their competence as police officers remained unquestioned (Fassinger et al, 2010).

Hegemonic masculinity is interconnected with whiteness, heterosexuality and middle-class, hence marginalizes non-hegemonic masculinities (Schippers, 2007). This is evident in an in-depth study by Schilt (2006) who interviewed 'female' to 'male' (FTM) trans* people to examine the reproduction of inequality in gendered workplaces. Findings revealed that tall white FTM trans* had more privilege than short and coloured FTMs (Schilt, 2006). Drawing on the intersectionality theory where certain identities such as gender, ethnicity and bodily characteristics are interlinked may contribute in explaining the constrained access to the gendered advantage for some men in the workplace (Schilt, 2006; Crenshaw, 1991). Echoing the findings of Denissen and Saguy (2014), the transmen could become 'one of the



guys' when entering new jobs because of the masculine privilege, however, the participants noted that this privilege could be hindered if they remained in jobs where they were hired as their 'assigned' sex prior to transition (Schilt, 2006). This indicates that gay men may gain privilege based on whiteness and gender, but is marginalized because of their sexuality (Schippers, 2007). However, the presence of LGBT workers may pose a threat to heteronormativity in the way in which men are the sexual subordinates of women (Denissen and Saguy, 2013). This is identified in Schilt and Westbrook's (2009) research where Chris, a 'female' to 'male' trans*, were hired as a man and did not plan to disclose until a co-worker recognized him from high school and told a woman Chris had set up a date with, who cancelled. In this case the transition from 'female' to 'male' threatened the heterosexuality of opposite sex because he was 'doing' gender in a way that did not reflect his 'biological' sex, which contradicts the theory of 'doing' gender as gender is learned and enacted (West and Zimmerman, 1987) not biological given (Butler, 2004).

On the other hand, the societal and normative expectation of men to occupy masculine activities is found in Brown et al's (2012) qualitative study of nine individuals who had transitioned from 'male' to 'female', where the findings show that prior to transition, the individuals held positions in what was typically associated with 'male' careers. An example was Sara who decided to join the military regardless of her aspiration to become a housewife. However, after transition the participants did not feel the pressure to hold jobs seen as masculine, and chose more 'feminine' careers that allowed them to express the aspects of themselves that had been concealed or ignored (Brown et al, 2012). Echoing the findings from Brown et al (2012), an American qualitative study by Budge et al (2010) on the work experiences of individuals who had started transitioning found that those transitioning from 'male' to 'female' found it necessary to find employment that were more applicable for women. An example was Rebecca, who felt that she had developed socialization in the 'new' gender by working in retail (Budge et al, 2010).

However, there are challenges for LGBT employees working in global organizations as some countries restrict sexualities that are not heterosexual and it is therefore vital for employers and employees to understand the consequences of overseas employment for LGBT employees (Ashworth, 2011). In an UK engineering LGBT survey, engineers identified as gay stressed the potential barrier to career development as contracts to work abroad were prevented due to the homophobic laws in regions where engineering companies operated (Groban, 2014). Furthermore, Ashworth (2011) indicate that there are associated legal barriers in countries where being gay, lesbian or bisexual is illegal, including the lack of legal protection from discrimination at work and restrictions of applying for visa for same-sex parents or partners, to mention a few. A qualitative study conducted by Mizzi



(2014) among eight aid-workers identified as gay investigated the level of preparedness for foreign missions in countries that are hostile of gay individuals, in this case Kosovo. Findings indicated that the workers felt marginalized prior to departure as families with same-sex parents were excluded from participation and the lack of preparedness offered by employers was a result of not taking intersectional identities such as gender and sexuality into account (Mizzi, 2014). As such, several of the participants pretended to have a 'wife' at home, which allowed them to 'pass' as 'normal' with regards to the heteronormative assumption of 'heterogender', which emphasise the importance of compulsory heterosexuality (Mizzi, 2014; Goffman, 1963; Pringle, 2008)

It is evident that workplaces are built around the heteronormative framework, which implies that gender and heterosexuality is inextricably linked. However, it is apparent that LGBT workers are challenging the heteronormative assumption that masculine equals man and feminine equals woman. As such, the theories of gender performativity (Butler, 1999) and 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman, 2987) may explain how LGBT workers are adjusting their gender and sexual identity within the workplace context, by for example by adapting more masculine traits to fit the heteronormativity of hegemonic masculinities within male-dominated workplaces (Denissen and Saguy, 2014; Miller et al, 2003; Schilt, 2006). However, sexuality may also have an impact on career decisions which were evident when 'male' to 'female' trans* people moved away from the heteronormative assumption that men are obliged to occupy masculine jobs towards work that were more applicable to their 'new' identity (Brown et al, 2012; Budge et al, 2010). In this manner, it is necessary for organizations to move away from the heteronormative assumption of heterogender and develop policies that do not restrict workers from being their true self (Mizzi, 2014; Ashworth, 2011). Furthermore, it is evident that more research needs to be conducted in order to understand the impact of heteronormative practices and how it affects LGBT workers, especially bisexuals, as their workplace experience and identities remains neglected in empirical research.



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Reviewers' Comments

This is a clearly written piece framed in theory with a coherent narrative overall. It is an important topic, and the author treats it as such and effectively expresses the rationale for research in this area. In explaining the key contexts of gender and queer theory in the second paragraph, it may be helpful to walk the reader into the theories a bit more. This seems a bit rushed and conflated in some senses, so perhaps taking more time with the flow of the arguments would be beneficial. For example, it may be helpful for the line of thought through the paragraph to be made clearer, as the jump to explain intersectionality felt a bit abrupt for the reader and could be unpacked a little more. The examples you set out are excellent in elucidating your points and supporting your arguments. This brings the theory to life in many respects and makes the concepts relate-able and relevant to the lived experience. It may be beneficial to remember that some readers will not be familiar with the studies you present, so taking some time to clarify and explain them a bit more would be helpful in understanding their relevance and importance. Further transitions between



thoughts can also help to guide the reader from one idea and study to another. For example, in the fifth paragraph, the flow here is difficult to follow, as you seem to jump from speaking about the Schilt study re FTM trans to then talk about gay men? Can you be more clear in the argument you are presenting here. Overall, this is a very timely and interesting piece, which highlights the theory well by using relevant examples to draw out main concepts. It raises good points which support further research in this area in order to have a potential impact on organisational practices.