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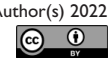

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Conceptualising Work as a 'Safe Space' for Negotiating LGBT Identities: Navigating Careers in the Construction Sector

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Abstract

Despite sustained focus in recent years on understanding the experiences of underrepresented groups in construction, there has been a paucity of work that has explored the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) workers. Research has shown homophobia is commonplace in the construction industry and very few gay employees feel able to be open about their sexuality. Using qualitative data garnered from 16 in-depth interviews and a focus group with LGBT workers in the UK construction sector, this article analyses how participants negotiate identities at work and navigate their careers. Drawing on the concept of heteronormativity we consider how organisational contexts frame, constrict and liberate identities in the workplace. Significantly, our findings show that despite enduring heteronormative structures, work was described by participants as a 'safe space'. By demonstrating how workers assess, move between and create 'safe spaces', this article contributes novel insights into the challenging of heteronormativity in heteronormative work contexts.

Keywords

construction, diversity and inclusion, equality, LGBT, qualitative research

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Introduction

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) construction workers face hostile working environments due to their sexual and gender identities (Ramchurn, 2015a, 2015b). Discrimination is also highlighted in relation to women (e.g. Watts, 2009), ethnic minorities (Caplan et al., 2009) and minority groups including those with disabilities (Briscoe, 2005), suggesting construction organisations are unwelcoming to diverse employees. Consequently, only between 8 and 14% of gay employees in the construction sector feel that they can be open about their sexuality in contracting roles (Hansford, 2016, 2017; Ramchurn, 2015a, 2015b). A lack of diversity, the need to attract workers, issues with hostile organisational cultures and discrimination at work, as well as legislative frameworks in the UK, such as the 2010 Equality Act, act together as impetus for meso and macro efforts to address these problems.

Recently, scholars are questioning the dominant essentialist view on men and masculinities in construction through the mobilisation of critical theory (Chan, 2013; Rumens, 2013). Queer theory in particular, Rumens argues, offers a powerful critique of the heteronormative taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life as it highlights the ways in which cultures and institutions are structured to privilege and normalise heterosexuality. The application of queer theory as a mode of analysis makes visible the fluidity of identities that are socially constructed as fixed and binary, in line with deconstructionist and post-structural perspectives. Queer theory is a useful tool to analyse work and organisations, specifically looking at career or identity overlap, organisational and human resources perspectives, discrimination identity, and social issues and experiences (McFadden, 2015; Rumens, 2013), which provides critical insights into perceptions of heteronormativity in work environments. Consequently, this study highlights the construction of LGBT identities at work, the performance of gender and sexuality and the challenging of heteronormative cultures in what is often seen as a sector unwelcoming to those who are not heterosexual white men through a queer lens. While LGBT are a small constituency (between 0.2–1% according to the Construction Industry Council's [CIC] Diversity Report, 2015, although national data shows around 95% of the UK population identify as heterosexual [ONS, 2020]) analyses of experiences promise much in terms of challenging understandings of the sector and its workplace climate. This article challenges dominant understandings by conceptualising the ways in which construction organisations act as arenas for reproducing discriminatory behaviour at the same time as offering 'safe spaces' – a situation that remains under-theorised and is therefore the key contribution of the research.

Drawing together studies of sexualities, gender and heteronormativity (Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 2004, 2011; Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]; Tyler and Cohen, 2010; see also Lawley, 2019) the article adds novel insights to research on LGBT employees in the workplace and in the construction sector. The empirical work responds to calls for research on transgender, sexual orientation and career/identity at work (Anteby and Anderson, 2014; Beauregard et al., 2018; McFadden, 2015; Rumens, 2013) by exploring the experiences of minorities in the construction sector by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups with people who identify as LGBT. In doing so the article's main contribution is an analysis of the ways in which the challenging of heteronormativity in

a strongly heteronormative work context (the construction sector) can be understood in relation to identity and place in such settings.

LGBT identities at work

Work is an important site in which gender identities and sexual orientations are negotiated and constrained (Hines, 2010). Studies on LGBT within the equality and diversity field highlight the relative complexity of sexuality and gender identity as concealable, despite crucial links between the body and identity at work (Einarsdóttir et al., 2016), which contributes to the 'invisibility' of LGBT identities in the workplace. Sexual minorities make decisions about coming out partly in response to the organisational context – how safe is it? – and how they assess the danger of disclosure versus dangers of non-disclosure (Hall, 1989: 129–132). The details of lived experiences in particular workplaces can help us understand how these assessments are made and what the personal and professional consequences might be, including discrimination and homophobia (e.g. Miller, 2003) and associated coping strategies (Mara et al., 2021); particularly as it is argued that those inhabiting minority identities are required to professionally compensate for countering norms through stronger role identification practices (Watts, 2009). However, agency is not a given as colleagues may make disclosures (Einarsdóttir et al., 2016) or encourage concealment, wishing to protect the person from abuse (Ozturk and Tatli, 2016). Stigma in response to disclosure is commonplace (Beauregard et al., 2018; Hadjisolomou, 2021; Köllen, 2013), as is biased treatment (Ellison and Gunstone, 2009) or being perceived as unprofessional (Woods and Lucas, 1993). However, non-disclosure or concealment also endangers one's identity, sense of authenticity and psychological well-being (Hall, 1989; Stenger and Roulet, 2018): 'Outness' is also associated with greater levels of job/life satisfaction (Huffman et al., 2008; see also Day and Schoenrade, 2000) and even, for some women, conferring a level of protection against sexist discrimination in male-dominated fields (Alfrey and Twine, 2017). The complexity of disclosure is amplified with regards to tensions between positive rationales for non-disclosure – 'passing' and authenticity (Ozturk and Tatli, 2016: 791) – and openness about identity as transgender (Beauregard et al., 2018). Further, transition is experienced as a central dimension of transgender workers' employment experiences (Ozturk and Tatli, 2016) representing a critical aspect of career decision-making (Budge et al., 2010), that may even result in postponing transitioning until retirement (Hines, 2010). Therefore, this study explores lived experiences through the lenses of people's multiple and intersecting identities, and by relating these to the workplace contexts within which they are manifested, the role of the workplace in shaping experience can be better understood. We explore the ongoing processes of identity construction as experiences of social interactions, career decision-making linked to broader strategic responses to organisational conditions and identity dilemmas, and how these relate to organisational norms.

It is argued that organisations are engaging more effectively with the needs of LGBT employees (Colgan et al., 2007, 2008; Giuffre et al., 2008; Raeburn, 2004), more 'gay-friendly' organisations (Colgan et al., 2007, 2008) and more progressive work contexts (Rumens and Kerfoot, 2009) – influenced by diversity at board level (Steiger and Henry,

2020), geographic location and culture of the local community (Roumpi et al., 2019: 14) and the national legal protections in place (Webster et al., 2018). Overall, the context of workplace support is crucial for LGBT employees (Huffman et al., 2008; Webster et al., 2018). Although others have found little impact of inclusion policies on job satisfaction (Bayrakdar and King, 2022). An avoidance of intersections with sexuality and gender identity (García Johnson and Otto, 2019), poor engagement with bisexual workers (Green et al., 2011) and issues around transgender identity more broadly (Ozturk and Tatli, 2016) are key limitations to Human Resource Management (HRM) approaches. Critical perspectives on diversity management also highlight a tendency towards corporatisation of inclusion, where 'non-normative minority identities are reduced to corporate categories and initiatives for management by majorities' (Calvard et al., 2020: 356). The ambiguities around organisational contextual factors in the experiences of LGBT workers suggest a complexity that requires further investigation: a key contribution of this study is, therefore, an analysis of relations between identity and place of work and how these are experienced by LGBT workers. This will be achieved through the application of the concept of heteronormativity.

Heteronormative organisations

Queer geographers have long argued that spaces are sexualised (Bell, 2001; Bell and Valentine, 1995; Browning, 1998) in relation to sexual orientation (Ahmed, 2006) as the 'materialisation of power relations' (Taylor and Spicer, 2007: 325), where homosexuality or queer gender identities are experienced as 'other' to the default heterosexual orientations of spaces based on binary constructions of gender: termed heteronormativity. Heterosexuality is positioned as the norm (Lawley, 2019), for example through the 'natural' reproductive roles in society as husband/father/breadwinner, wife/mother/caregive. Organisational systems and cultures based on such essentialist binary gender stereotypes reinforce ideas that men and women are suited to certain work or responsibilities (Barnard et al., 2010). Heteronormative, hierarchical and binary concepts of gender privilege heterosexual masculinity (Butler, 1993, 2000, 2004) and in organisational settings LGBT individuals experience 'disorientation' (Ahmed, 2006) and lower job satisfaction (Bayrakdar and King, 2022). This can take the form of discourse that presumes heterosexual marriage or parenthood, sexualised banter (Barnard et al., 2010), homophobic 'humour' (Faulkner, 2009) and casting LGBT colleagues as a 'threat' (Lawley, 2019) that undermines the inclusion of minorities, culminating in 'a heteronormative standard of the model employee' (Rumens, 2016: 116). What is crucial then with accounts of heteronormative spaces is the way power is conserved, reproduced and embedded in organisations (Tyler and Cohen, 2010: 177; see also Lawley, 2019), a key aspect to which this study will contribute through an analysis of expressions of power and exclusion in organisational settings.

Building on this idea of organisational spaces as situated in power structures, we can conceive of spaces that are more or less open to a broad range of individual identities depending on the relative concentration of power. Perceptions of what are acceptable and viable, gendered, organisational subjects establish norms (Nippert-Eng, 1995) that 'demand the self-policing of one's gender identity and its performance for both survival

and status' (March, 2021: 462–463). This suggests there is a need to feel safe expressing authentic identities culminating in a landscape of safe(r) spaces (Freitag, 2013). As 'we do not simply occupy space, but rather we become ourselves in and through it' (Tyler and Cohen, 2010: 192), organisational spaces represent opportunities or constraints for expression of sexual and gender identities (Hines, 2010). The notion of sexualised, heteronormative workplaces (Drydakis, 2015; Rumens, 2013; Stenger and Roulet, 2018; Willis, 2012) and gendering of the concept of 'professional' (Rumens and Kerfoot, 2009; see also Bruni and Gherardi, 2001; Whitehead, 2002) raises questions about impacts on the construction of LGBT identities at work and how heteronormative organisational spaces are experienced and navigated.

Heteronormativity in the construction sector

Organisational spaces in the construction sector in the UK are male-dominated (around 87% of workers are male [Statista, 2021]), often project-based, and dependent on mobile working practices: most research on the construction industry is based on work conducted in the production environment on site rather than the other places where construction activity takes place (Denissen, 2010). Therefore, the experiences of employees in different contexts and spaces, the role of place and the intersection of identity and place are under-explored. Despite this limitation, evidence points to a general picture of heteronormative cultures in construction, epitomised as the white, male, heterosexual stereotype of the construction worker and the homosocial relations that surround it being particularly problematic for minorities (Chan, 2013; Riley, 2008). Here we can see how the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987, 2002; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) might help us understand how heteronormative cultures are perpetuated: through hostility towards, sexualisation and objectification of women (Gale, 1994); privileging 'manliness' (Denissen, 2010) and 'toughness' (Chan, 2013). Fasoli et al. (2017) suggest that men are more likely to discriminate against gay men, indicating that male-dominated spaces in the construction sector are less welcoming to LGBT employees. However, it is argued that expression of hegemonic masculinity is not the only way minority groups are subordinated (Chan, 2013) and it is likely that heteronormativity plays out differently in different spaces in the sector. The construction sector represents an interesting microcosm of masculine society, and varying work contexts (sites, offices, projects), some relatively permanent and others more transient, offering a churn of people and hence, the potential for behaviours to change with them.

Sexuality is an important factor in the reproduction of social relations in the construction sector (Chan, 2013). Homosexuality is framed as a private matter, unlike heterosexuality, which is normalised through social interactions (see also Riley, 2008; Wright, 2013). Studies in the construction sector have identified instances of homophobia, taking place in contact with clients (Chan, 2013) or with colleagues (Wright, 2013) and discrimination in performance assessment subsequent to individuals' coming out (Chan, 2013). Lesbians experienced less unsolicited attention after coming out (Wright, 2011), although LGBT employees in STEM experience more negative workplace experiences than their non-LGBT colleagues, regardless of gender, age, or status in the hierarchy (Cech et al., 2017).

This article makes important contributions by focusing on how these heteronormative spaces are experienced by LGBT employees, including an exploration of how individuals question 'what sexuality is this place?' and navigate their careers in construction organisation spaces. In doing so, the article brings together concepts of queer identities in workplaces and heteronormativity to address the research question: How do workers who identify as LGBT experience their sexuality/gender identity in highly heteronormative contexts and spaces?

Methods

To explore the experiences of LGBT employees in the construction sector in-depth a qualitative investigation included one-on-one interviews (n=16 interviewees) and one focus group (n=8 participants). We sought to bring together a range of participants who identified as LGBT, and who worked in different environments (site based, office based, public and private sector employers). As sexual minorities and transgender employees are often difficult to identify and access (Browne, 2005; Formby, 2017) participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling via invitations to participate being shared through an industry magazine and construction organisation networks. Full ethical approval was granted, which included consideration of sensitive approaches to participant recruitment and appropriate questioning. Participants had the right to withdraw at any time and considerations about disclosure during the process were carefully discussed, including the treatment of data as confidential. Data has been fully anonymised, and pseudonyms are used.

In the semi-structured interviews we used a qualitative approach by asking open questions about the person's work experiences and career, their LGBT identity, and perceptions of industry practices. Questions included: How did you come to work in construction? Can you tell me about your sexual/gender identity? Have you experienced discrimination? What about positive experiences at work? Have you witnessed or participated in any actions to address diversity in your workplace? For an inclusive working climate, what needs to change? These were written in plain language and designed to follow a conversational format with extensive use of follow up questions. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes to an hour, being on average 40 minutes in length. The one-to-one interviews were carried out with 1 trans man, 2 trans women, 1 bisexual cis-woman, 8 cis-men who identify as gay, 5 cis-women who identify as lesbian. There was a wide age range, between 24 and 54 years of age, of those interviewed reflecting a range in the years of experience working in the sector; and participants were employed in a wide range of roles, such as quantity surveyor, structural engineer and quality management across a range of construction organisations. The breadth of job roles carried out by LGBT employees working within the industry spanned office and site contexts, affording some insight into the diverse nature of the industry and providing rationale to move beyond conceptualisations that limit construction to construction sites.

The focus groups were organised after initial analysis of the interviews had been conducted allowing for high-level findings to be shared as talking points for the group discussions. The key discussion points were: entering construction, career so far, looking forward. Eight people took part in the focus group discussions: 1 trans woman, 1 bisexual cis-woman, 5 cis-men who identify as gay, 1 cis-woman who identifies as lesbian. Direct

anonymised quotes are used to illustrate key points and allow the research participants' voices to come through the analysis. The demographics of interview and focus group participants do not reflect the study's ambitions as we were not able to include anyone who works on site 100% of the time, those from ethnic minorities, and those who are not 'out' despite attempts to target recruitment to those groups via social media and contacts in the construction sector. This study is in line with others that have found an impact of sampling strategies for LGBT research that tends towards better paid and more highly educated participants (Webster et al., 2018). Further, the chance to counter negative stereotypes about the culture of construction sector organisations acted as a key motivator for participants volunteering to take part in the research, as they felt their positive experiences should be heard. These limitations should be considered when viewing the findings.

The analysis of the interview data was conducted in NVivo and based on open coding of extracts of data and the identification of principal themes and issues (Silverman, 2019) following an inductive thematic analysis approach, the coding process forming themes (Braun and Clarke, 2020). This approach was adopted as we did not embark on the study wishing to pre-empt the findings – for example the codes around safety and context were not defined prior to analysis – rather the overarching research question related to experiences of sexuality/gender identity at work guided our focus during this stage. Initial codes were checked and discussed within the research team, refined and applied to all interviews, acknowledging the position of researchers in representing the voices of the minority groups in the study. Following the focus groups the codes and themes were revisited and revised in line with the group discussions and development of publications. The on-going process of checking codes and themes in this way aligns to a reflexive thematic analysis that can result in 'rich, complex, and non-obvious themes' (Braun and Clarke, 2020: 5) that also respond to our overarching aim to know more about LGBT workers' perceptions and experiences.

Findings

The findings from the qualitative data analysis examine the ways spaces and sexual identities are navigated and experienced in relation to heteronormativity, including accounts of working in construction as varied organisational spaces where pockets of diversity are developing, influencing the extent to which LGBT employees feel welcome and safe. The themes presented here focus on the extent to which organisational spaces vary; and the (re)negotiation of authentic identities in safe spaces.

Navigating different diversity contexts in the construction industry

Dominant academic and lay portrayals of the construction industry suggest that it is homogeneous demographically, both in relation to LGBT identities specifically, but also in a wider sense, e.g. lack of females, ethnic minority groups, individuals with disabilities, etc. To some degree, the interview data supports this argument:

> I always describe it as mono-cultural when I'm looking out of my glass office now all I can see is white middle-aged men, there's one girl there you know and they all wear suits, they all try very hard to be the same I think and that's a shame because I'm sure there's some of them

> carrying weights around on their shoulders too but I think for people to be more authentic and themselves, and more diversity generally, if we had a better mix, men, women, different cultures, different backgrounds, different routes, coming in to the industry in different ways, I think the more you mix it up the easier it is for everybody just to be themselves (Angela, cis-woman, lesbian, Senior Quantity Surveyor).

But in relation to office workspaces, interview participants articulated that there is now a higher degree of diversity within the industry, particularly in relation to the higher presence of females and LGBT identities in these workspaces:

> For me at head office it's a lot more, from my experience, got people of different races, a high proportion of women working in the office, but I'm sure that's not as reflected on site and I think, the women that I've spoken to say they don't feel as comfortable on site as they do in head office and I don't necessarily feel like I'd be so comfortable with my sexuality on site as in the office (Alex, cis-man, gay, Graduate Role).

In making distinctions between site and office Alex and other participants in this study challenged portrayals of construction as a homogeneous industry, suggesting that such portrayals do not reflect the experiences of minority groups within it. Participants framed office workspaces as sites of diversity, inclusion and acceptance for LGBT employees and other minority groups, feeling 'sheltered in an office' (Phil, cis-man, gay, IT support). As one participant explains:

Tom: Although I've had a positive experience and I don't feel issues, that's not to say that the site, the predominantly site workers don't have that level of support or visibility.

Sian: So you think there's a difference between the office and site?

Tom: Yeah, there is definitely a difference. As part of the network that we're building up we do have site-based representatives and some of the things that they talk about and the issues they face, is quite interesting and I think some of it is just born from ignorance of others rather than any maliciousness. So the network group really is just there to educate people. I've had issues just about terminology used in the office and more prevalent on site but even in the office, the terminology that's used is sometimes inappropriate (Tom, cis-man, gay, Senior Business Analyst).

This does not mean that discrimination does not occur in office environments, as the excerpt from the interview with Tom illustrates – others gave examples of being outed by a colleague (Vivien, cis-woman, lesbian, Technician) or referred to subtler forms of discrimination in offices (focus group participant, Ash, cis-woman, lesbian, Engineer). To an extent heteronormativity remains a dominant frame: focus group participant Mat (cis-man, gay) remembered how his being gay was referred to as a mid-life crisis / phase by his contacts in the industry. However, sites were described as traditional, exclusive spaces dominated by hyper-masculine white males, displaying overt forms of discrimination and discriminatory banter, which triggers 'hyper-vigilance' (Focus group participant, Mat,

cis-man, gay, IT). Some lesbian participants noted the main career challenge for them as being taken seriously as a woman on site.

Differentiations between site and office environments made by participants in some way explains their conscious decision to move into wholly or partially office-based work, even when they started out their career in the sector on site. In career terms movement into more welcoming environments led to greater satisfaction for the participants in the study, though some across all sexual orientation and gender identities experienced difficulties making friends at work, developing connections with colleagues, fitting into the heteronormative corporate culture and hit career blockages whereby moves upwards or sideways were problematic. Positive experiences articulated by participants tended to be situated within office workspaces, and instances of 'banter' or discrimination (or the fear of) were associated with construction sites, although some state that they have not experienced sexism on site (Katie, cis-woman, lesbian, Office Manager), 'people just tend to accept you' (Catherine, trans woman, Quality Director) and that professional associations (such as the Institute for Civil Engineers or the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors) are even more problematic for diversity and inclusion (Lana, trans woman, Manager; also mentioned by Mat, cis-man, gay, IT worker in focus group discussions). Despite this there was a perception amongst interview participants that office environs represent diverse, inclusive, and accepting spaces within construction, while more needs to be done to address the lack of diversity within construction sites to facilitate the inclusion of LGBT employees and other minorities in these workspaces.

(Re)negotiating authentic identities in 'safe spaces'

Considering the variance between organisational spaces in the construction sector, research participants clearly articulated experiences of work as a safe space to be their true self, particularly when juxtaposed with treatment by family, from experiences working in other sectors, in wider society or when visiting or working in other countries. As one participant put it:

> I would say this company in particular, for a long time it was actually my safe place, [. . .] anyone on the LGBT spectrum who has a safe working environment, has a safe area, and I mean safe as in, so you know they don't have people misgendering them, they don't have the homophobic jokes or anything like that and when you have that sometimes they're actually more protected and safer at work with colleagues etc., rather than at home or on the street (Jake, trans man, Administrator).

In the interview Jake goes on to make links between organisational policies and being looked after by the company in ways that increase their feeling of safety when compared with a family context. Therefore, for some the establishment of norms in the workplace around how LGBT people are treated formally and informally contributes to a feeling of safety. Though trans participants spoke of HR needing support from them to develop appropriate and supportive responses to transitioning, demonstrating that the development of inclusive cultures is predicated on the presence of diverse employees and may place undue responsibility on them to ensure they are treated with respect.

For lesbian, gay, and bisexual participants being their 'true self' was closely linked to being out, 'not pretending' or 'hiding' and being 'up front' about being gay or bi. Several interview participants stressed the importance of being able to fully express their LGBT identities in the workplace, as well as the positive impacts that come with being able to do so: 'I think being more relaxed to be myself is really important' (Angela, cis-woman, lesbian, Quantity Surveyor). A discourse around safety and feeling comfortable is a crucial factor in work experiences that lesbian, gay and bisexual participants highlight in the interview data. Furthermore, feeling able to express one's identity in the workplace can have positive outcomes for productivity at work:

> I felt like I could progress more because I was being myself, didn't have to hide anything, I could just be upfront about who I was, so yeah for me it made a big difference (Katie, cis-woman, lesbian, Sales Office Manager).

It was also noted that moving into more senior roles results in greater visibility in terms of minority status and greater comfort being themselves: 'other places where I've worked I've felt less comfortable, maybe where I've had less power' (Mel, cis-woman, lesbian, Business Manager).

Several participants highlighted the negative outcomes of not being able to fully be themselves in the workplace and associated feelings of anxiety, awkwardness, or dread prior to disclosure. As Stefan states:

> So when I first started, so going back six and a half years ago, I've been, I'd been closeted so I hadn't been out and you know I suffered from depression, I suffered from anxiety and I think part of this was related to me not being able to, or me feeling that I wasn't able to talk about who I am, and be open about who I am, but also it was also at a time when I was still trying to come to terms with being gay is ok, I wasn't going to change, being gay is who I am and part of who I am (Stefan, cis-man, gay, Project Coordinator).

> I know people who have left the industry because they genuinely felt that they couldn't cope with transitioning in the construction sector. So they've taken jobs in retail or in hospitality or other roles, and for many of them that was a real shame leaving an industry that they loved working in (Catherine, trans woman, Quality Director).

The excerpts above vividly illustrate the negative effect that not being able to be themselves can have on one's physical and mental health, well-being and anxiety prior to disclosure. This issue was particularly acute for transgender participants. The importance of feeling comfortable to be open is also associated with a sensitivity to organisational spaces as cultural climates, which requires a version of 'risk assessment' on the part of the LGBT employee. As a participant put it: 'I don't actively hide it, but I don't go out there and announce it until I've worked out if it's a safe environment or not' (Emma, cis-woman, bi, Director of Consultancy). Participants perceived a safe environment as constituted by a culture of LGBT visibility and openness (an example being rainbow lanyards), but also, and perhaps crucially, indifference. Inquisitive colleagues showing an interest and asking questions can heighten a sense of 'otherness' (Ozturk, 2011; Rumens, 2012)and some stress that whilst it is imperative to be fully themselves in the

workplace, their LGBT identity is only one facet of who they are as people, and do not want to be defined solely by this aspect of their identity:

> I do sometimes find it awkward, for example when I'm meeting people for the first time, particularly people who I'm going to be working closely with, I do see it as it doesn't define my personality, it doesn't define who I am so it's not the first thing I would sort of tell somebody but then if they don't work it out, or if it doesn't naturally come up in conversation after a few weeks it almost becomes awkward that it's a big part of who you are (Robert, cis-man, gay, Civil Engineer).

In line with the passage above, interview participants stated that they did not want to be judged, questioned, or treated differently (positively or negatively) as professionals or individuals based on their identities. Therefore, whilst being able to express their LGBT identities is crucial for the participants within this research, this is countered by a desire to not be solely or predominantly defined by this aspect of their identities. Safe spaces for LGBT employees are described as part of an organisational culture that is generally supportive of employees, fosters good relations between colleagues and good connections between employees, managers, and HR to allow for awareness raising on LGBT issues in the workplace.

Discussion

This study's exploration of how workers in the construction sector who identify as LGBT experience their sexuality/gender identity in work contexts and the associated impacts on career decisions has revealed complex interrelationships between identities and organisational spaces, particularly with regards to the navigation of differentiated heteronormative organisational spaces and relative levels of safety and normalisation, which will be discussed here in more detail. Heteronormativity is expressed through varying work contexts that are deemed more or less inclusive by LGBT workers. Work roles in the construction sector that span projects, sites and offices may offer exposure to or shelter from discrimination, resulting in reflexive navigation through career. Such navigation indicates a form of agency that is not cost-free. In the organisational literature, workplaces are often portrayed as hostile environments for LGBT workers (Coffman et al., 2017; Einarsdóttir et al., 2015; Willis, 2012). Hines (2010: 604) found for trans people a 'fear of the workplace as a potentially threatening space, which demands self-regulation of gender identity in order to mitigate against such threats'. However, participants pointed out that organisational spaces in construction can be experienced as relatively safe and that distinctions are made between different environments, where the office is perceived as more inclusive than site contexts. Therefore, the data shows distinctions made between places, and 'spatial differentiation between different forms of employment in terms of the distinct lived experiences afforded within workspaces' (Hines, 2010: 605): that workplace is crucial is a new perspective considering previous research that has positioned construction as problematic at industry (Dainty et al., 2000) and profession-level (Sang et al., 2014). Furthermore, our data raises questions about the extent to which the way participants describe the differences

between office and site reflect varying expressions of heteronormativity – for example, others have pointed to more insidious discrimination in professional roles (Rumens and Kerfoot, 2009: 763). The organisational literature posits that workplaces are sexualised environments (Drydakis, 2015; Willis, 2012) and heteronormative workplaces privilege heterosexuality and 'others'/discriminates against non-heterosexuality (Ozturk, 2011; Rumens, 2012). We found that the research participants in this study articulated agency within the sexualised structures to seek out and find a safe space in the construction sector in which they could be true to themselves – in moves away from site (see also women's agency in the sector [Denissen, 2010]). However, whilst highlighting the evidence for individual agency it is also clear that there is still a need to navigate and seek out such spaces, and research participants consistently framed decisions about being open or coming out as contingent on the context. The fact that the participants were mainly in office-based roles, even in cases where they initially started out on site, demonstrates that the quest for a safe space has led them to *particular* organisational spaces: ones that were deemed more welcoming, and that have become more welcoming as more diverse people occupy those spaces.

Navigation through organisations may result in a career change (Ozturk and Tatli, 2016) or postponing transitioning (Hines, 2010), both strategies for dealing with difficult work contexts for those who are transgender, which can in turn be experienced as a career penalty or negative impacts on well-being. How then can we understand the findings of our study in relation to power (Taylor and Spicer, 2007; Tyler and Cohen, 2010) and the concept of heteronormativity? If professional office spaces in the construction sector are more welcoming to diverse employees, and those spaces wield power in construction organisations, does this translate into more power and less disorientation for LGBT employees? What about those working on site? Will diversity in office spaces lead to greater diversity on site, or segregate employees, as indicated in the career biographies of the participants in this study?

Safety comprised openness to diversity at the same time as an indifference to it – what might be conceived as normalisation that challenges heteronormativity. These views were articulated in comparisons to other spaces that are experienced as unsafe. Family contexts, working in other sectors or countries and in society more broadly were described as difficult in comparison to experiences in the workplace. Notions of comparative safety is not to say there are no problems in these 'safer' spaces, but that they are experienced as more inclusive in the context of multi-level sites where discrimination and abuse occur (Freitag, 2013). In response, LGBT workers make ongoing 'risk assessments' that influence the extent to which they are open about their sexuality and/or gender identity. Webster et al. (2018) found that workplace contextual supports, supportive relationships and organisational climate are related to disclosure decisions. In work settings, the role of legislation and organisational efforts to support diversity feed into these judgements. This raises questions about differential impacts due to inconsistencies in legal and organisational protections for LGBT employees (Webster et al., 2018) across large multi-national companies. Participants in the study also pointed to how visibility matters, above and beyond organisational diversity policies (Ragins and Cornwell, 2001; Tejeda, 2006), for example the use of badges, flags, or rainbow lanyards for raising awareness. Despite suggestions that such initiatives

represent corporatisation of social justice issues (Lawley, 2019; see also Ahmed, 2012), these visible symbols of support helped to build the safer spaces the research participants experienced.

The idea of comparative safety is relevant to not only the spaces that people navigate or occupy, but also how cis-women in the study felt as a result of coming out as lesbian, indicating a heteronormative order that sexualises women as objects of the desires of men. Women once situated outside of that order or included as 'one of the guys', can occupy spaces that feel safer to them. As women participants felt safer after coming out as lesbian this demonstrates that the intersection of sexuality and gender is a crucial issue in a discussion of LGBT, as Wright (2011) has also found. Women feeling safer as an out lesbian underlines, rather than undermines, heteronormativity in these spaces.

Conclusion

This study reveals complex interrelationships between LGBT identities and organisational spaces – exemplified by a reflexive navigation through career in offices and sites that represents a quest for a safe space that recognises and normalises LGBT identities. Workers in this study question 'what sexuality is this place?' and repeatedly evaluate when and whom to come out to in work environments that are variably aligned with hegemonic masculinities. By drawing on the concept of heteronormativity we consider how organisational contexts crucially frame identities in the workplace and (positively or negatively) influence the extent to which workers feel safe at work. Future research might build on this by exploring the ways multiple identities find different interconnections with workplaces. Participants in this study identify important factors as LGBT visibility, openness, and indifference, which could act as guiding principles for those wishing to challenge heteronormativity in the workplace.

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