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Rainbow lanyards

Bisexuality, queering and the corporatisation of LGBT inclusion

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AUTHORS PREPRINT COPY**Rainbow lanyards: Bisexuality, queering and the corporatisation of LGBT inclusion***Accepted to Work, Employment and Society July 2019***Authors:**

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Abstract

This article presents the powerful account of Hannah, a woman working in a UK university who identifies as bisexual and queer. Hannah's voice reflects a younger generation of workers who have come of age with the emergence of queer theory and activism supporting greater LGBT rights. Her narrative illustrates the tensions around developing an inclusive stance towards diverse sexual identities at work. Hannah's account resonates with critical views of diversity management and inclusion practices, where non-normative minority identities are reduced to corporate categories and initiatives for management by majorities. More specifically, the account presented also covers the complexities and challenges of discussing and disclosing gendered sexualities at work, namely bisexuality, which serves as an illustration of 'queering' – a resistance towards understanding identities as fixed, manageable, and binary.

The article provides insight into how and why sexual identity matters for issues of power and conflict at work.

Keywords

Bisexuality, queer, sexualities, LGBT, diversity, inclusion, higher education

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Introduction

The central objective of this article is to present a narrative that describes in detail the experience of being a bisexual woman at work, with broader implications for LGBT employees and critical views of diversity management and inclusion. Sexualities at work and critiques of diversity and inclusion also intersect in terms of queer theory and the notion of ‘queering’ minority identities. Queering resists the corporatisation and reduction of minority identities by majorities into binaries, categories and initiatives that show limited engagement with the nuances of their ongoing performance (Parker, 2002; Rumens et al., 2018).

The article presents an account from a bisexual woman, employee and member of a contemporary, relatively young generation who has grown up through the emergence of queer theory and politics in the 1990s, attended university and is now engaged with issues of LGBT inclusion in the workplace. Sexual identity is an issue of general concern in the workplace for many reasons associated with power and conflict (Fleming, 2007). These include a lack of legal protections for LGBT employees internationally, employment discrimination against LGBT

minorities, experiences of bullying and humiliation, the stress of deciding how to be authentically 'out' at work, and 'phobic' attitudes from a heterosexual majority privileged in workplace cultures (Cech and Rothwell, 2019; Webster et al., 2018).

Ultimately, minority sexual identities can result in structural and material forms of exclusion and disadvantage. Difficulties with disclosure and stigma threaten feelings of authenticity, cause stress and negatively affect workplace relationships and well-being (Drydakis, 2009; Webster et al., 2018). Despite national populations having LGBT citizens and workers numbering into the millions, their voices and experiences remain relatively marginalised and under-researched (Anteby and Anderson, 2014). If these power and conflict issues of sexual identity are left unaddressed, they present risks for organisations and individuals, where talented staff may leave and workplace health, reputations and relationships will suffer as a result (Becker and Smidt, 2016; Cech and Rothwell, 2019).

More specifically, bisexuality matters in the workplace as it highlights distinctive misconceptions and phobias involved when the validity of a worker's identity and its non-binary nature is questioned, where an employee is 'neither gay nor straight'. Bisexuality can be understood in different ways but is generally identified "as an adjective to refer to sex acts and attractions to same-sex and other-sex persons, and as a noun to mean people who have these attractions" (Monro et al., 2017: 665). LGBT is a related term used to refer to a broader group of minority sexual identities, and in some organisations is an acronym used to establish employee support networks which can provide visibility and voice, moderating the loneliness and stigma that may be faced (McFadden and Crowley-Hendry, 2018).

Below we present an account from Hannah (a pseudonym), and she explains how she identifies as bisexual and queer. Working as a student support officer in a Russell Group UK university, Hannah is an employee highly aware of and sensitive to diversity and inclusion challenges. Of course, universities are not representative of all employment contexts in all

ways; they have many hybrid institutional features such as marketisation, industrial relations and regulatory pressures that might be associated with both private and public sector settings. Moreover, campuses also seek to offer open spaces for change and tolerance among international communities of students entering the workforces of the future (e.g. Morris, 2003).

Bisexual and queer identities are not considered in employment research as frequently as gay men or lesbian women (Köllen, 2013). This makes them less visible despite wide variation in statistics suggesting that between 0.5% and as many as 43% of the general US and UK populations identify as neither exclusively heterosexual nor homosexual (Monro et al., 2017). Furthermore, sexual subgroups such as bisexuals face distinct difficulties and patterns of disadvantage in terms of having to conceal their true sexual orientation at work more often than other LGBT subgroups (Stonewall, 2018), and thus experience specific forms of prejudice, social isolation and pay gaps (Bryson, 2017; Monro, 2015).

Under the LGBT umbrella, the common element of bisexual, trans- and other queer, non-normative, non-binary sexualities is that they are complex and vulnerable to being subsumed under binary, essentialist and exclusionary attitudes and assumptions that misrepresent them through the eyes of a majority. For instance, 'biphobia' constitutes an aversion to, denial of and stereotypical beliefs about the validity of bisexuality as a genuine subject position (Monro, 2015, see also Prasad, 2012). Where they also identify as queer, bisexuals strive to resist being categorised on multiple dualisms – as heterosexual (heteronormative assumptions), as gay (gay-centric assumptions), or as rooted in male or female ways of being (mono-sexist assumptions). Together these impositions and distortions all but erase bisexuality from conversations around diversity in the workplace (Monro, 2015). LGBT, bisexual and queer employees are therefore both similar but yet distinct, and continue to face various dilemmas, challenges and ultimately, disadvantages at work. These are nested and intersectional minorities – sexual minorities within LGBT minorities within gender

minorities – embedded within longstanding political and cultural relationships between sexuality, power and resistance in workplaces (Fleming, 2007).

Employees and active members of the LGBT community who identify as bisexual may also identify as ‘queer’; the ‘Q’ that is often added to LGBT, along with other letters (e.g. ‘I’ for intersex) which reflect shifting spectrums of sexual identities. Providing a queer narrative here answers calls for the advancement of the political project of queer theory in critical sociology and studies of work and organisation (Rumens et al., 2017; Schotten, 2018). For Rumens et al. (2018: 5) what characterises a ‘queering’ of work and organisation is thought or action that “questions prevailing, normative ways of understanding gender, sex, the body, sexuality and sexual desire...predicated on resistance to categorizations”. Crucially, this distinction goes beyond minority groups per se, to encompass resistance to the very idea of identity, and especially the idea that identities can or should be treated as normal, legitimate, moral or dominant (Rumens et al., 2018; Schotten, 2018). It bridges a gap between emerging studies on the difficulties of disclosing non-heterosexual identities in co-worker interaction (Einarsdóttir et al., 2016; Stenger and Roulet, 2018), and the more radical emancipatory project of workers resisting and subverting diversity categories and binaries on an ongoing basis. Employee resistance to gendered and sexualised binaries is related to another critical issue concerning the complexity of diversity’s forms in work and employment – that of the need to acknowledge and address the intersectionality of multiple differences between gender, ethnicity, age, class and so on (McBride et al., 2015). The current article seeks to speak to the critical idea that substrata of minority employees refuse to be reduced to one side of a binary, or to one or another dimension of diversity, and are likely to continue to organise and express their views at work on this basis.

From critical perspectives on diversity management and the control of labour, these queer subversions of employee differences have important, destabilising implications for work

and employment more generally, and for the impulse to try and ‘manage’ or even grasp any or all minority differences and equalities. Prevailing approaches to diversity management and LGBT inclusion, however well-intentioned, are often founded on the very impulses to normalise, legitimise, manage and control identities that queer theory is so concerned to resist (Parker, 2002). LGBT employees may therefore feel understandable ambivalence towards the danger of diversity and inclusion practices becoming reduced to tokenism, fashionable corporatised initiatives (such as wearing ‘rainbow lanyards’) and managerial rhetoric of completed objectives (Prasad et al., 2011).

Sexuality and queering the workplace involves more than minorities’ private sexual preferences. Indeed, since it more publicly relates to majority conceptions of what constitutes normative versus alternative expressions (and oppressions) of gender, masculinity, femininity, relationships, identities and desires, sexuality infuses workplaces vis-à-vis conflict, tokenism and corporatisation. Bisexuality is extremely vulnerable to being misunderstood, invisible, unacknowledged, denied or subject to demanding and unwelcome explanations in co-worker and managerial interactions (Popova, 2018). In terms of potential workplace responses, Hannah’s narrative also resonates more broadly with emerging critiques of diversity and inclusion practices (e.g. Brewis, 2018; Noon, 2017). Inclusion training, overarching employee support groups and ritual shows of allyship are experienced as sites of social and organisational struggle and mixed legitimacy in falling short of fully dealing with the nuances of LGBT issues. Ultimately, more tailored, supportive, empowering and open-ended emancipatory approaches to inclusion are needed, but they test conventional workplace cultures to their limits, and perhaps that is the point – to keep queering the limiting assumptions.

Having established some key issues concerning LGBT identities and queer politics of diversity and inclusion in the workplace, this article now turns to Hannah’s first-person narrative. The employment setting is a university context, and several main issues with

important implications for staff and students are highlighted. One guiding theme is the double standard surrounding who gets to talk about sexual identities and relationships through open workplace conversation. Power struggles and potential conflict arise where heterosexual employees and co-workers are perceived as problematic allies for LGBT issues and voices, appropriating them in misinformed ways. Equally, what is deemed safe, comfortable and acceptable for working relationships and workplace conversation often reverts to heterosexual norms, such as having opposite-sex spouses and romantic interests.

Heteronormative organisational cultures are presented as having negative consequences for the safety and comfort of LGBT staff and students. The implication is that universities still need to create more roles, spaces and representation for challenging heteronormativity and implementing more sustained and holistic approaches to LGBT inclusion. In order to increase organisational awareness of LGBT inclusion across a large institution, short training sessions and symbolic initiatives are simply not enough – more tailored resources, informative policies, networks and role models are needed. Deeper related challenges around the long-term ways of facilitating LGBT and specific forms of bisexual inclusion as organisational changes that go beyond corporate logics of reputation, box-ticking, and instrumental reward are also discussed. These changes are difficult to achieve, but the implication is that a more radical openness between staff and students to learning, allyship and the suspension of exclusionary assumptions will be crucial.

In sum, Hannah's story and testimony illustrates nuanced, dynamic challenges of LGBT inclusion and queer politics in the workplace, and the associated ambivalence and resistance these experiences can entail. After some initial introduction from Hannah about her personal background, the account is organised by its coverage of two main issues: (1) Identifying as bisexual and queer in work and life; and (2) LGBT tokenism and the corporatisation of sexual identities at work.

Hannah's story

To someone who is bi, being 'out' happens in different ways. I would say I'm very open about my sexuality at work. It is inherent in what I do because I work with the LGBT community. I talk about these issues and so it makes sense for me to talk about my personal experience as well. Although equally, I'm not sure if you went in and asked my colleagues 'how does Hannah identify?' that everyone would give you an accurate answer. If you are gay or lesbian, people seem to clearly identify that as part of your personality, your history, your life. Whereas being bi, particularly in an 'other-gender' relationship, it is easy for people to just ignore that. It is quite normalised, and they don't necessarily take the time or energy to process that something else might be the case.

I initially started identifying as queer when I was a student, I was really politically active and into LGBT circles. A lot of the reasons why I chose the word queer over the word bi were rooted in biphobia. Having talked to lots of bi-activists, I've come to embrace that identity too, but queer is still the primary term I use. For me, queer is kind of more challenging. It's about unpicking how we perceive sexuality, how we perceive gender, how we perceive intimate relationships and the difference between platonic and romantic love.

I work with students from a range of marginalised and minority groups, but primarily black and minority ethnic students, disabled students, LGBT students and women students. Each group is different, and there are different experiences within those communities, but often my work revolves around the result of a negative experience during their time at university. It could be feeling isolated or singled out, experiences of harassment or discrimination, or a lack of representation in their studies. When things get tough, students are grateful to have a community of people with whom they can share those experiences, get advice and support and just feel heard.

Identifying as bisexual and queer in work and life

In my work with students, it can feel very natural to talk about my own experience, particularly in the context of young people having questions. Beyond this however, I think some of the questions I've had from colleagues or people in general would definitely be considered insensitive. There is this oppressive idea of me being very positive and wanting to be 'out' all the time. There is always lots of conversation about what we could be doing. I think there's this expectation that I always will want to enthusiastically be involved in those conversations.

It is hard because being bi and queer is such a big part of my identity and work, but equally not all my life, and I have lots of other interests and things that I want to do. Some days, I don't want to have a detailed conversation about what it means to be bi. Some days I do. There is not always an understanding of this boundary. Sometimes I don't have the time, energy or headspace. Talking about yourself is tiring and advocating for your community is something that takes emotional energy to do.

In terms of LGBT employees in my immediate workplace, there are not huge numbers but a few people. I know one other person who is gay and one other person who is bi. It is often very personal and yet also about your team, the people you work with closely and how your identity manifests. At work it is a strange situation. One of the challenges of being bi is that it can still be invisible even if you are being open about it, particularly as I am married to a male partner. I think lots of people probably would assume that I'm straight and move on and not really consider any other options. I'm sure I've mentioned it in front of my manager about how I identify and that I was involved in LGBT campaigning when I was a student, but still, I'm not sure that if you asked them whether they would have processed that information.

When I'm with students or friends I'm more open about the challenges of being bi and queer. Whereas in meetings with senior university figures...I still struggle with this idea that sexuality is not an appropriate topic of conversation. It is challenging because I'm in a steady relationship. Yet in many workplaces, talking about being bi would be seen to be inappropriate

in a way that talking about a weekend with the wife would not. Talking about going out to a queer club night would be seen as going too far. Being in a heterosexual relationship is so normalised that a man at work talking about a weekend trip with their wife - that is a very normal conversation. That is seen as part of life, whereas bisexuality is seen as sexual, inherently about sexuality, and therefore inappropriate for the workplace, because it is about sex and not about just your life.

For me, bisexuality is simply a feeling of attraction to and a desire for intimacy with two or more genders. Biphobia is any negative behaviour experienced by someone who is bisexual as a result of their bisexual identity – it can range from people simply treating you differently, off-hand comments and disparaging remarks, through to explicit harassment and violence. Myths and stereotypes around bisexuality are still pervasive, both in the workplace and in wider society. The idea that bisexuality simply means half-straight, half-gay rather than it being its own, unique identity is a big problem. The idea that bisexuals are hyper-sexual, untrustworthy, indecisive, unable to commit...when people think of bisexuality they rarely think of positives. So much of this is tied to media representations of bisexuality. When people meet someone out as bisexual in the workplace, they often have no point of reference, no prior experiences with someone who is bi, so they fall back on stereotypes and assumptions, or try to relate it to identities like gay and lesbian that they are more familiar with.

Part of me wants to push back against stereotypes and assert that I'm in a committed relationship. It does not diminish the love that I have for my partner. The fact that there are women that I find attractive does not mean that I love him any less. However, I also want to push back against the idea that stereotypes are inherently negative things in the first place, and that people can be those things and that's fine as well! I think particularly in a workplace situation, having those conversations can be really challenging, to resist the negative stereotypes whilst also not undermining them where they are the case.

Even my mother thought I was a lesbian. Then I got a boyfriend, and she was like ‘great, you’re straight’. I think people either don’t see bisexuality or see it as a stage between other things, which it absolutely isn’t. Bisexuality still doesn’t have the same visibility in popular culture as being lesbian or gay. I would struggle to name TV characters who are bi, for example.

LGBT tokenism and the corporatisation of sexual identities at work

I like to get behind any inclusion initiative at work because I want to show I am happy to be associated with it. But in a personal capacity, I have a lot more conflict about my organisation and about lots of things that are going on. I want to stand up for students, but equally I have my personal quarrels with the inclusion project itself and balancing those two things is challenging.

I have experienced tokenism. As soon as you are identified as a minority in your workplace, organisations can be keen to use that – whether it’s to educate others or simply prove that they are inclusive. This can put an incredible amount of pressure on individuals – pressure to be a spokesperson and answer everyone’s questions. This constitutes additional workplace labour, but that fact is rarely recognised by organisations. There is an expectation that you will want to do it, on top of your other work, out of pride, out of gratitude for being acknowledged, but nothing more.

Rainbow lanyards at work are a good example of ‘allyship’. The university recently had rainbow lanyards with the university logo on and the idea was that people would wear them during LGBT history month to show their support for the LGBT community. It was my desk where they appeared, but it was difficult because I have some issues with the idea of people wearing rainbow lanyards, and around allyship. The idea was that anyone could wear them. I have concerns about what that then symbolises if there are people who potentially aren’t good allies to the LGBT community. Internally, we weren’t comfortable with it just being LGBT

staff wearing them because that singles them out. I would be very comfortable wearing one, but there are other staff who work in areas where they wouldn't be comfortable being out. It sets up a not very nice distinction between those two groups. I'm also worried about what it symbolises if students are going to start approaching staff who are wearing rainbow lanyards and assuming knowledge that they don't have. There is something majorly concerning around the tokenisation of LGBT in a corporate sphere, and the university using it to get prestige and recognition while I continue to work with LGBT students who feel incredibly unsupported.

Another case - the organisation's LGBT network has recently received an award and there was lots of celebration, which I absolutely understand because people have worked so hard on it and committed a lot of time and energy into building it up. However, I also know the organisation is probably going to take that and declare 'we're such an inclusive employer', while there are still members of the staff network who don't feel comfortable being out in their department and the organisation hasn't done much to challenge that. They have done some ally training, but it has been very small-scale training that appeals to people who are already engaged in the conversation. Whereas there are staff working in departments where they have lots of bias against the LGBT community, and not much is being done to push back against that.

People want it to be extremely simple. They want there to just be a two-hour workshop that I can run and suddenly everybody is the best LGBT champion alive. But then sometimes it can be a juggling act. I want to do those things, because they are beneficial, but I also want to recognise they are probably not the end of the road. Institutionally, people want them to be end of the road, to be able to tick that box and say we can move on now. People want to oversimplify sexuality, so they 'get it' and can then be done. I think they don't mean it in a negative way, but it can still feel quite dismissive.

In terms of corporatisation of these issues, I would always be reluctant to describe my workplace as LGBT-friendly. It is hard to establish who at work might be homophobic or have massive misunderstandings of the LGBT community. I think the LGBT community is still massively tokenised overall. This idea that people want to run these wild training sessions and then say that they're done, or to get a Stonewall award and then tick that box and say 'that's finished' is problematic if no-one wants to have more complicated conversations about LGBT stakeholders and the support they need.

I think it is challenging to imagine an inclusive workplace in a society which still has so far to go in terms of true LGBT inclusion. That said, I think an inclusive workplace is one where everyone – regardless of role, working pattern or level – feels able to bring their full self to work. Not to be an open book to everyone, but that if they would like to share details of their identities or experiences, they can be confident that there won't be any negative impact of doing so. There needs to be an openness to listening to the experiences of individuals who hold marginalised identities – whether those individuals are staff members or customers – and a commitment to on-going learning and making changes where issues are identified.

This is not to say that inclusion initiatives have no value – of course they improve the material reality for LGBT and individuals from minority groups – but I am deeply sceptical of their wider impact. I would question the value of those initiatives which focus on LGBT individuals entering positions of leadership, when doing so often means assimilating to the dominant organisational culture, and rarely has a positive impact on LGBT individuals lower down the hierarchy.

There can be a tension in resources, and often what ends up getting supported is the issue of the day – training on trans identities, for example. Equally, at some point something homophobic could happen and then people will be expecting me to come in and to talk to them about homophobia. Bisexuality often falls through the gaps between those things and when

you're running a two-hour session to tackle homophobia, there is not enough time to get into the nuances of biphobia and how it looks different. Although there are national days and things like that it's never really a priority, even in initiatives about the LGBT community. We fly the rainbow flag during LGBT history month, but there's something difficult for me around stepping over that line into describing the workplace as LGBT-friendly. I would like to see us talking about sexualities more specifically. There is asexuality, bisexuality and other identities under the LGBT spectrum, but the organisational message is always the very broad umbrella term. There can be general support, but these specific identity things never really get pulled out.

Much of the work of LGBT inclusion in workplaces is performative – organisations want to be seen to be acting because doing so carries social capital. This means that the workplaces who are more likely to engage in LGBT initiatives are those who have the most to gain from doing so – perhaps because their business or industry is perceived to be unwelcoming to those from marginalised groups – and who have the resources and capacity to invest in what is largely a PR exercise.

With corporate rankings of LGBT inclusion, most organisations listed are large, private sector corporations. If we accept this list as the ultimate measure of inclusiveness, we might assume that the safest place for LGBT folks to work is in the finance sector and not the third sector. Of course, this is not necessarily the case. For smaller organisations, particularly those in the third sector, they lack the resources to finance branded Pride floats and other symbols of LGBT inclusion, yet they may already embody values of compassion and inclusion in their work. Many corporate inclusion initiatives measure their success against the number of openly LGBT people in senior positions, rather than challenging the numerous oppressive hierarchies that exist in many workplaces and societies more widely.

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