

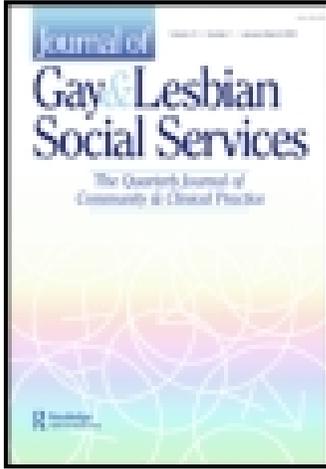
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Discrimination Against Gay Men, Lesbians, and Transgender People Working in Education

Jude Irwin ^a

^a Department of Social Work, Social Policy and Sociology, University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia

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Discrimination Against Gay Men, Lesbians, and Transgender People Working in Education

Jude Irwin

SUMMARY. This paper explores the workplace experiences of 120 gay men, lesbians, and transgender people who were employed as teachers, academics, and educators. The data, drawn from a larger collaborative research project, explored the workplace experiences of 900 gay men, lesbians, and transgender people. Homophobic harassment and treatment were widespread amongst the lesbian, gay men, and transgender teachers, academics, and educators. The paper will utilize the stories of those who experienced discrimination to explicate the issues confronting gay men, lesbians, and transgender people who work in the education system. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Lesbian, gay, transgender, discrimination, education, homophobia, academic, schools, employment, teachers

Jude Irwin is Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work, Social Policy and Sociology, University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia (E-mail: jude.irwin@social.usyd.edu.au).

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Homophobic discrimination in the workplace has been on the political agenda of lesbians and gay men in Australia since the early 1970s, when a group of gay and lesbian activists voiced concerns about the discriminatory employment practices in the armed forces and when some gay men and lesbians were dismissed from their employment after they “came out” publicly (Irwin, 1999). More recently, research undertaken in Australia has confirmed the existence of homophobic discrimination in the workplace (e.g., Anti Discrimination Board, 1982, 1990, 1992; Gays and Lesbians Against Discrimination, 1994; New South Wales Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, 1992, 1994). Anecdotal evidence suggests that many gay, lesbian, and transgender teachers, academics, and educators have experienced extensive homophobic harassment and discrimination in the workplace, but there has been little documented research focusing specifically on their workplace experiences. This article is an attempt to address this gap. It explores the workplace experiences of 120 gay men, lesbians, and transgender teachers, academics, or educators who participated in a larger research project undertaken in 1997, which inquired into the workplace experiences of gay men, lesbians, and transgender people in Australia. The article will begin by outlining the methodology of the larger project and briefly reporting on the major findings. It will then highlight the experiences of teachers, academics, and educators, utilizing their narratives to provide more detailed understandings of the nature and effects of this discrimination.

THE LARGER RESEARCH PROJECT— AN OVERVIEW OF THE METHODOLOGY

The larger research project undertaken in 1997 explored the workplace experiences (current and previous) of gay men, lesbians, and transgender people (Irwin, 1999). The research was undertaken in Australia with almost all the participants coming from the populous east coast states of New South Wales and Victoria. The main aim of the research was to identify both the extent of discrimination in the workplace against gay men, lesbians, and transgender people and to increase understanding of this by exploring gay men’s, lesbian’s, and transgender people’s experiences of discrimination in terms of collegial relationships, effects on career, and the impact these experiences had on health and overall well-being. It also explored the responses of unions and employers and assessed the adequacy of legal and other responses to discrimination. The research utilized a combination of both quantitative and

qualitative methods. These included a self-completion survey (900 completed) from which the quantitative data were obtained, five focus group interviews, and 52 individual interviews.

The survey was advertised extensively in the gay, lesbian, and transgender media as well as in various community newsletters and in some mainstream specialist publications. It was distributed through venues, bookshops, cafes, gyms, and community organizations and services. A full copy of the survey was printed in a publication disseminated widely to members of the gay, lesbian, and transgender communities, and this resulted in over 300 responses. The survey explored the experiences of gay men, lesbians, and transgender people in their current or most recent workplace in great detail, including experiences of homophobic harassment and discrimination. Experiences of harassment and discrimination were also explored in previous workplaces. The survey included questions on the social and demographic backgrounds of participants; their educational and work experiences; experiences of discrimination (if relevant) and details of the discrimination, for example, who perpetrated it, what was done (if anything), to address the discrimination by either the participant, the employer, trade union, or other relevant organization); as well as the effects of the discrimination on the health, well-being, and employment options of the participant. The survey allowed for participants to elaborate on their responses with some opportunity for qualitative comments. It also gave participants the opportunity to participate in either an individual or a focus group interview. Focus group (5) and individual interviews (52) were undertaken in order to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of the participants. The focus group interviews aimed to capture the experiences of particular groups of gay men, lesbians, and transgender people. The five groups were conducted with lesbians who were living in a non-metropolitan area; gay men and lesbians who were "out" and had never experienced discrimination; gay men and lesbians who were out and who had experienced discrimination in a previous job; older gay men; and lesbians and transgender people who had taken action against workplace discrimination. Individual interviews were undertaken with twenty-seven lesbians, twenty gay men, and five transgender people. These explored in detail all aspects of the participant's workplace experiences. Those who had experienced workplace harassment or discrimination were given the opportunity to discuss what forms it took, its effects on their life generally, and the outcomes of any action they may have taken. If the participant had not experienced workplace discrimi-

nation, the focus of the interview was on identifying the positive aspects of the workplace.

The quantitative data from the survey were analyzed with the assistance of a software package and the use of descriptive statistics. The focus group and individual interviews were electronically recorded and summarized and, with the qualitative data obtained from the survey, analyzed thematically.

About the Participants

There were 900 participants in the research comprising 416 men, 415 women and 59 transgender people (20 were female to male, 39 were male to female). The majority of the participants (77%) were aged between 25 and 45. The participants were a highly educated group with over 67% (547) having completed a university degree. While lesbians overall had higher qualifications than gay men, they earned less, being over represented in the lowest salary groups and under represented in the highest salary groups. The participants were employed in a wide range of occupations with the most common being in administration (124 or 14%) and education (120 or 13%) and the least common in the unskilled (21 or 2%), security (17 or < 2%) and service areas (36 or 4%). The majority of the participants were Anglo Australian (74% or 664). One-third of the participants who did not identify as Anglo Australians came from non-English speaking countries (78 or < 9 %) with 3% (27) identifying as Indigenous Australians.

SUMMARY OF OVERALL FINDINGS

Participants identified both positive and negative workplace experiences. From the huge array of negative practices described there were two main categories. *Homophobic behavior, harassment, and discrimination* included homophobic jokes, verbal and physical harassment, destruction of property and threats which were directed at the participants. The perpetrators of this type of behavior were generally work colleagues or clients. *Prejudicial behavior, treatment, or practices* included such treatment as being overlooked for promotion, not being offered the same opportunities as heterosexual staff and the sabotaging of work. In some situations, the perpetrators were work colleagues at the same level as the victim but in many other situations they were employees in a supervisory position who had the power to decide who is

offered opportunities (such as overtime, additional training, or good shifts). Another form of prejudicial treatment was a denial of entitlements available to heterosexual colleagues (such as partner superannuation, partner travel, and family health benefits).

The existence of discrimination in both current and previous workplaces of the participants was widespread, with 59% (532) of participants identifying experiences involving some form of homophobic behavior or prejudicial treatment in their current and/or previous workplaces. For almost all (97%) this was not just a single incident but was ongoing and affected the way they felt about themselves, their workplace, and their colleagues. It contributed to a hostile environment that had a powerful influence on their lives often extending beyond the workplace. Around 41% (368) of participants did not specify experiencing any discrimination in their current or previous workplaces and many of these identified positive workplace experiences.

The homophobic behavior reported by the participants included sexual and physical assault, verbal harassment and abuse, destruction of property, ridicule, belittling, and homophobic jokes. Prejudicial treatment in the workplace included unfair rosters, unreasonable work expectations, sabotaging and undermining of work, and restrictions to career. Forty-one participants considered they had been dismissed from their most recent job because of their homosexuality. Several participants also reported they had been denied workplace entitlements that were available to heterosexual colleagues such as partner travel, superannuation, and compassionate leave. Homophobic harassment and prejudicial treatment spanned all occupations, industries, and types and sizes of the employing organizations. However, discrimination was more likely to happen in traditionally male-dominated occupations and industries.

Transgender participants were most likely to experience discrimination or harassment (75% or 44). Just over 67% (248) of lesbians and 57% (236) of gay men experienced discrimination or harassment in their workplaces.

The effects of this homophobic behavior and prejudicial treatment were extensive and included effects on the individual and their workplace performance. The effects on individuals included increased stress, depression, illness, loss of self-confidence, increased alcohol and drug intake, and attempted suicide. Workplace performance was negatively affected as a result of increased leave due to stress-related illness, participants not wanting to be at work and having to be constantly on guard. The existence of homophobic behavior and harassment affected the

workplace culture, often creating a hostile and unsafe environment for out or suspected lesbians, gay men, and transgender people.

Some participants commented that they did not experience homophobic discrimination because no one at their workplace knew they were gay or lesbian. While a high percentage of participants were out to at least someone in the workplace, 10% (90) chose not to tell anyone in their workplace that they were gay, lesbian, or transgender. Many participants were out selectively because they felt unsafe to be entirely open about their sexuality. Those participants who were out to everyone had often chosen workplaces where they felt safe and where “I can be myself.” In these situations participants felt there was little likelihood of experiencing homophobic discrimination.

Only a small percentage of those people who were the recipients of homophobic harassment or behavior took action. Those who did take action were most likely to confront the harasser or discuss the issue with management. Very few participants chose to use the legal avenues that exist. The main contributing factors to this decision were the anticipated long time delays, exposure of their sexuality, and little chance of a positive outcome. Unions did not play a major role in assisting people to take action.

The positive workplace experiences of participants were characterized by a workplace culture which promoted difference (rather than just accepted or tolerated it), that is, where gays, lesbians and transgender people felt safe and where their contribution was acknowledged and valued.

WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS, ACADEMICS, AND EDUCATORS

Teachers, academics, and educators comprised the second-largest occupational group participating in the research (120 or 13%) after administrative workers (124 or 14%). They included those employed in the state and private (including church operated) school systems and those employed in the post secondary and tertiary education sectors. Just over 60% (71) of the teachers, academics, and educators identified experiencing homophobic behavior, harassment, and discrimination and/or prejudicial treatment. The homophobic behavior included: being the target of homophobic jokes (41 or 35%); being asked unwelcome questions about their sexuality (36 or 31%); being “outed” or having their sexuality disclosed (32 or 27%); being socially excluded (28 or 23%); being

ridiculed (21 or 18%); being sexually harassed (19 or 16%); being threatened with physical violence (13 or 11%); being threatened with sexual violence (6 or 5%); and having property damaged (6 or 5%). Three participants experienced physical violence and one of these was also sexually assaulted.

I experienced some overt discrimination including questioning about my sexuality, being outed, social exclusion, as well as over-supervision of my work and the threat of losing my job. My bosses saw the problem as my involvement with another worker rather than my sexuality but relationships between heterosexual employees weren't treated in this way. (25-year-old lesbian teacher)

My office was trashed, and I had anonymous hate mail and phone calls. I have also been excluded from office functions. (39-year-old gay male academic)

The perpetrators of this behavior were most likely to be work colleagues employed either at a similar level or in a more senior position than the recipient of the homophobic behavior. For schoolteachers, the perpetrators of the homophobic behavior included students and their parents.

I experienced student and parent harassment on the grounds of my perceived lesbianism. This involved accusations to both my immediate supervisor and the Deputy Principal. (42-year-old lesbian teacher)

I experienced harassment from a small group of senior students who used to harass me by calling out "lesbian" when I walked past them, by writing lesbian on my property. They once threw an apple at me when I was on playground duty. I also had unwelcome questions from other students about my sexuality and insinuations that I looked like a man. (38-year-old lesbian teacher)

Many teachers, academics, or educators also experienced prejudicial treatment. The most frequent form was the undermining and sabotaging of work (26); unreasonable work expectations (18); limited opportunities for career development (18); threat of loss of promotion (16); and additional performance criteria (14). Twenty-one people stated they had been denied partner rights to superannuation, while 11 commented

they had been denied entitlements available to heterosexual staff (e.g., parental leave, leave to care for an ill partner, compassionate leave).

In 1995 my work was called into question. I was closely scrutinized and disciplined for no reason. I was treated differently by the principal and others. I ended up being forced out. I suffered emotionally and financially. I used to be out and confident and now I am not out and feel a loss of identity. (43-year-old lesbian teacher)

I work in a Catholic school and I am not out. If I asked for my partner to be included in my superannuation I would out myself and that would be the end of my job. (29-year-old gay male teacher)

Some participants talked about how it was sometimes difficult to know whether they were being treated in a homophobic way. Others commented on the complexity of harassment and how it was not always possible to determine whether it was primarily homophobic or a combination of interacting factors.

I was never really sure it was homophobic harassment. It was as much to do with me being a strong and assertive woman who would take him on. (45-year-old lesbian academic)

It is difficult to say why I was discriminated against but I think it had more to do with being a woman than a lesbian and being an older and stropic woman. (55-year-old lesbian teacher)

In or Out of the Closet

Some teachers, academics, and educators commented that they had not experienced homophobic behavior or prejudicial treatment because they had not been open about their sexuality.

I was never discriminated against because I didn't come out till after I retired. No one knew I was gay. I lead a double life because my family still don't know. (69-year-old gay male retired teacher)

Only 8% (10) of teachers, academics, and educators were not open to anyone at work about their sexuality. Just under 35% (41) are out to everyone at work. This is a smaller proportion than in the complete survey, where 51% (448) of the participants identified they were out to every-

one in their workplace. Teachers, academics, and educators were the occupational group in the research most likely to be selectively out (56% or 67) compared to 39% (347) in the complete survey. Many teachers, especially those employed in church schools, expressed concerns about being out and the risk this posed for their continuing employment.

I'm not really out at work so I am in constant fear and anxiety of being found out and I would get the sack. It's a church school. (30-year-old lesbian teacher)

Some teachers commented on the negative consequences of being "found out" or presumed to be gay, lesbian, or transgender. Others commented that they were reticent about being open about their sexuality after experiencing homophobic harassment or discrimination in other schools, and for some these experiences took some time to overcome.

After my previous experiences I was less prepared to be open about my sexuality. (53-year-old gay male teacher)

I am fortunate to have a lesbian boss and co-workers. For the first time ever I feel safe at work. It took a long time to trust this. (52-year-old lesbian teacher)

A contextual factor that could have influenced school teachers' choices about being open about their sexuality was the "moral panic" that resulted from the Royal Commission into Police Corruption in the state of New South Wales between 1995 and 1997, which highlighted police protection of pedophiles. Some gay and lesbian teachers perceived that this reinforced the misconceptions that link homosexuality to pedophilia. This had a significant effect on many groups but particularly on gay men and lesbians who worked as teachers in schools (Ferfolja, forthcoming). However, the implications of this issue require further research. Many teachers, academics, and educators commented on the personal consequences for them of not feeling safe enough to be out about their sexual identity.

I don't like not being open but if they knew I was gay I'd be out of a job. It is hard though to hide the most important part of your life and it causes fear and stress. (43-year-old gay male teacher)

It takes a lot of energy to hide your sexuality and creates a lot of stress. (31-year-old lesbian teacher)

For some, being open about their sexuality was possible because they had supportive workplace colleagues, which meant they felt safe to be out.

I don't want to hide what I do any more. Being open helped me to relate more honestly. (47-year-old gay male teacher)

Effects of Discrimination

All but three of the seventy-one teachers, academics, and educators who had experienced some form of discrimination commented that it had some negative effect on them or on their work performance. The most likely effect identified was an increase in their anxiety and stress levels (90% or 64). Many became depressed (80% or 57) and/or experienced a loss of confidence (63% or 45). Just under 62% (44) commented that they had become ill as a consequence of their treatment with just over 59% (41) commenting that it had a negative effect on their personal relationships. Thirteen (18%) commented that they had increased their drug and alcohol intake. Twelve (16%) commented that they had contemplated suicide and one person said he had attempted suicide. As a consequence of the ongoing harassment, 30 (42%) said they had sought counseling, and 24 (34%) had sought medical treatment.

The constant stress had eroded my confidence and self esteem. I began to think about how I had contributed and began to blame myself for the situation. I know I shouldn't think like this but sometimes I just can't help it. (34-year-old gay male academic)

I suffered a complete nervous breakdown. It made me depressed and I lost total confidence in my ability to do the job. I even thought about killing myself. (41-year-old lesbian teacher)

Many commented on the negative effects of either being exposed to, or being fearful of homophobic harassment at their work. Forty-two (59%) said it had resulted in them achieving less at work, 51 (72%) commented that they had considered resigning, 27 (38%) had resigned,

33 (46%) had taken sick leave, 35 (49%) had decided on a career change and 13 (18%) said they had been sacked.

I worked for a religious school and experienced extreme and systematic discriminatory behavior, including being the target of homophobic jokes and remarks, being asked unwelcome questions, ridicule, social exclusion, threats of physical violence. I eventually resigned rather than seek sickness compensation, which they were refusing to give me. (28-year-old gay male teacher)

Some participants commented that the fear of becoming the target of harassment affected the way they behaved or what they had to do to be accepted.

I had to work twice as hard building up positive relationships. (37-year-old lesbian academic)

The same rules didn't apply to me as to the straight people. I had to be very careful about how I related to the kids. It was constraining sometimes. (29-year-old gay male teacher)

Many of the participants commented on the effect that the existence of homophobic behavior and harassment had in the creation of a negative culture in the workplace. For example, many of those who experienced being the target of homophobic jokes or being socially excluded, commented that while these types of homophobic behaviors may seem minimal, they nevertheless contributed to the creation of a workplace culture that was hostile and unsafe and where it was often necessary to be "on guard." For many this reinforced their difference in a negative way and created an atmosphere of intolerance. Others, however, viewed it differently; as one gay man said, "It was a blessed relief to be excluded." Likewise, some considered behavior such as social exclusion had no effect on their performance at work, while others considered it did have an effect on their work performance and their sense of self.

Action Taken Against the Homophobic Harassment and Treatment

While experiences of homophobic behavior, harassment, and unfair treatment were extensive, less than half (45% or 32) of the teachers, academics, and educators who experienced homophobic harassment or treatment chose to take action. Teachers, academics, and educators were

nevertheless the occupational group most likely to take action. In the larger research project only 36% (192) of those who experienced discriminatory behavior or treatment took some form of action.

The most likely action taken was either to confront the offender or to discuss it with management or senior staff. Responses varied, and ranged from the harassment ceasing to the claim not being taken seriously by executive staff. Only two teachers sought advice or assistance from their union. Some commented that they did not consider that the union would act for them on an issue such as homophobic harassment as they saw the core business of unions as work conditions and salaries. Others commented on the homophobic treatment they had experienced within the union movement.

The union was full of homophobes. Perpetrators are usually union members too and have “mates” in union positions. The union is only good for wages and other conditions. (36-year-old gay male teacher)

Positive Experiences

There were participants who identified positive experiences in their workplaces. Very often this was associated with their employers’ (and senior staff) commitment to the promotion of diversity. In these situations, discrimination of any kind was not acceptable and this was reflected in the attitudes of staff.

The university in which I work is tolerant of difference. This is one of the reasons I decided to come out when I moved here as I thought it was safe. All staff and students know me and that I am a lesbian and that my partner works here. (46-year-old lesbian academic)

My current workplace has been a good experience and has improved my life and confidence outside work mainly because the boss who is a lesbian has made it clear to staff, students, and parents that the school does not tolerate homophobia. Staff support this and students are dealt with immediately and appropriately. For the first time in my working career I have not heard a single homophobic joke or assumption in staffrooms. (46-year-old lesbian teacher)

CONCLUSION

Employers and unions have responsibility and a duty of care to protect employees against discrimination of any kind. It is the employer's responsibility to ensure that employees are protected against homophobic harassment and prejudicial treatment. The creation of a safe, productive, and inclusive workplace is dependent upon employers creating a workplace environment where there are disincentives for perpetrating homophobic harassment and prejudicial treatment. Employers need to be active in challenging individual, institutional, and systemic discrimination in the workplace. While employers may not be actively reinforcing homophobic practices and behaviors, they can collude with these practices by not actively challenging them. The need for close examination of employment and workplace practices to ensure that people are all treated in a fair and just way is paramount. It is only by doing this and creating transparent policy, procedures, and practices that inclusive workplaces will be created.

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