

Discrimination, bullying and harassment of lesbian, gay and bisexual employees in Great Britain

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Summary

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This briefing reports on a recently completed three-year, multi-method study of workplace experiences of British lesbians, gay men and bisexuals (LGBs) providing new insights about an often overlooked minority.

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Summary continued

Although most LGBs report positive workplace experiences, many suffer discrimination, bullying and harassment at the hands of colleagues or clients. The key research findings showed that:

- LGBs were more than twice as likely to be bullied and discriminated against as their heterosexual colleagues. Bisexual and lesbian employees reported the highest levels of discrimination and bullying and the worst levels of poor health;
- in terms of negative behaviour, LGBs reported higher levels of exposure to intrusive and sexualised behaviour, as well as social exclusion, than heterosexual employees;
- stereotyping played an important role in scenarios of bullying and discrimination, with gay men who matched stereotypical expectations being more at risk of bullying, and lesbians who did not fit such stereotypes being more exposed;
- ignorance and lack of understanding were commonplace when discussing bisexuality, with an expressed intolerance of ‘not knowing’.

Introduction and background

What little previous research existed into the work experiences of lesbians, gay men and bisexual employees tended to paint a bleak picture, with verbal abuse, homophobic remarks and even physical violence commonplace (e.g. Stonewall, 2007). But a question mark has been raised over much of the research findings due to methodological shortcomings (Griffith and Hebl, 2002). It has been argued that many of the samples used are small, unrepresentative, self-selected, often male

and urban/London-based; alternatively they have emerged from panel studies, or even from surveys not specifically focusing on LGBs. In response to this challenge and to provide a robust and reliable account of LGBs’ experiences we used a multi-method approach, combining a nationwide survey that employed a representative sample of LGBs and heterosexual employees based on quota-sampling; interviews with LGBs, HR managers and trade union representatives; as well as focus groups with heterosexual colleagues.



Discrimination, bullying and harassment: Assessing the impact of sexuality

A representative sample of 500 non-heterosexual and 712 heterosexual British respondents was identified by an external survey provider (TNS-BRMB) involving screening a total of 73,303 people. Among the 500 non-heterosexual respondents, there were 147 gay men, 122 lesbians, 151 bisexuals

(40 men and 111 women), 56 'unsure', and 24 who declared themselves as 'other sexual orientation'. Respondents were interviewed in their homes by a methodology which protected interviewees' confidentiality and anonymity, acknowledging the sensitivity of the issues involved.

Table 1: Exposure to bullying at work

	Heterosexuals	Lesbians	Gay men	Bisexuals	Other	Unsure
No	92.4%	82.3%	86.3%	80.1%	83.3%	83.9%
*Yes, occasionally	5%	11.6%	13.7%	12.6%	8.4%	11%
**Yes, regularly	1.4%	5.3%	0.0%	6.6%	4.2%	3.6%
Total bullied	6.4%	16.9%	13.7%	19.2%	12.6%	14.6%

* incorporates 'occasional' and 'monthly' categories

** incorporates 'weekly' and 'daily' categories

The key findings which emerged from the research were that:

- LGBTs were more than twice as likely to be bullied and discriminated against as heterosexual respondents when controlling for all other factors;
- bisexuals and lesbians reported the highest levels of bullying (19.2% and 16.9%), followed by gay men (13.7%), compared to heterosexuals (6.4%);
- bisexuals and lesbians reported much higher exposure to severe or regular experience of bullying (6.6% and 5.3%) respectively, compared to heterosexuals (1.4%).

LGBTs were also much more likely than heterosexual respondents to report experience of negative behaviour, and lesbians and bisexuals more so than gay men. When examining the behavioural experience further (by means of factor analysis), LGBTs were particularly prone to experience intrusive, sexualised behaviour, and acts associated with social exclusion.

Intrusive, sexualised acts include:

- experiencing unwanted physical contact, e.g. touching and grabbing, groping;
- being confronted with unwanted jokes or remarks which have a sexual undertone;

- receiving unwelcome comments about the way you dress.

Acts expressing social exclusion include:

- people avoiding physical contact with you;
- facing hostile reaction when you talk about your personal/private life;
- being excluded from your work team/workgroup;
- being excluded from social activities with colleagues at work.

Sexuality, bullying and health outcomes

The results confirm previous research, with LGBTs reporting worse health and wellbeing than their heterosexual colleagues. However, the data also revealed a more nuanced picture in that:

- the worst health and wellbeing was found for lesbians and bisexuals and this applied to psychological as well as physical health, although this was most pronounced for psychological health;
- gay men also had significantly worse physical health than heterosexual men, although not psychological health.

Disclosure of non-heterosexuality and experience of workplace bullying

Whilst a majority of LGBs are open about their sexuality at work (55%), one in five were 'not open at all' or give the impression of being heterosexual, with bisexuals and respondents within the 'other group' least likely to be open.

It is noteworthy, that those receiving support and encouragement from their line-manager with respect to being open at work also were less likely to be bullied. By contrast, where line-managers were unsupportive or where policies on equal opportunities were not followed, LGBs tended to report higher levels of bullying.

Whilst being open about one's sexuality at work was not related to any increase in bullying, it was those who expressed a desire to be more open who were more at risk of being bullied and discriminated against, as well as experiencing poor health. This suggests that fear of potential adverse impact prevents some LGBs from disclosing their sexuality at work. It also indicates that assumptions about non-heterosexuality can lead to, or play a role in, bullying and discrimination. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that those LGBs who agreed with the statement 'no matter what I do or say, people will draw their own conclusions about my sexuality/sexual orientation' were more likely to be targets of bullying. In other words, simply assuming that someone is lesbian or gay, rightly or wrongly, could be sufficient for someone to become a target of bullying.

Disclosure dynamics, stereotyping and bullying

Our interviews confirmed that for most LGBs, disclosing one's sexuality at work is not a one-off event, but a repeated process dependent upon context and situation, which would include finding the right moment. Most models of disclosure of non-heterosexuality are based on the assumption that sexuality is hidden or invisible and would need to be disclosed to be known by others (Ragins,

2008). It follows that disclosure is considered to be controlled by the LGB persons themselves and can be planned and managed as the individual sees fit.

However, our interviews with LGBs suggest otherwise, emphasising that the disclosure process is often far more dynamic, with colleagues playing an active part. For example, a disclosure decision may be prompted by questions about one's private life. Colleagues may be party to information previously volunteered and passed around the organisation, or indeed from other sources or connections, sometimes revealed publicly – the so-called 'outing'. But disclosure can also be assisted by colleagues arriving at their own conclusions, rightly, or wrongly. For example, they may be picking up on hints or information regarding a person's social connections and cultural interests, and indeed signals about sexuality revealed by looks, dress and mannerisms.

Our interviews revealed that many LGBs had a clear picture of what other LGBs often look like, referring to someone as 'typically gay or lesbian'. Such stereotypes often extend beyond looks and dress, to include voice and mannerisms. Whilst the 'gaydar', or gay radar, is commonly used by LGBs to spot other LGBs, it emphasises the subscription to stereotypical assumptions among many LGBs and also among heterosexuals. Furthermore, as the stereotypes are often negative and unflattering, particularly about lesbians, they give rise to concern, particularly as the academic literature, and indeed the LGB community, largely ignore their presence and their negative impact. In this respect our interviews revealed that matching stereotypes, or 'fitting the bill', had different implications for gay men and lesbians. Whilst gay men conforming to stereotypes were more vulnerable to experience negative acts, among lesbians, it was those who did not 'fit the bill', the 'feminine lesbian', who seemed to bear the brunt of negative treatment. Not only was the sexuality of these women often questioned or mistrusted, they were often considered a threat by female colleagues, whilst some male colleagues continued making advances.

Sexualised and intrusive workplace behaviour: Boundary setting and management intervention

To get a better picture of how heterosexuals view LGBs and their presence in the workplace, we carried out 15 focus groups across five large organisations – three public, one private and one from the third sector – by presenting participants with scenarios of negative LGB experience, written in ambiguous terms to stimulate discussion.

In one of the scenarios Amir, an openly gay man described as 'loud' and 'not holding back when telling about last weekend's adventures', often found himself at the receiving end of intrusive questions about his personal life. He also reported that some of his male colleagues make negative remarks about gay men and tell jokes about gay men, but admits that he often joins in the laughter. In the following discussions most participants put the blame on Amir, although to a differing extent, for 'setting the tone' and 'taking it down the gutter', interpreting the scenario's references to 'being loud' and 'adventures' to mean that Amir is being sexually explicit about his experiences, thus, revealing prejudice about gay men. Although Amir admittedly finds it upsetting, he was blamed for joining in and not making a stand and challenging the behaviour. As he is considered guilty of setting the standard, he is also seen as having lost the right to complain.

When participants in the groups made up of managers discussed boundary setting, it was revealed that some subscribed to non-intervention, leaving it to LGBs themselves to define their own boundaries. Others saw acceptability of behaviour primarily as a function of context and situation, whilst only a minority emphasised absolute boundaries with managers responsible for enforcing these. There was agreement that much less tolerance was to be expected towards jokes and banter playing on ethnicity or race.

Bisexuality: Feared and misunderstood

In another scenario a bisexual, divorced woman, described as popular, particularly with her male colleagues, found herself gradually isolated and socially excluded as rumours about her sexuality are passed around the organisation when she confides in a colleague, having been spotted kissing a woman outside a gay venue. The discussion revealed that bisexuality often is little understood, particularly when the person is not in a same-sex relationship, as reflected in the following quote:

“Miriam was straight, then although it says bisexual, if she then started liking women and then it was just women, surely she would then be a lesbian and not a bisexual.”

Many participants showed little sympathy for Miriam, blaming her for creating the problem in the first place by being 'dishonest with her colleagues'. The conversations demonstrated intolerance for 'not knowing', suggesting a fear of homosexuality, and with some people revealing a need to know when to police one's behaviour.

Key issues and conclusions

As one of the largest, most comprehensive and scientifically sound studies of LGBs' workplace experiences, the research reveals that:

- LGBs experience substantially more negative behaviour, bullying and discrimination than their heterosexual colleagues;
 - lesbian and bisexual women reported more bullying and discrimination as well as worse health and wellbeing;
 - negative experiences are often linked to stereotyping, with negative stereotypes of gay men and lesbians widespread, although rarely acknowledged;
 - managers are often uncertain about their responsibility in intervening when boundaries for unacceptable behaviour about or involving LGBs are crossed.
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Recommendations

- Supportive managers and actively enforced equal opportunities make a positive difference to the experience of LGBs.
 - A 'one size fits all' approach does not work, as gay men, lesbians and bisexuals to some extent face different problems.
 - Ignorance and prejudice should be challenged, educating everyone, although training should start with managers themselves.
 - Training could utilise discussion-based material, using real-life scenarios as vehicles for discussion.
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