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Hoel, H., Lewis, D. and Einarsdottir, Anna (2014) The ups and downs of LGBs' workplace experiences: discrimination, bullying and harassment of lesbian, gay and bisexual employees in Britain. Report. Manchester Business School , Manchester.

<https://doi.org/10.15124/yao-6sv1-kd87>

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# The ups and downs of LGBs' workplace experiences

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

Helge Hoel, Duncan Lewis and Anna Einarsdóttir



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& SOCIAL  
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## Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support and assistance of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) whose funding [grant number RES-062-23-2412] made this study possible.

The authors also thank the members of the Steering Committee whose advice was invaluable at various stages of the research. We are particularly grateful to Baroness Rita Donaghy for her support in hosting steering committee meetings at the House of Lords.

The authors also thank Sue Botcherby of the Equality and Human Rights Commission for her support and guidance in preparation of the research proposal and project design.

Finally, the authors also thank the case study organisations, their employees and the research participants who took part in this study and gave their time generously.

**Helge Hoel** and **Anna Einarsdóttir**\* are in Manchester Business School at the University of Manchester

**Duncan Lewis** is in the Graduate School of Management at Plymouth University

Manchester Business School,  
Booth Street West,  
Manchester, M15 6PB

Published January 2014

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**[lgbatwork.portals.mbs.ac.uk](http://lgbatwork.portals.mbs.ac.uk)**

ISBN no: 978-0-946007-32-5

*\* As of 1st January 2014 Anna Einarsdóttir lectures at Hull University Business School*

# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	4
1.0 <b>Our research</b>	5-7
2.0 <b>Methodology: the value of a mixed method approach</b>	8-9
3.0 <b>Surveying discrimination, bullying and harassment: examining the impact on sexuality</b>	10-18
4.0 <b>Disclosure &amp; openness about sexuality at work</b>	19
5.0 <b>Homophobia and negative treatment of LGBs</b>	20-21
6.0 <b>Disclosure and Stereotyping</b>	22-23
7.0 <b>The straight view: how heterosexual colleagues interpret LGB issues</b>	24-28
8.0 <b>LGB workplace experiences in context: case study accounts</b>	29
8.1 <b>Inside Middleton: an NHS Trust</b>	29
8.2 <b>The Royal Navy</b>	30
8.3 <b>Hillside Prison</b>	31
8.4 <b>Foundations Financial Services</b>	32
8.5 <b>Goodwill – a nationwide charity</b>	33
8.6 <b>Fairprice – an International Retailer</b>	34
9.0 <b>Conclusions</b>	35

# Executive Summary

**This report summarises the findings of a national study into the workplace experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) employees.** Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and supported by the Equality and Human Rights Commission the report provides a sound and reliable account of contemporary life of LGBs in relation to bullying, harassment and discrimination at work. Drawing upon a representative survey of over 1,200 face-to-face interviews, and backed up by over 50 interviews with LGBs in six organisational case studies and 75 heterosexual respondents discussing LGB vignettes in 15 focus groups, the report provides insights that have often been absent in explaining the relatively high incidences of bullying and discrimination of LGBs in the UK.

Our report uses personal experiences and witness observations to illustrate how LGBs encounter bullying and discrimination and what effects these have upon individual psychological and mental health. Our report shows:

- LGBs were more than twice as likely to be bullied and discriminated against than heterosexual employees
- One in five (19.2%) bisexuals report the highest levels of bullying with a third reporting regular bullying
- One in six (16.9%) lesbians report bullying at work with approximately a third reporting regular bullying
- Gay men report more than double the levels of bullying compared to heterosexuals
- LGBs are one and half times more likely to experience a range of negative acts compared to heterosexuals and these were highest for lesbians and bisexuals. In some cases, LGBs were nearly three times more likely to encounter certain negative acts compared to heterosexuals. These include:
  - 'People avoiding physical contact with you at work'
  - 'Experiencing unwanted physical contact e.g. touching, grabbing, groping'
  - 'Being confronted with unwanted jokes or remarks which have a sexual undertone'

The negative behaviours LGBs find most difficult to deal with include:

- 'Being asked intrusive or pushy questions about your personal/private life'
- 'Receiving intimidating emails, text messages or photos from people you work with'
- 'Being excluded from social activities with colleagues at work'

Our report shows how LGBs reported significantly higher levels of poor health and this was highest for lesbians and bisexuals.

Bullying and exposure to negative acts also revealed high correlations with negative health outcomes. As expected, the

more regular and frequent exposure to negative behaviours leads to poorer physical and psychological ill-health.

Whilst the majority of the LGBs in this study are open about their sexuality at work, one in five remains closeted. Our report shows that wanting to be 'more open' about one's sexuality showed significant associations with negative outcomes including reporting higher levels of bullying and discrimination. This has implications for organisations and managers in how disclosure of sexuality is managed.

Although homophobia was not widespread our report shows that when it does occur it can be extremely hurtful and upsetting. Additionally, we suggest that less obvious manifestations of prejudice are often overlooked or missed and heterosexism and modern forms of discrimination can be exhibited in more subtle and selective ways.

A major finding in our study is the role of stereotyping in dynamics around disclosure of non-heterosexuality and how LGBs suffer from such stereotyping which has implications for decisions on whether to disclose their sexuality. In some cases presumptions about heterosexuality force LGBs to disclose their identity whilst others are assumed to be LGB because of their dress, physical features or mannerisms. Stereotyping can be used to harass and bully and be a source of homophobic remarks, particularly for gay men, whilst lesbians who did not conform to stereotypes were treated with suspicion, seen as a threat to other women and indirectly to men who saw them as "fair game". Stereotyping, which was also common among LGBs themselves, also had implications for how tasks or roles were decided in work leading to significant potential career implications.

Our report also reveals how heterosexuals interpret LGB issues. Using three LGB scenarios, heterosexuals often display a denial of discrimination, instead preferring to blame the victim or target of the perceived discrimination. Heterosexual discussants also revealed their ignorance of the challenges facing LGBs when it came to managing boundaries and inappropriate behaviour, with several believing it was LGBs' responsibility to challenge and address these issues. Of particular insight was the ignorance and fear displayed regarding bisexuality, echoed in perceptions that everyone has a right to know so that no-one would be shocked.

## 1.0 Our Research

**Evidence of bullying, harassment and discrimination towards lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people has emerged in a number of studies of British employment experiences.** Whilst these studies are informative, most do not focus on LGB people, but instead report on a variety of demographic groups of which LGBs are one small component. When studies do focus on LGBs they are often small in scale and lack the representativeness in sampling that is so important in providing a comprehensive picture of contemporary working life for LGBs. Our research addresses some of these shortcomings by providing the first representative survey of bullying of LGBs in Britain using the Negative Acts Questionnaire Sexual Orientation (NAQ-SO) survey. This survey was conducted by survey specialists TNS-BRMB on our behalf in 2011-2012 where a representative sample of heterosexual, lesbian, gay and bisexual employees were asked about their experiences at work.

### 1.1 What we asked in our Survey

Our survey wanted to find whether LGBs experience more or less bullying, negative workplace behaviours and discrimination compared to heterosexuals. To do this we asked a series of questions about:

- Negative behaviours using the NAQ-SO battery.
- Whether people perceived they had experienced bullying, using a standard definition.
- What health effects were associated with these experiences.
- We asked people about how demanding their jobs were, how much autonomy they had to make day-to-day decisions on planning and carrying out their work and whether they had sufficient resources to carry out normal work tasks.
- We asked people about discrimination and their awareness of their employment rights.
- We also asked questions specifically to LGBs about how open they were at work about their sexuality, whether they had been subjected to homophobic behaviour and how they felt about disclosure of their sexual identity.
- We also asked a series of demographic questions about:
  - Age
  - Gender
  - Ethnicity
  - Religion
  - Income levels
  - Disability and long-term health issues
  - Educational attainment
  - Which sector of the economy they worked in
  - Organisation size
  - Relationship Status
  - Managerial responsibilities
  - Working status

We tested our questionnaire using cognitive testing at a Hall Test in a large UK city by randomly selecting members of the general public to complete and discuss how they understood our questions. This enabled us to establish if our survey captured what we intended it to and to modify questions where there was any uncertainty. It was during cognitive testing that we learnt the importance of including categories of 'unsure' and 'other' for sexuality.

We had two main screening questions for our research. The first aimed to only screen-in those people who were in employment or had been within the last six months. This period was selected because we believe people's ability to recall events longer than six months ago could be problematic. We also wanted to capture any people who might have left employment because of bullying or because of the types of experiences we were interested in. Our second screening question was about sexuality. We knew we could capture heterosexual respondents relatively easily, but we knew from existing research that getting non-heterosexual people to take part in surveys was consistently problematic. We explain in some depth the challenges associated with this in our section on methodology.



## 1.2 Our Case Studies

Researchers have long known that asking people questions in a structured survey only tells a part of the picture on work experiences. Data from surveys could help us with the patterns of bullying, negative behaviour, discrimination and so on, but to understand what these mean we needed qualitative information. The sorts of things that interested us were how LGBs actually experienced homophobia, bullying and negative treatment. What effects did this have on them and how did they cope with them. We specifically wanted to see how LGBs managed their sexual identity at work and what risks they associated with disclosure to different people they worked with.

We also wanted to discover what heterosexuals thought about LGB experiences of these issues. To do this we adapted an approach used by others<sup>1</sup> where stories of LGB people are discussed by heterosexuals in focus groups. This would provide valuable insights into how heterosexuals perceive a range of issues that might trouble LGBs.

We knew from other studies on employment experiences that Human Resources (HR) and trade unions played important roles in buffering and managing the employment relationship and supporting managers and employees in dealing with workplace conflicts. We therefore decided to include HR and trade union representatives in our case studies to see what roles they played in the lived experiences of LGBs.

We decided at the outset that it was important to capture people's experiences across a range of employment sectors. Studies have shown that all sectors are affected by bullying, harassment and discrimination and that in some sectors this is more prevalent than in others. We also knew that estimates of LGBs in the labour market varied significantly<sup>2</sup> and to capture a modest number of LGB voices in an organisation we would need to work with larger employers, typically with more than 500 employees. These sizes of organisation would also have the HR and trade union representatives we wanted to talk to. Using these criteria we spent two years negotiating with six organisations to build cooperative relationships where we could be certain of protecting organisational and individual anonymities. We have therefore disguised the organisations where they have asked to remain anonymous. Section 8 below deals with each case study individually.

## 1.3 Aims of our study

Our research has seven research aims:

- 1) Provide an accurate estimate of the prevalence and behavioural nature of discrimination, bullying and harassment of LGB employees.
- 2) Identify risk-groups within the LGB population, risk-industries and occupations and examine how sexuality may overlap with other risk factors such as gender, ethnicity, religion, age and disability.
- 3) Identify situational and organisational antecedents of discrimination, bullying and harassment of LGBs as well as those organisational and contextual factors that might buffer/prevent such experiences
- 4) Establish the relationship between LGBs' experience of bullying and harassment and degrees of disclosure of their sexuality at work.
- 5) Compare the experience of LGB employees with that of heterosexual employees.
- 6) Examine how the experiences of gay men are similar or different to those of lesbians.
- 7) Investigate the individual and organisational outcomes of discrimination, bullying and harassment.

These aims would be investigated using a combination of our representative survey, in depth interviews with LGBs, focus groups with heterosexuals discussing LGB issues and in-depth interviews with HR and trade union representatives. We would also examine policy and organisational literature where appropriate to establish what steps each organisation had taken to tackle bullying, harassment and discrimination.

## 1.4 Research Steering Committee

To assist us in achieving a successful research project we established a steering committee chaired by Baroness Rita Donaghy of Peckham, former Chair of the TUC and Acas. The membership of the Steering Committee comprised:

- **Baroness Rita Donaghy** - Chair
- **Professor Helge Hoel** - Principal Investigator
- **Professor Duncan Lewis** - Co-Investigator
- **Dr. Anna Einarsdóttir** - Research Associate
- **Dianah Worman OBE** - Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD)
- **Peter Purton** - Trades Union Congress (TUC)
- **Gill McCarthy** - Acas
- **Peter Harris** - Wales Secretary Public and Civil Services Union
- **April Guasp** - Stonewall
- **Michelle Fullerton** - Bank of America Merrill Lynch
- **Surinder Sharma** - Department of Health
- **Elizabeth Cowper** - LVMH Perfumes & Cosmetics
- **Paul Milner** - Zochonis Charitable Trust
- **Richard Vince** - HM Prison Manchester
- **Holly Critchley** - HM Prison Manchester
- **Lt. Cdr. Jill Monnox** - Royal Navy
- **Lt. Cdr. Chris New** - Royal Navy
- **Lt Cdr. Mandy McBain** - Royal Navy
- **Lt. Cdr. Toby Evison** - Royal Navy
- **Hyacinth Parsons** - Communities and Local Government
- **Barbara Lindsay MBE** - Government Equalities Office
- **Jayne Willetts** - Police Federation of England and Wales
- **Wayne McManus** - Police Federation of England and Wales
- **David Vaughan** - Royal Mail
- **Liz Williams** - IBM
- **Liz McCue** - North West Employers
- **Sue Botcherby** - Equality and Human Rights Commission
- **Kevan Collins** - London Borough of Tower Hamlets

## 1.5 Structure of the report

Our report commences with the methodological considerations of our mixed methods approach. Specifically, the weaknesses of some previous research approaches, the rationale for a mixed methods study and the advantages in adopting this pathway.

We then turn to the results of our survey where we present findings on bullying, harassment and discrimination and compare these for heterosexual and non-heterosexual respondents. We also look at our other findings on health outcomes, job satisfaction and so on.

Our focus then switches to look at the experiences of LGBs alone. We commence with analysis of homophobia and negative treatment of LGBs before examining how stereotyping of LGBs challenges assumptions about the invisibility of homosexuality. In this section we also discuss the dynamics of processes involved with disclosure.

Our report then examines what we have labelled 'The Straight View'. Here our attention turns to the attitudes of heterosexual colleagues to LGB stories of negative mistreatment which we obtained from our focus groups.

Our case studies then become our focus and each is briefly described before outlining the organisational climate as perceived by LGBs, how the diversity climate is presented and whether LGB networks exist. Each case study presents the experiences and presence of bullying and negative behaviour and how the lesbian, gay and bisexual experiences share similarities and differences in the employment landscape. We also present evidence from HR and trade union voices on how they perceive the management challenges of supporting and tackling unfair treatment at work. Where appropriate we shed light on the findings from focus groups in each case study to help describe the organisational context.

We conclude our report with key observations and comments.

## 2.0 Methodology: the value of a mixed methods approach

### **We have previously outlined some of the key features of our research regarding what we asked in our survey and the reasons we elected to have case study organisations.**

This rationale for a mixed methods approach was because single methods alone, such as survey or interviews, cannot provide us with the answers we needed to address our aims and objectives.

Many traditional studies of bullying at work have favoured a survey approach, but often researchers have struggled to gain access to representative populations because of the prohibitive costs or access problems to such populations. Our funding enabled us to overcome this by deploying a structured survey where we could target a representative population so that we could capture LGB responses from a range of regions, employment sectors, urban and rural populations. This approach also enabled us to make robust and generalisable claims about our data and findings and to be confident that we had taken a sound scientific approach to our study.

Our survey adopted the same approach as a number of other studies that have explored employment problems at work<sup>iii</sup> by deploying a quota sampling strategy using modules on an Omnibus Survey. However, we were concerned about interviewing LGBs at home and how this might have an impact on disclosure of sexuality. A report written for the UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission<sup>iv</sup> showed that in-home interviews were as likely to obtain accurate responses as telephone or on-line methods for lesbian and gay respondents. Nevertheless, we put in two privacy controls to counter any concerns people might have about disclosing their sexuality at home. The first allowed respondents to answer the question on sexuality by giving them control of the CAPI machine (Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing). This meant that the researcher could not see or access the respondent's answers to the sexuality questions. The second privacy layer allowed LGBs to complete an on-line version of our survey if they felt uncomfortable about answering questions face-to-face using CAPI. 291 people elected to complete the on-line survey rather than speak face-to-face, but only seven responses were received, with five of these from heterosexuals. This provides strong evidence to sexuality researchers that this category of response is effectively a refusal.

We set initial quotas of 200 lesbian, 200 gay men and 100 bisexual responses within our target population of 500 LGBs, plus a comparator of 500 heterosexuals. A standard omnibus weighting was applied to our screened sample to ensure this was representative of the population (researchers wanting further details should contact the authors). The fieldwork for our survey took 44 waves over six months and was deployed twice weekly. A total of 73,303 people were screened to obtain a final sample of 1,222 respondents (500 LGB and 722 heterosexuals). This extremely large sampling frame of over 73,000 was necessary because of the challenges we encountered in attracting lesbian respondents to take part in the survey. The final sample consists of 722 heterosexuals, 147 gay men, 122 lesbians, 151 bisexuals (40 men and 111 women), 24 people who labelled themselves 'other sexual orientation' and 56 who labelled themselves 'unsure'.

We needed to capture a range of organisations from different sectors in order to gain insights into how LGBs and heterosexuals experience and perceive bullying, harassment and discrimination at work. We knew from existing studies that the public sector was more likely to report bullying and the types of mistreatment that were of interest to us and that the third sector was under represented in studies of this kind. Despite inducements of no financial costs for taking part and an offer of free reports and a half-day's seminar to present our findings, it took nearly two years to negotiate access to six organisations, three from the public sector, two from the private sector and one from the third sector.

We set a modest target of 6-8 interviews with LGBs in each of the 6 organisations. We used intranet sites, poster campaigns and LGB networks to gain access to our interviewees. We deliberately did not canvass for interviewees with direct experiences of bullying or discrimination, but instead promoted participation in our research under the banner 'Tell us about the ups and downs of being LGB at work'. As a result of this approach we conducted 50 interviews in the six case study organisations.

In addition to our interviews and survey we wanted to understand how heterosexuals perceived negative treatment, bullying and discrimination of LGBs. We therefore created vignettes (short stories) of gay, lesbian and bisexual experiences based on these phenomena. This allowed heterosexuals to discuss ambiguous accounts that might or might not be considered bullying or discrimination with issues of disclosure of sexuality embedded in the texts. Because a number of our case studies are hierarchical (Royal Navy, Prison and NHS), we always structured our focus groups so that members from one level in a hierarchy were not discussing the issues under investigation with members from lower levels in a hierarchy. This was to avoid biased responses and is particularly important for uniformed services or in organisations where rank and grade are evident. We also ensured individuals did not know each other well and

were not drawn from roles with diversity responsibilities. We conducted a minimum of two focus groups in five of the six organisations, 15 in total. Finally, we felt it was important to gather the thoughts and experiences of HR and trade union representatives in each organisation and conducted a number of interviews with these representatives in each case study.

Our multiple/mixed methods approach allows us to: a) triangulate data through multiple methods; b) complement one method to enhance the results of another method; c) develop results from one method to guide another; d) initiate results and follow questions as they emerge; e) expand using multiple methods to simultaneously follow alternative lines of enquiry. These approaches allowed us alternative ways of seeing the LGB experiences at work and provided us with insights that single methods alone could not do.



## 3.0 Surveying discrimination, bullying and harassment: examining the impact on sexuality

**Inasmuch as previous UK studies have tried to estimate the size and the nature of these types of workplace problems for non-heterosexual employees, the picture painted is bleak.** Numerous studies have suggested that nearly one in five lesbians and gay men had experienced bullying due to their sexual orientation, with 13% of the population reporting that they had witnessed verbal bullying in the workplace, whilst nearly 4% reported witnessing physical anti-gay bullying<sup>v</sup>. Another study by the TUC in 2000 suggested that 44% of LGBs reported discrimination associated with their sexuality. Other large scale employment rights studies have shown LGB employees to be at enhanced risk levels for bullying compared to heterosexuals<sup>iii,vi</sup>.

As explained in our methodology, we are confident that our robust sample size, advanced sampling techniques and the methods used to obtain data through face-to-face interviews using CAPI, enable our findings on sexuality and the workplace to provide authoritative insights that hitherto have often only been alluded to, primarily because many previous studies have not focussed upon sexuality or have used single method approaches.

Because we used a variety of statistical techniques to interpret our survey data, we only present findings that are statistically significant here (researchers may contact the authors for further detailed explanations used in other published works).

### 3.1 Demographic Overview

Section 2.0 above has already illustrated details of our sample, but it is perhaps noteworthy of both the challenge of obtaining a modest sample of LGBs using an Omnibus approach (73,303 people screened) and that 74.5% of bisexual respondents were women. Non-heterosexual respondents were on average younger than heterosexual participants, with a mean of 41.8 years for heterosexuals, compared with 36.9 for lesbians and 37.7 for gay men. Bisexuals were on average younger with a mean of 33.6 years. The oldest LGB respondents were found among the 'unsure' and the 'other sexual orientation' groups. Altogether this appears to confirm a trend that sexuality is somewhat more fluid among younger age-groups, particularly among women and that uncertainty about one's sexual orientation is greater in the older age groups.

Although the majority of respondents within all sexuality groups identified themselves as white, lesbian and gay respondents were less likely to be Asian. Gay men were more likely to be of mixed race and bisexual respondents less likely

to be Black African. More participants in the unsure group were also more likely to be Asian.

Whilst there were no differences for physical disability between the sexuality groups, lesbian and bisexual respondents were more likely to report an emotional disability compared to the other sexualities.

In considering educational attainment, respondents who were unsure about their sexual orientation were overrepresented in the category 'no education'. To examine the relationship between sexuality and income, respondents were assigned to three groups according to weekly income: Group 1 = < £223 to £407, Group 2 = £408 to £1026, Group 3 = £1027 to > £1389. Our data show that heterosexuals were underrepresented in the lowest income category, whereas bisexual respondents were overrepresented (less than £223-£407). Respondents who are unsure about their sexuality were also more likely to be in the lowest income category.

### 3.2 Workplace Bullying

A key question in our study was to establish how sexuality may affect the magnitude and the nature of the experience of bullying in the workplace. To measure the prevalence of bullying, researchers tend to use one or more approaches. The first, known as the self-labelling approach provides respondents with a definition of bullying and asks them how frequently they would label their experience as described by the definition, for example from daily through to occasionally or never experienced. The second approach, measures bullying by providing participants with a list of negative acts commonly associated with bullying, and then asks respondents to identify which acts they have been exposed to, if any, and the frequency of their exposure within a set period.

We decided to use both approaches, which has become a more widely adopted method used by researchers worldwide. Respondents were provided with the following definition of bullying:

*"Bullying at work involves repeated negative actions and practices that are directed at one or more workers/employees. The behaviours are unwelcome to the victim and undertaken in circumstances where the victim has difficulty in defending themselves. We do not think of one-off incidents as bullying".*

They were then asked:

*"Have you been bullied at work over the last 6 months?"*

Table 1: **Exposure to Bullying at Work**

	Heterosexuals	Lesbians	Gay men	Bisexuals	Other	Unsure
<b>No</b>	92.4%	82.3%	86.3%	80.1%	83.3%	83.9%
<b>*Yes, occasionally</b>	5%	11.6%	13.7%	12.6%	8.4%	11%
<b>**Yes, regularly</b>	1.4%	5.3%	0.0%	6.6%	4.2%	3.6%
<b>Total bullied</b>	<b>6.4%</b>	<b>16.9%</b>	<b>13.7%</b>	<b>19.2%</b>	<b>12.6%</b>	<b>14.3%</b>

\*Incorporates 'occasional' and 'monthly' categories      \*\*Incorporates 'weekly' and 'daily' categories

Table 1 reveals that whilst 6.4% of heterosexuals were bullied, the numbers for non-heterosexual employees are much higher and this applies to all non-heterosexual groups. Bisexuals and lesbians report particularly high levels of bullying, accounting for one in five bisexuals (19.2%) and one in six lesbians (16.9%). Bisexuals and lesbians are also heavily overrepresented among the most severely bullied category, namely those bullied on a weekly or daily basis.

So how do these figures compare with previous UK studies? If we look at heterosexual workers, a figure of 6.4% is broadly in line with previous studies applying a similar methodology<sup>v, viii</sup>. Compared to these figures rates of bullying reported by lesbians and bisexuals' are exceptionally high and worrisome.

Although these figures clearly show that LGBs are at greater risk of bullying than heterosexuals, we wanted to ensure that the overrepresentation of LGBs among those labelling themselves as bullied were not to be explained by underlying factors or variables, for example gender or age. We therefore applied multivariate analysis to allow us to measure the change in the likelihood of experiencing bullying when only one demographic characteristic is changed and all others are held constant. The method applied for this purpose was logistic regression.

Please note that estimates of risk or probabilities are expressed in what is referred to as 'odds ratios'. The odds ratios are calculated by taking the ratio of the odds of one group being subjected for example to bullying, compared with the odds of the reference group being subjected to bullying. Odds are simply the ratio of the probability of something happening to the probability of that event not happening. In

this case, an odds ratio of more than 'one' implies an increased likelihood of being bullied, while an odds ratio of less than one implies a decreased likelihood of being bullied.

It emerged that sexuality was clearly one of the factors influencing bullying, with an odds ratio of 2.25. This shows that LGBs were more than twice as likely to be bullied, compared with the reference group (heterosexuals), all other things being equal. Whilst sexuality therefore is a clear risk-factor for bullying, two other demographics, being disabled (having a psychological or emotional condition) and being under 25 years, were stronger predictors of bullying than sexuality. Gender also emerged as a risk-factor for bullying with women more likely to be bullied than men. Although our results are based on one of the most representative samples ever identified of LGB employees, it is unfortunately not sufficiently large to allow for a further breakdown of the sample in order to report similar estimates of relative risk for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals separately. We return to the issue of gender below.

Two further demographic factors are also important when considering bullying of LGBs: being a manager and having part-time work appear to increase the risk among LGBs, as these are close to being statistically significant.

Some organisational factors also appear to affect bullying. 'Having inadequate resources', 'not having enough time to carry out the job', as well as 'I cannot follow best practice in the time available' all emerged as risk factors for bullying. In other words, where resources are inadequate and where there is insufficient time to allow for work to be carried out in the prescribed way, bullying is more common.

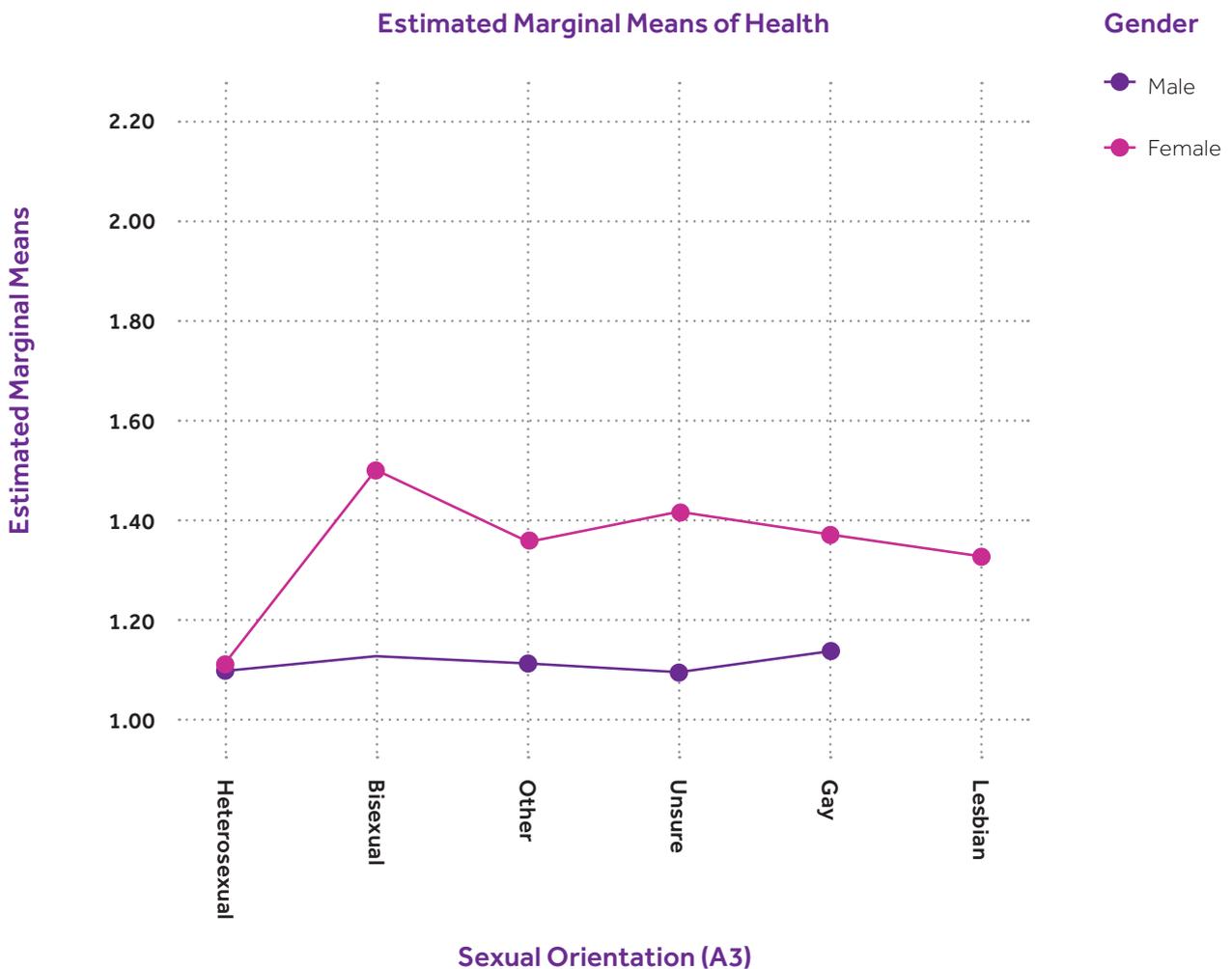
### 3.3 Gender and Bullying

Looking at the impact of gender on bullying, gender appears to play a key role, with lesbians, bisexual and heterosexual women, all reporting higher levels of bullying than male respondents (this also applies to gay men when frequency of bullying is taken into consideration). Furthermore, when we focus on the relationship between gender, sexuality and bullying, for male participants sexual orientation appears to have little effect, that is, for males the reported frequency

of bullying does not differ substantially between the sexual orientation groups. This is different for women where differences in bullying levels can be observed between the groups, with bisexual, lesbian, unsure and 'other' groups having higher mean levels of bullying compared to heterosexual women (see figure 1 below).

No significant effect was found for employment sector (private versus public), although both lesbians and bisexuals report higher levels of bullying in the public than in the private sector.

Figure 1: Mean scores for bullying by gender



### 3.4 Bullying by exposure to negative behaviour

To measure bullying in this way we used a new instrument which we call the Negative Acts Questionnaire - Sexual Orientation (NAQ-SO). This instrument/scale is designed to investigate how sexual orientation may impact upon the nature of the bullying experience. The scale consists of 31 items, 22 of which emerged from a review of the literature about LGBs' negative experiences in and outside work, as well as 9 items taken from the short version of the validated and widely used Negative Acts Questionnaire (Revised<sup>vii</sup>). All items were written to be applicable to the experience of heterosexuals allowing comparison with LGBs.

To measure risk or probability of exposure, we used multivariate analysis (ordinal logistic regression) to reflect the need to capture the frequency of exposure, rather than simply measuring exposure versus non exposure. Our analysis revealed that sexuality had an influencing factor on the total experience of negative acts measured by the NAQ-SO, with an odds ratio of 1.44, showing that LGBs were almost one and a half times more likely to experience negative acts than heterosexuals.

As previously noted, other influencing demographic factors such as age (respondents under 25 years) and having a long-standing day-to-day disability were more pronounced risk-factors. Among other factors impacting upon the experience of negative behaviours were workplace size, where workplaces with more than 250 employees were more at risk,

as well as having management responsibilities. As in 3.2 above, certain work environment factors such as having inadequate resources, not having enough time to carry out the job, never feeling that everything has been completed, and decisions over when to take a break also emerged as risk factors for bullying when measured by exposure to negative behaviours and acts. One other indicator that made bullying more probable was a lack of knowledge on equalities legislation.

Whilst our analysis shows that LGBs as a group were more likely to experience negative acts, further analysis was needed to clarify whether there were any differences between the non-heterosexual groups (L, G and B) in terms of risk. These analyses based upon on analysis of variance and post-hoc tests showed that lesbian and bisexual respondents reported significantly higher exposure to negative behaviours compared to heterosexual participants, who reported the lowest levels of negative acts, but also compared to gay men.

Looking specifically at gender, we found that gay men reported statistically higher levels of negative acts compared to heterosexual men. For women, the results showed that lesbians and bisexual women reported higher levels of negative acts compared to heterosexual women, although this was only statistically significant for bisexual women.



### 3.4.1 Negative behaviours more frequently experienced by LGBs

The likelihood or probability that LGB employees experience particular negative acts compared to heterosexuals revealed an interesting pattern of results. We express these as odds ratios for ease of comparison. The acts listed in table 2 below are ranked by risk with those representing the greatest risk to the least risk.

The three acts or behaviours to which non-heterosexual employees are most exposed to compared to heterosexuals were:

- \* 'People avoiding physical contact with you at work'.
- \* 'Experiencing unwanted physical contact, e.g. touching, grabbing, groping', and
- \* 'Being confronted with unwanted jokes or remarks which have a sexual undertone'.

The full list of negative acts for which sexuality is an influencing factor can be seen in table 2 below.

A closer look at these behaviours using a technique of 'confirmatory factor analysis' revealed two groups of behaviours that non-heterosexual respondents were particularly exposed to. The first of these we label as 'intrusive sexualised behaviour'. This includes behaviours such as 'being confronted with unwanted jokes or remarks which have a sexual undertone', 'experiencing unwelcome banter or teasing at work', 'receiving unwelcome comments about the way you dress' and 'being talked to in an insulting and derogatory manner at work'. The second group of behaviours to which non-heterosexuals were more likely to be exposed we have labelled 'social isolation or exclusion' which included behaviours such as 'people avoiding physical contact with you at work', being excluded from social activities with colleagues at work' and 'being excluded from your work team/workgroup'.

Table 2: Mean scores for bullying by gender

Risk factor	Odds ratio	Significance
Sexuality is a statistically significant independent variable for the following	Odds ratio	P
People avoiding physical contact with you at work	2.91	0.004
Experiencing unwanted physical contact, e.g. touching, grabbing, groping	2.81	0.000
Being confronted with unwanted jokes or remarks which have a sexual undertone	2.78	0.000
Experiencing unwelcome banter or teasing at work	2.28	0.000
Receiving unwelcome comments about the way you dress	2.26	0.001
Facing a hostile reaction when you talk about your personal/private life	2.22	0.003
Being excluded from your work team/workgroup	2.13	0.001
Being insulted or having offensive remarks made about you (i.e. about habits and background, attitude or private life, etc)	1.85	0.004
Being the subject of unwanted practical jokes	1.82	0.012
Being excluded from social activities with colleagues at work	1.72	0.014
Receiving threats from people at work	1.69	0.028
Experiencing actual physical violence at work (e.g. being hit, kicked or pushed around)	1.67	0.037
Feeling excluded from conversations when people talk about subjects you are not a part of or have no connection with	1.66	0.003
Spreading gossip and rumours about you	1.66	0.020
Being shouted at	1.59	0.004
Receiving repeated reminders of your errors or mistakes	1.46	0.025
Being talked to in an insulting and derogatory manner at work	1.55	0.002

### 3.4.2 Which behaviours did LGBs find most difficult to deal with?

When respondents were asked to identify the behaviour which they found most difficult to deal with at work, the top behaviour was "being talked to in an insulting and derogatory manner at work". Other behaviours that LGBs were more likely to report as finding difficult to deal with compared to heterosexuals included:

- \* "Being asked intrusive or pushy questions about your personal/private life"
- \* "Receiving intimidating emails, text-messages or photos from people you work with"
- \* "Being excluded from social activities with colleagues at work".

These findings reinforce our earlier results that showed intrusive sexualised behaviour and being socially isolated are particularly problematic for LGBs.

### 3.4.3 Who is responsible?

We also wanted to know who perpetrated bullying behaviour at work. The largest group of perpetrators were found among managers or someone with supervisory responsibility with 44% of respondents identifying the culprit as belonging to this category. This was followed by the perpetrator being a colleague(s) (26%), or client/s or customer/s (17%). By contrast, only 3% reported that they had been bullied by a subordinate. A total of 4% of respondents identified the organisation rather than any individual as the culprit.

Sexual orientation does not seem to play a role regarding a perpetrator's status or position. The same goes for sexual orientation and the perpetrators' gender. Overall, respondents were predominantly bullied by male perpetrators, which is in line with previous research. It is noteworthy, however, that bisexual respondents reported more often being bullied by female perpetrators compared to the other sexual orientation groups. However, although a trend, these differences were not statistically significant.

We found no relationship between sexual orientation and the perpetrators' age. Overall, participants reported most often being bullied by people older than themselves which possibly reflects the management/supervisor relationship in the majority of bullying cases. This applies particularly to gay and bisexual respondents.

Overall, respondents reported that they were most often bullied by a person of the same ethnicity. It is worth noting that there was a significant association between sexual orientation and ethnicity, with lesbian respondents overrepresented in the group who were bullied by people from a range of different ethnicities.

When considering the severity of bullying, participants who reported being bullied by a superior showed the highest levels of bullying exposure, while participants who did not know who was responsible for the bullying, reported the lowest frequency of bullying.



### 3.5 Discrimination at Work

We were interested to find out if LGBs felt more discrimination at work compared to heterosexuals. More than one in 10 LGBs (11%) reported that they had been subjected to discrimination within the last 12 months as opposed to one in 20 heterosexuals (5%). A closer inspection of the results indicates that a larger proportion of bisexual (13%) and lesbian (12%) respondents felt they had experienced discrimination compared to the other sexual orientation groups. By contrast, heterosexual participants were proportionally under-represented in the group that had experienced discrimination.

We carried out multivariate analysis using logistic regression and sexuality was found to be a factor influencing discrimination with an odds ratio of 2.52, making LGB respondents two and a half times more likely to be discriminated against, compared to non LGB respondents.

As with bullying, having a long term health condition such as a psychological or emotional problem appeared to be even more prominent than sexuality when considering discrimination. We reported earlier that having a lack of knowledge on equalities legislation made bullying more probable. This was also shown for discrimination where those who reported a lack of knowledge on equalities legislation were four times (4.31) more likely to report discrimination than those who claim to have such knowledge. Although this finding is not necessarily associated with sexuality, this is a very important finding in its own right. This result appears to imply that some people may be misguided in claiming discrimination, but could equally mean that a lack of knowledge increases vulnerability and an ability to challenge unequal treatment.

Three organisational factors were also found to affect perceptions of discrimination:

- \* Having inadequate resources to undertake tasks/work
- \* Not having enough time to carry out the job
- \* Determining the methods and procedures you use in your work (those who could influence how they worked were less likely to be subject to discrimination).

Returning to sexuality, many more bisexual and lesbian respondents reported experiencing discrimination compared to the other sexual orientation groups. Furthermore, lesbian and bisexual respondents are more likely to perceive themselves to be the subject of discrimination and are underrepresented in the group that reported it had not been discriminated against. For male participants, there were no statistical differences between the groups.

To examine people's knowledge of equality legislation and to get a better picture of how they responded if being discriminated against, we put a number of questions to respondents. When asked about their knowledge of UK equality legislation <sup>viii</sup> and their rights under legislation, more than four out of five respondents perceived themselves to be well informed (83%). We specifically asked those who did not identify themselves as heterosexual to what extent they knew that the Equality Act 2010 makes it unlawful to discriminate against someone on the basis of their sexual orientation. A total of 81% of LGBs agreed that they knew this. A similar number (85%) of respondents, irrespective of sexuality, also agreed that they were confident with respect to exercising their 'rights' should they be discriminated against or harassed at work.

Having asked respondents about their experience of discrimination we wanted to establish what people did in response to being discriminated against. A quarter of respondents (24%) told us that they 'did nothing'. However, here we found a very substantial difference in responses between men and women with 44% of discriminated men doing nothing whilst the figure for women was 8%. Interestingly, when taking sexuality into consideration, lesbians responded in line with heterosexual women and gay men responded similarly to heterosexual men. One in five (20%) of those discriminated against reported that they had made a formal complaint although no gay men reported any formal complaints. Of these, 24% reported that nothing had happened, whilst 31% had their case formally investigated. Evidence revealed that men's cases of discrimination were much more likely to be investigated than complaints from women (62% of men compared to 19% of women).



### 3.6 Sexuality and Health Outcomes

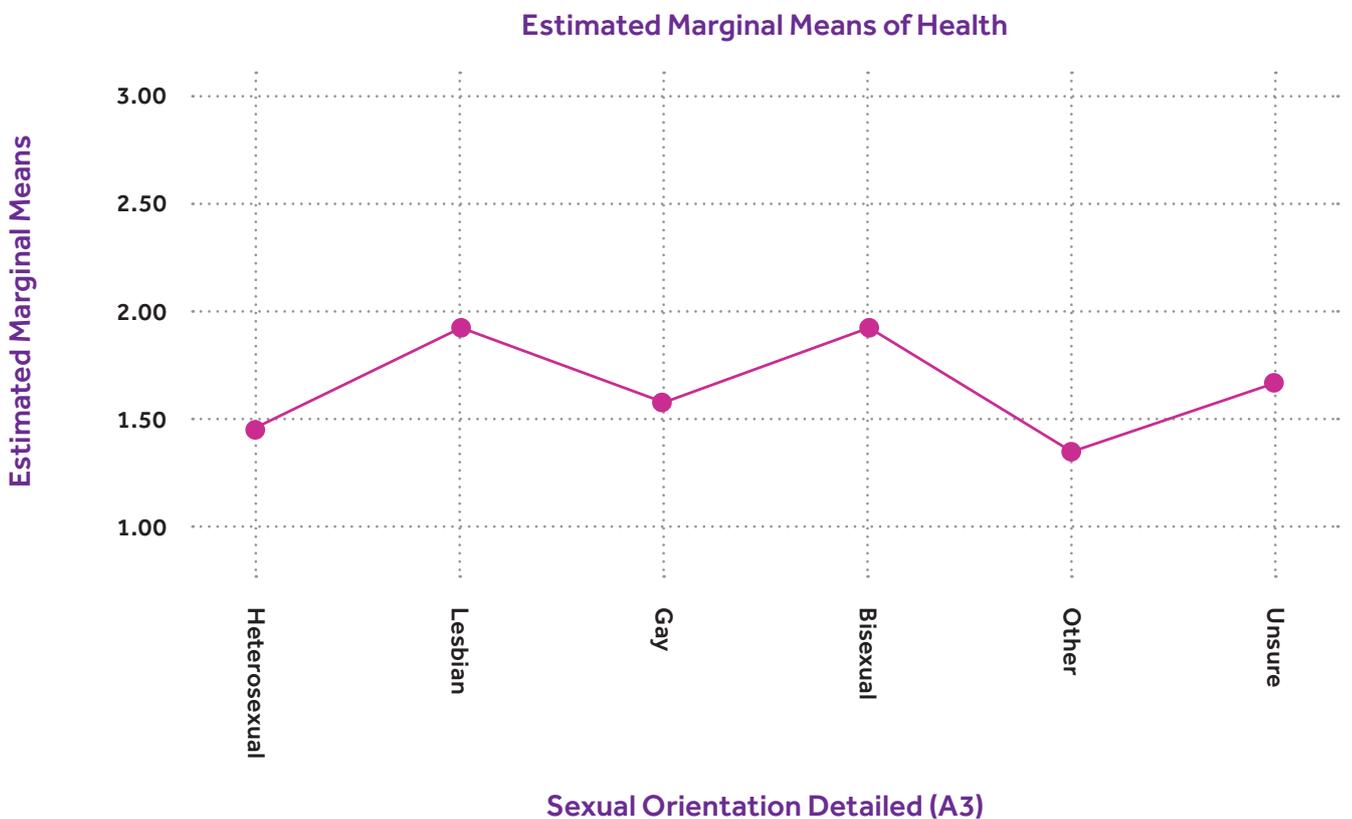
To measure participants' health and health outcomes we used the Asset questionnaire<sup>ix</sup>, a 16 item scale which, in addition to assessing the respondents' overall health, also provides separate scores for physical and psychological health. Overall, the impact of sexual orientation on health was found to be statistically significant. Looking at lesbians, gay men and bisexuals separately, we found that lesbian and bisexual respondents reported significantly higher levels of poor health compared to heterosexuals and gay men.

A similar pattern of results emerged when we looked specifically at psychological health where lesbian and bisexual respondents reported significantly higher levels of poor psychological health compared to heterosexuals and gay men. In contrast, when we studied the data for physical health, the differences in poor health between the groups were smaller. Nonetheless, our analysis showed that lesbian participants reported significantly higher levels of poor

physical health compared to heterosexuals, whilst bisexuals reported significantly higher levels of poor physical health compared to heterosexuals and gay men.

Comparing male and female participants, women overall reported higher levels of psychological ill health than men, which is a common finding in health research. However, when sexuality was taken into consideration, the differences between women were greater than those seen for men, with lesbians and bisexuals reporting higher levels of poor psychological health compared to heterosexual women. A similar result was found for physical ill health with women significantly more likely to report higher levels of poor physical health than men. Furthermore, as was the case for psychological health, lesbians and bisexual respondents reported significantly higher levels of poor physical health compared to heterosexuals. However, when we looked at the case of physical health, gay men were also on average found to have significantly worse health compared to heterosexual men.

Figure 2: Sexuality and Health



### 3.7 Bullying and Health

As expected, we found a strong relationship between bullying and exposure to negative acts, which showed particularly high correlations with negative health outcomes. Looking particularly at the relationship between exposure to negative behaviours and health, our analysis showed that respondents within the group that reported 'no bullying', had significantly lower scores for physical health (meaning better health) compared to those who fell into the groups with high and medium exposure to bullying. Whilst participants in the high-bullying group, namely those with frequent exposure to negative behaviours, on average reported higher levels of poor physical health than the medium-bullying group, this difference was not statistically significant. The behaviour which emerged as the strongest predictor of ill health was 'Receiving repeated reminders of errors or mistakes'. Figures 3 and 4 below illustrate the effects of bullying upon health.

When the analysis was repeated for physical health, the same results emerged for the no-exposure-to-bullying group with respondents belonging to this group on average reporting the best health (see Figure 4 below). However, in this case, there was also a significant difference in physical health between those with medium and those with high exposure to negative behaviours, with participants in the medium group reporting better physical health compared to those in high exposure group.

When we looked at people's experience of discrimination, bullying and harassment, it is noteworthy that respondents who report experience of some form of harassment - either expressed as bullying, discrimination or exposure to negative behaviours - are more likely to report experiencing some other type of workplace harassment. Although these phenomena are closely interrelated, this may also mean that being exposed to one form of harassment may increase vulnerability to other types. This might be as a result of lowering one's defences or thresholds or heightened sensitivity.

Figure 3:  
**Psychological Health & Bullying**

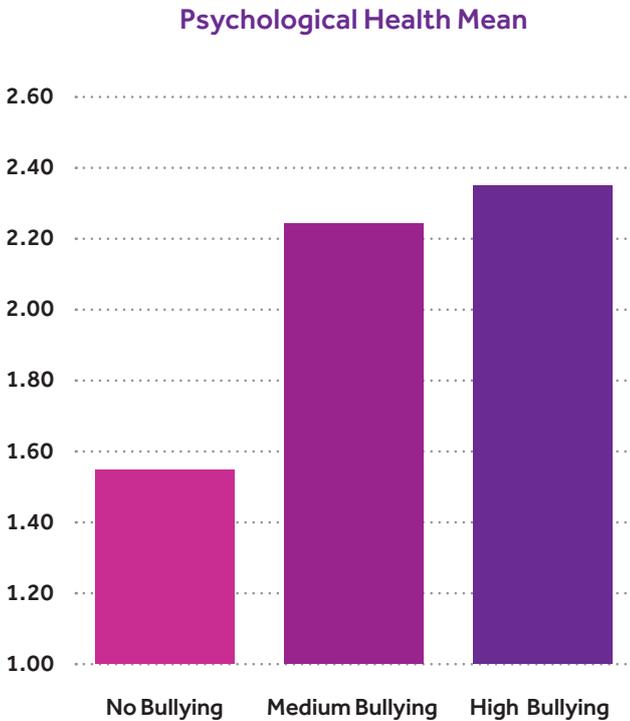
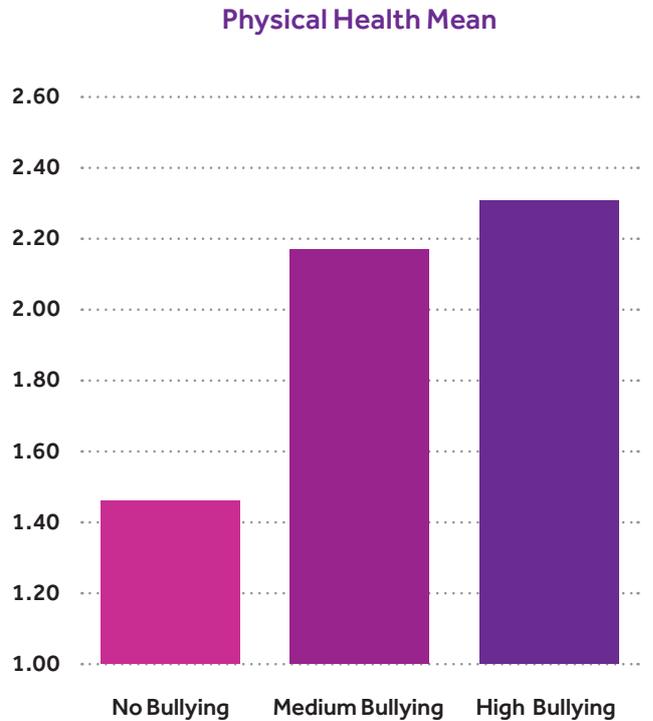


Figure 4:  
**Physical Health and Bullying**



## 4.0 Disclosure & openness about sexuality at work

**Over half of LGBs (55%) are open about their sexuality at work.** However, nearly one in five remain closeted about their sexuality answering with 'not open at all' or 'give the impression that I am heterosexual'. A similar number (21%) also only reveal their sexuality if asked specifically. Lesbians and gay men were most likely to be open about their sexuality at work with two out of three (66%) lesbians and gay men being open. By contrast, bisexuals and respondents from the group 'other' were significantly less open about their sexuality than lesbians and gay men.

We wanted to find out what factors favoured disclosure as well as those factors that acted as a barrier. Not feeling the need to hide one's sexuality was the most common encouraging factor. A comparison between the sexuality groups shows that gay men reported finding it too hard to hide their sexuality resulting in them being more open about their sexuality compared to the lesbian, bisexual and the unsure groups. By contrast, across all sexualities, 'I want to keep my personal life private' was the most common factor which discouraged people from being open about their sexuality at work. Gay men reported more often than other groups that the absence of other LGBs discouraged them from disclosing their sexuality. For bisexual respondents, being in a relationship with a member of the opposite sex was a discouraging factor.

### 4.1 Disclosure and negative outcomes

Our analysis showed that having the desire to be more open about one's sexuality showed significant associations with negative outcomes. Respondents who indicated that they would like to be more open about their sexual orientation reported higher levels of bullying, were more likely to be discriminated against, and reported higher levels of poor health. However, there was no significant link between wanting to be more open about one's sexuality and the number of negative acts experienced.

Those who indicated that having supportive line-managers encouraged them to be open about their sexuality at work also reported lower levels of bullying than respondents who did not list their line manager as an encouraging factor, although this finding was not fully statistically significant. Similarly, respondents who listed unsupportive line managers as a discouraging factor, and who reported that equal opportunity policies are not being taken seriously, tended also to report higher levels of bullying. Together these findings stress the importance of an organisational response to workplace sexuality by enabling line-management support, and of taking equality and diversity policies seriously.

Finally, participants who agreed more strongly that 'people will draw their own conclusions about their sexual orientation', were more likely to experience higher levels of bullying, experienced more negative acts and were more likely to be discriminated against. Still, in other words, for some, simply being assumed lesbian, gay or bisexual is sufficient to unleash bullying and discriminatory behaviour against them. It should be noted that although these correlations were significant the magnitude of the association was small.

### Summary from the Survey

Whilst the findings above provide valuable new evidence about the experiences of LGBs at work in terms of their exposure to discrimination, bullying and harassment, which in some cases reinforces previous research findings, the following conclusions are pivotal:

- As a group, lesbians, gay men and bisexuals (LGBs) are more than twice as likely to be bullied and discriminated against compared to heterosexual employees.
- Among LGBs, lesbians and bisexual women are even more likely to be bullied, discriminated against and to be exposed to negative and destructive behaviours at work than gay and bisexual men.
- As a group, LGBs are nearly three times more likely to be exposed to intrusive and sexualised behaviour than heterosexual employees and also more likely to be exposed to social exclusion.
- LGBs' physical health is substantially worse than the health of heterosexuals. Lesbians and bisexual women report the worst psychological and physical health.
- Whilst the majority of LGBs are open about their sexuality at work, one in five remains closeted. Having the desire to be more open about one's sexuality showed significant associations with negative outcomes. Respondents who indicated that they would like to be more open about their sexual orientation reported higher levels of bullying, were more likely to be discriminated against and reported higher levels of poor health.
- A supportive line manager who can encourage openness about sexuality might buffer the effects of bullying and reduce its occurrence while an unsupportive line manager or a workplace where equality and diversity are not taken seriously can exacerbate bullying at work.

## 5.0 Homophobia & negative treatment of LGBs

**Our representative survey data clearly showed that homophobia is widespread in many British workplaces with approximately one in ten LGBs reporting such experiences.** Coined in the USA in the early 1970s, the term homophobia refers to a fear of homosexuals. The homophobia label has been helpful in that it directs the problem away from homosexuals, locating it firmly in those harbouring negative and aggressive feelings towards sexual minorities. Homophobia has typically been considered a sign of suppressed erotic desire, as failure or fear of not living up to traditional gender role expectations and as a threat to heterosexual group identity. However, by associating the problem in this way and placing it with other phobias, homophobia can be thought of as an irrational response thus justifying (in some eyes) personal negative attitudes to sexual minorities. As a consequence, homophobia has more recently been considered as a form of prejudice.

Research shows that homophobia is more common:

- among men rather than women
- among older and less educated people
- among those with little contact with LGBs.

More negative attitudes and prejudices against homosexuals are also expressed and directed towards men rather than women. Lesbians are often excluded from studies altogether.

Despite evidence in some countries of anti-homosexuality, attitudes towards homosexuality are changing in a positive direction with a recent British study reporting that whilst 22% of the population in 2013 considered same-sex relationships between adults 'always wrong', this was down from 50% in 1983. Whilst this suggests a marked positive change in attitudes towards non-heterosexuality, there is evidence that some people, mostly men, have become better in controlling their prejudices where these are seen to be socially unacceptable. Moreover, our survey findings show that LGBs continue to experience discrimination, bullying and certain forms of negative behaviours to a much greater extent than heterosexuals. With this in mind we wanted to explore what homophobia meant to LGBs and how it was experienced in our case-study organisations.

Although overt expressions of homophobia were rare, some of our interviewees had experienced it first-hand. Here we touch on part of Kerry's story, which was by far the worst we encountered in the three years of our study.

Kerry is a married bisexual NHS employee, her catalogue of abuse and negative behaviours was sparked off after she revealed to a work colleague that she had been in a relationship with a woman. Her colleague subsequently told her husband who insisted that she immediately left her job and terminated her friendship with Kerry. In the aftermath of this episode Kerry was subjected to an array of negative behaviours and abuse from her colleagues. This made her life a misery. Her diary including her electronic diary had alterations made to it by her colleagues. Allegations were made against her about inappropriate touching and an attempt to kiss a colleague, she was systematically excluded from social events inside and outside work, derogatory remarks describing her as 'horrible' and 'ugly' were posted on Facebook and her mobile phone was flooded with calls from an unknown sender. The abuse reached a climax when an undertaker turned up at her house at 3am to collect her husband's body, despite the fact he was in sound health. Interestingly, her attempt to alert her line-manger and a senior-manager failed with her complaint being referred to as a 'personal issue'. Despite her appalling treatment from her colleagues, the term homophobia (biphobia) did not surface when she told her story to us. When prompted by us, only then did she consider that her experience might be homophobic/biphobic.

For the few LGBs who had encountered homophobic experiences, they referred to episodes where they had been called words like 'dirty lesbian', 'in my face' or being 'too gay for the store'. For all of them, the experience was described as a 'shock' and met with disbelief. Yet even encounters like these were rarely described with reference to homophobia. Actually, the few occasions when it seemed acceptable or safe to use the term homophobia was when describing someone's past behaviour or incidents. For example, referring to colleagues whose behaviour later had changed for the better or before they had had the opportunity to get to know them properly.

When referring to negative work experiences, some of our interviewees pointed to incidents where they had overheard conversations about themselves or other LGB colleagues. Here they were referred to in derogatory terms such as being 'gay' and 'rubbish', implying that their sexuality made them less able or less fit to do their job. One of our interviewees (Iris) was especially upset by the fact that she had not disclosed her sexuality to anyone at work, yet her colleagues' attitudes were entirely based on assumptions and stereotypes.

Whilst many LGBs reported positive work experiences, they often expressed limited faith in their colleagues, believing that negative comments often were made behind their back. For example, having witnessed crude and sexist jokes being told about female colleagues, they assumed that similar jokes would be made about them when they were not present.

An extract from an interview with Royal Navy interviewee James emphasises this point:

The moment a girl comes into the room everyone's like, 'oh yeah it's cool having the girls in', and it's like, I know that happens but you can see it with a girl, fairly obvious, but you can't see a guy, a gay guy and so I've seen it on both sides now, that I know that behind my back people probably make crude jokes they probably say, they question my ability to be able to do a job, erm question my reasons for joining a predominantly male organisation, and I know that happens behind my back because I've been in a situation where I've not been out [open about non-heterosexuality] and I've heard it, so I can only assume now that it happens.

In some cases our interviewees had also overheard colleagues questioning LGBs claims' for civil rights including the right to marry, adopt and have children.

Although negative comments were often upsetting for the individual there was a tendency for LGBs to explain away or excuse their colleagues, pointing out 'they didn't mean it'. Equally, negative experiences were often trivialised and played down. This could, of course, be a matter of becoming desensitised to negative behaviour affected by previous negative encounters whether at home, in school or elsewhere in society.

Whilst being referred to or identified by their sexualities as 'the lesbian' or 'the gay person' may not necessarily be negative, many respondents also emphasised that they did not want to be known for or described according to their sexuality but rather acknowledged for their abilities and merits.

Altogether, with LGBs primarily focused on what is said to them and about them, and less on what is done to them, it is difficult, if not impossible to make sense of their experience. This is particularly so when the only signpost (homophobia) they are aware of specifically associated with their sexuality so rarely corresponds with what they see and experience. The difficulties they have in evoking the homophobia label is also a reflection of the culture of their organisations which generally were described in positive terms as 'accepting', 'fair, or 'diverse'.

## 5.1 Expanding our vocabulary: anti-homosexuality, heterosexism, selective incivility and modern discrimination

For many LGBs however, particularly those working in organisations with well established policies and procedures on equality and diversity, the label homophobia evokes ideas of threats and verbal abuse, which increasingly does not correspond with their own negative work experience. Therefore, by continuing to focus on homophobia as the greatest danger for non-heterosexual employees, we may overlook other, often more subtle negative experiences. This creates a false impression, leaving less obvious manifestations of prejudice against non-heterosexuality untouched and unchallenged. It also prevents us from challenging the normality with which heterosexuality is treated in almost every facet of life, including the workplace, and the consequences of such heteronormativity for the experiences of sexual minority employees. This particularly applies to heterosexism, where heterosexuality is promoted as 'the norm' and where non-heterosexual forms of behaviour are degraded and demeaned.

To open up this discussion further we adopt the term 'selective incivility' as a form of modern discrimination directed against minority groups based on race, ethnicity and gender, and in our case, sexuality. Here we think of incivility as any rude or disrespectful behaviour with an ambiguous intent to harm. Modern discrimination sets it apart from more traditional discrimination such as racism and sexism, where more obvious and overt expressions are largely stamped out, at least in organisations which pride themselves on taking equality and diversity seriously. By contrast, expressions of modern discrimination happen when the perpetrator treats a minority group member, for example a lesbian or a gay man in a disrespectful or uncivil manner, and simultaneously provides a rationale unrelated to sexuality to justify their behaviour, for example, failing to meet a deadline or a particular work standard. In other words this form of discrimination and anti-homosexuality shows its true face when a rational reason for their behaviour is at hand, and only in such situations. A typical expression of modern discrimination would be the idea that minority members are being too pushy and impatient in pursuing their rights.

Whilst selective incivility helps us to better understand the current situation of many LGBs in Britain, there are of course limitations to it, not least regarding the focus on being selective, particularly when sexuality is not always a static or a fixed entity, or when someone's sexuality is not known. However, as we have seen above, not knowing someone's sexuality does not necessarily stop people making assumptions and it is to this we turn next where we explore stereotypes of non-heterosexuality and their role in disclosure dynamics.

## 6.0 Disclosure and Stereotyping

Since it first commenced in the 1970s, research on lesbians, gay men and bisexuals (LGBs) work experiences have often focused on disclosure of non-heterosexual identities in the workplace. With work environments being shown to be often negative towards LGBs, or at times even demonstrating outright hostility to any deviation from heterosexuality, research bears witness as to how LGBs reveal or indeed consciously conceal their sexuality from their employer and co-workers. However, it quickly became apparent that this was not a question about being open ('out') or not open ('closeted') about one's sexuality, but rather more about the degree of openness a person chooses to disclose. This can be thought of as a continuum from being 'completely open' or 'mostly open' at one end, to 'not open at all' or even 'passing' (actively pretending to be heterosexual), at the other end of the continuum<sup>x</sup>. Gradually it also became clear that disclosure was not a one-off event, but rather an ongoing, repeated process, with disclosure decisions depending upon situation and context. In this respect individuals' strategic decisions are seen to rest on a cost-benefit analysis where the relationship with colleagues and likely organisational support (or not) are considered key factors in the disclosure process. Other factors which are seen to influence disclosure decisions are personal confidence, finding the perfect timing, previous experience of disclosure and what is referred to as identity centrality, or how important it is for a person to be seen by others as they see themselves.

Such models of disclosure are based on the idea that sexual identities are hidden or invisible and that disclosure requires conscious effort on behalf of LGBs<sup>xi</sup>. In other words, LGBs are supposed to be in control and disclose their sexuality at will or as they see fit. Whilst disclosure decisions, therefore, are considered deliberate acts, they may not always be fully planned as they may follow on from, or be a response to, questions from colleagues about their private lives<sup>xii</sup>. As information already volunteered may also be passed around the organisation, knowledge about someone's sexuality may pre-date any active declaration by LGBs themselves. Importantly, such information can also be used to 'out' someone, revealing someone's sexuality against their will. However, there is also some evidence that colleagues, heterosexual and other LGBs may sometimes arrive at their own conclusions based on particular clues which include looks, dress and cultural interests. It follows that in some cases, and independently of what is being said or done by LGBs themselves, colleagues assume and arrive at their own conclusions suggesting that the disclosure process could be far more dynamic than previously anticipated, giving colleagues a key role in the disclosure process. As this is controversial, we wanted to explore this in more detail.

### 6.1 Coming out of heterosexuality

From our interviews with 50 LGBs it became apparent that 'coming out' was less planned than often suggested and that colleagues, by asking questions and arriving at their own conclusions, often played a central role in the process. Still, as the literature suggests, for most LGBs it was often about finding the right time and place, for example, when private relations were discussed and that establishment of trust was essential for this to happen. Personal crisis and emotional turmoil had also led some LGBs to reveal their sexuality, desperately needing to confide in others as to whether to seek support in a difficult situation or to explain their behaviour and emotions. Others decided to disclose in reaction to homophobic remarks, whilst some realised that suspicions had been raised when avoiding taking part in discussion about private matters, and feeling the need to tell things as they were. Indeed, for some the decision was entirely taken out of their own hands as they found themselves 'outed', for example through their friendship or association with other LGBs or by LGB colleagues who were not aware of their decision to conceal their sexuality or who ignored it altogether. In some cases, they had felt the need to act when their presumed heterosexuality had led to someone from the opposite sex starting taking too much of an interest in them or to clarify presumed misunderstanding about their personal life as here in the case of Ralph:

"So we were all in the staff room one day and they sort of looked at me [and] said 'oh, what does she do?' I said 'not she', you know, 'it's Damian."

### 6.2 'Looking the part'

Whilst some needed to tell for their non-heterosexuality to become known, others insisted that their own or other LGBs' sexuality was "obvious", or a given fact, they simply "look gay". This is how one female interviewee describes what she considered a "typical lesbian":

"They're quite big...short haircut, just butch in their body language really, do you know what I mean? I'd say I'm like feminine but then I'm not as well, do you know what I mean, that's it really. You can just tell can't you, it's obviously like, like you get the gaydar don't you, do you know what I mean. You just tell, just the way the person is can't you and, just how they act. Yeah just like the way they're sat, the way they speak about things".

Not only does this suggest that many LGBs subscribe to stereotypical assumptions, it also indicates that LGBs themselves use such stereotypes as a marker to spot other LGBs, hence the comment about having a gay radar, or 'gaydar'. In line with this many of the LGBs we interviewed had a very clear view about what lesbians and gay men look and behave like, with their conclusions informed by a mix of physical features, dress and mannerisms. However, whilst lesbians were often described in a rather negative way in terms of their external presentation of themselves, gay men were in some respects portrayed more positively, often described as "fit", "smart" and "well turned out", although at the same time they were also described as "effeminate", "camp", "loud" and "superficial". Since several of our interviewees worked in the services that might be best described as 'uniformed', one may think that this would make such recognition a lesser issue, but this was not borne out in reality as other signifiers may give them away despite them wearing a uniform.

Such signifiers or clues may also include tone of voice or the way people speak as here suggested by Warren:

"I was on the phone with a customer and I have quite a camp accent sometimes. And they picked up on that and basically started saying homophobia down the phone.... He asked me if I was gay, um, and I said, 'I'm gonna have to terminate the call,' and he said, 'You are a frigging poof,' and 'you fucker,' or something like that. And then he called me 'a dirty little shit' and then I hung up the call."

Here we see that stereotypes of LGBs are also being used to harass and as a source of homophobic remarks, feeding prejudice even at a distance, like in Warren's case over the telephone. These examples demonstrate that knowledge about sexual identities is not only formed by LGBs' disclosure decisions, but that heterosexuals' own assumptions about what constitute a gay man or a lesbian, including physique, looks, dress and mannerisms could play a role in disclosure dynamics.

### 6.3 Stereotypes & negative treatment at work

As the example of Warren above indicates, we found that stereotypes also play an essential role when it comes to explaining LGBs' experience of negative treatment at work. However, our interviews also reveal that fitting stereotypes appears to have different outcomes for men and women. Whilst men were frequently punished and treated negatively for matching or living up to gay male stereotypes, typically being effeminate or not manly enough, the opposite was true for women who failed to meet stereotypical requirements in different ways.

As the negative responses often acted out against gay men who fitted a stereotypical image appeared to grow out of assumptions about masculinity, this could also have implications for what jobs or tasks gay men were considered able or suited to carry out. By contrast, some gay men who did not correspond to any of the stereotypes reported little by way of negative response. By contrast, for lesbians, dressing in a feminine way and wearing make-up, their experiences were far more negative than those matching the stereotypes of the masculine or 'butch' lesbian. Their femininity left them exposed to hostility, and doubts about their 'true' sexuality' were often raised by their female as well as male colleagues. They were frequently perceived as a threat by some of their female colleagues, or indeed by their husbands, who strongly disliked the idea of their wives working with lesbian colleagues. For some male colleagues, these lesbians never ceased to be considered women worthy of sexual attention as they were reminded that their 'problem' was that they were yet to experience 'the real thing'.

Our findings show that whilst sexual identity often remains invisible, there are many cases where non-heterosexual identities are apparent to LGBs themselves as well as to heterosexuals resulting in implications for the coming out process. In other words, colleagues seem to play a far more important role, directly and indirectly in the coming out process than is often anticipated. Whilst for many this may seem to confirm the obvious, we have to ask why the research literature on disclosure continues portraying this as primarily a choice and a process under the control of LGBs themselves. We believe that the unwillingness to engage with these realities is closely linked to a fear of reinforcing existing, and often negative stereotypes about LGBs themselves, often a product of prejudice and indeed homophobia. However, it is our conviction that we need to talk openly about these issues and what effect they have on LGBs' openness and work experiences which also would include LGBs themselves as they often contribute to reinforce and reproduce such stereotypes.

## 7.0 The straight view: how heterosexual colleagues interpret LGB issues

**To explore how heterosexual members of staff in our case study organisations view and make sense of non-heterosexuality and the presence of LGBs in the workplace, we carried out 15 focus groups, involving around 75 employees.** To facilitate discussion and involvement, we introduced three scenarios describing typical experiences of LGBs, one lesbian, one gay and one bisexual. None of these scenarios were based on the organisations our focus groups came from. The scenarios contained a degree of ambiguity to purposefully stimulate discussion. Here is the first of our three scenarios - Amir, a gay man.

Amir's story:

Amir, a gay man in his thirties is 'out' to everyone at work. His colleagues generally describe him as 'loud', mostly because Amir is talkative and he does not hold back when he describes last weekend's adventures. When asked about his experiences at work, Amir says that he gets on with most people, but some of his colleagues do ask pushy questions about his personal life. Amir finds this both intrusive and upsetting. These same colleagues also make derogatory remarks about gay men and tell the odd joke about them. Amir admits that he does not challenge this and most of the time he joins in the laughter. A few years ago, Amir made a couple of serious work-related errors, which were both confronted and dealt with at the time. Since then he has received positive appraisal, but is often reminded about his errors. Amir is troubled by this and he cannot help comparing his own professional trajectory to many of his colleagues who have recently been promoted. He has come to the conclusion that he is being discriminated against.

### 7.1 'We have no trouble here': denial of discrimination

We opened the discussion by asking participants to state their initial reactions to the scenario they just had read. With few exceptions participants in all groups rushed to reject any claim of discrimination even though this issue was never raised by the facilitators. The following comment was typical:

"He can't think, he can't think oh it's because I'm gay that I'm not getting promoted. If there's someone that's straight and better at the job then obviously, they're the stronger candidate to be promoted. ..If they're not making these errors so I think he's - you've got to look it's like a very fine tooth comb there innit you've gotta... like look over it. So it's not because I'm gay I have made these errors. And he needs to like try and cut them out rather than blaming his homosexuality for it".

In order to justify their conclusions of non-discrimination, like the one portrayed above, a variety of reasons were suggested by our focus group attendees including:

- 'he is unsuitable for the job'
- 'he might not be good enough for the job and that's the bottom line'.
- 'there were better straight candidates'
- 'it stems from his job-evaluation'
- 'serious errors can prevent promotion'
- 'how much support he has received'
- 'may not have good interviewing skills'

Only a couple of participants were open to the possibility that discrimination could have taken place. Additionally, where participants acknowledged that Amir may be up against prejudice, there was a willingness to put at least some of the blame for his situation on Amir himself, reflected in comments like "it sounds complicated and interactive". Equally, Amir's name and possible ethnic status were rarely touched upon at all. Whilst the scenario does not provide sufficient clues or evidence to establish whether discrimination has taken place or not, the widespread need to distance themselves and explain away the presence of discrimination and prejudice is striking and suggests that many employees are sceptical or indeed provoked when minority groups, including sexual minorities, make claims of discrimination. Whilst denial of discrimination emphasises the sensitivity of the issues, it also suggests that protected groups may face an uphill struggle challenging what they perceive as unfair and unequal treatment when there is no hard or unequivocal evidence presented.

## 7.2 'Victim-blaming' / Blaming the target

Amir's scenario describes a situation in which a gay man considers himself a target of unwanted 'pushy questions', derogative remarks and jokes. Having already ruled out any discrimination, many participants were quick to blame Amir. The description of him as 'loud' and for 'not holding back' when talking about 'last weekend's adventures', were used to support a view that Amir was entirely, or at least in part to blame for his own misfortune. Comments like: 'he set the bar', 'he may be encouraging it' and "he gives out a lot of the wrong cues", all put the responsibility back on Amir's shoulders as far as many focus group participants were concerned.

This is how one participant put it:

"He joins in when people sort of banter him about his sexuality, etc. If he never pushes back against it, you know, and asks them to stop, then these sort of people will continue to do it. Um, so I think he's half to blame here really. It doesn't excuse the ... um, you know, the actions of the other people in this example, but, um, I think if he wanted to stop it, he should stand up to them a bit more."

There is a moralistic tone to this quote ('half to blame'), indicating that Amir cannot expect that things will change if he doesn't 'man up' or challenge what he doesn't like, with some suggesting that by not challenging it, he actually accepts things as they are. Equally, how could people know that they are causing him offence if he doesn't let them know by challenging it. In other words, Amir is guilty of putting other people in a difficult situation.

Some went further, blaming Amir for creating the situation in the first place:

"..if I'm putting something on the table, then I'm setting the level of the tone of the conversation. And it's whether it's, if it's down the gutter, then it is up to me whether I want to go down the gutter or I want to challenge it. Alternatively if you've thrown it on the table and it's down the gutter as a starting point, don't be coming complaining afterwards when equally somebody rises to the occasion."

This extract plays on an interpretation of the reference to 'last weekend' as being sexually explicit. Moreover, the reference to 'gutter' suggests implying something dirty and unspeakable, an unlikely way of describing heterosexuality even when what is said is inappropriate for the situation. This implies a clear signalling of underlying prejudice. It also suggests that by being loud and provocative Amir has lost any right to complain.

Although the interpretation above of 'adventure' was common to many attending the focus groups, not all participants saw it this way, with some warning against prejudging, 'he may simply have been out dancing' or 'had too much to drink' as examples of trying to understand the information presented.

More than anything else, the fact that Amir admitted to 'join in the laughter', was repeatedly used to blame him for the situation. When participants expressed some understanding for his way of responding, they pointed to social factors such as 'peer-pressure', 'feeling part of the crowd' and 'avoiding becoming isolated', but also more personal factors, joining in as a 'defence mechanism' or a reflection of 'insecurity'. Some did, however, question whether Amir actually had a choice, suggesting that if he did not go along with events he might end up in a worse situation expressed as, 'the butt of all jokes', and 'becoming further isolated'.

## 7.3 Making a complaint: a catch 22 situation

Whilst most participants argued and indeed demanded that unwanted behaviour such as the jokes and banter directed against Amir should be challenged directly, and boundaries established by Amir himself, whether he ought to make a complaint or not was a much more contentious issue. Whilst some considered this a possible option, others warned against such an approach, suggesting that this would be seen as an unfriendly move and likely to have negative repercussions, particularly if 'dressed up as' a complaint against bullying. In one focus group this was labelled a 'ridiculous response' and suggested that the likely outcome would be social isolation and ostracism of the complainant.

## 7.4 Appropriateness and boundaries

To address the issue of boundaries, we asked participants what they thought was appropriate to talk about in the workplace. Most thought that this largely depended upon the situation or context, pointing to factors such as how well you know someone, if you have a relationship outside work and the general level of tolerance of a particular work environment. Some participants pointed out that boundaries ought to be negotiated between the parties. Others argued that it often was difficult to define a boundary and point out when a line was actually crossed such as 'hang on, you can't say those sorts of things', with some participants arguing that if we were too eager to stop people from saying what they would like to say, this could lead to natural communication and dialogue being halted or prevented altogether. However, as seen in the following statement, sexuality, or more specifically, non-heterosexuality clearly impacted upon boundary setting:

"And also when you're in the office working, what you were saying about environment, would be different from when you're in the staffroom having lunch and talking to people because it's a different setting because people can overhear you and they might not want to know about your personal life. And it also links it with, um, sort of stereotyping again, assuming that gay males are promiscuous. So if they were to say, "Oh, I've, you know, kissed a couple of men at the weekend, or whatever, for a woman to say that, a straight woman to say that would be acceptable. But for a gay man to say that, it's quite shocking. People would find it shocking. Then they see that behaviour as promiscuous, which sort of links in with the stereotype."

It is clear from the statement above that personal lives in the case of LGBs are straight away interpreted as a sex-life which reinforces the point made above. However, the statement also clearly shows what LGBs are often up against in terms of stereotypes and prejudice.

## 7.5 Managing Amir's situation

It is particularly interesting to see how Amir's situation was discussed among managers and how they interpreted their own role in such scenarios. Some managers said they would leave it to the target to set the boundary altogether.

Others emphasised that they would intervene if they came across a situation they interpreted as being offensive to the target, primarily based on their visible reaction, or indeed whether they thought it would be offensive to observers. Clearly blaming the situation on Amir this is how one manager saw her role:

"..I would be having a quiet chat in the office and explaining in the workplace, those conversations aren't appropriate, you know, you've gone beyond the boundary as far as I am concerned..... there are people there that are quietly being offended."

Others took a much more principled stand, suggesting that they would react straight away should they overhear an inappropriate conversation or encounter someone 'being mocked'. However, many indicated that they found it hard to be too categorical when discussing boundaries, pointing to the particular context or situation: "I don't think there is a line [to be crossed] because it depends, doesn't it". A couple of managers also argued that if targets were not open about their sexuality or explicitly out, they would find it hard to intervene for fear of outing the person. Whilst one might have some sympathy with the last position, these approaches may all result in targets being left to fight their own corner. We will argue that, if managers are unable to establish clear boundaries, instead of hiding under a guise of context or culture, they are by implication abdicating their management responsibilities.

By contrast, some of our participants, including managers, agreed that race was a much more 'hot issue', with much less tolerance of racial jokes or banter on the basis of ethnicity compared to sexuality. As one participant put it:

"I think there's more, there's less comments towards somebody's ethnicity than', yeah, definitely. I think it's been, I think people are scared to mention anything about race related really. Rightly or wrongly, I know it's certainly been promoted and pushed though for everybody to be aware of the impact of that, and I don't know if maybe the other sort of aspects of diversity haven't been pushed through as hard as that has".

Although our focus groups demonstrated that things are changing for the better regarding non-heterosexuality, including the comments of managers, there is considerable work to be done on bringing sexuality up to the same behavioural standards as race and ethnicity in the workplace in Britain.

## 7.6 Bisexuality: ignorance and fear

In a second scenario, we meet Miriam, a bisexual divorced woman. From being popular with her colleagues, not least with men, she gradually finds herself isolated when rumours about her new relationship with a woman spread after she has been seen outside a gay club, apparently kissing another woman. Having confirmed her bisexuality in confidence to another colleague, she increasingly feels people are avoiding her and stop talking when she is around.

Miriam's experience and her bisexuality quickly became the centre of discussion in our focus groups. The interactions between participants revealed that many found bisexuality hard to grasp: "Bisexuality is difficult, more challenging, hard to get your head around it", or as expressed by one male participant:

"Hard to think you are attracted to men and then to women."

Such expressions may reflect a lack of familiarity with the phenomenon of bisexuality as our survey shows that many bisexuals decide not to disclose their sexuality, particularly if they are in a relationship with someone of the opposite sex. However, more than anything else it tells us that many people perceive sexuality as an either-or entity, with the possibility of being attracted to both men and women hard to comprehend. Thus, Miriam is perceived to have become or turned bisexual when she enters a relationship with a woman having previously been married to a man. For some, the confusion was near complete as the examples below suggest:

"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".

"you're bisexual and you want to settle down with someone, who do you settle down with. Straight, same sex, opposite sex? So it could be more difficult. It's not, um. It's not straightforward, is it?"

What seems to be particularly difficult for many heterosexuals to reconcile is that a bisexual identity allows a person to have a relationship with either sex and that personal preferences and societal demands would impact on a person's decision at any one time. Some directed their own perplexity against the bisexual persons themselves,

suggesting that "they are too greedy" or "they don't know what they want, I've heard that said before in the past, you know, they're bisexual, they don't know what they want."

Despite widespread confusion, a number of participants did have a clear picture of what bisexuality meant. Still, for most, bisexuality appeared as something distant, unusual, with little relevance to them. The discussions also indicated that in most people's minds sexuality is entirely a fixed and given entity. However, there were some who acknowledged that sexuality to some extent may be fluid, with attraction and falling in love to some extent being 'person specific'.

## 7.7 The right to know

When discussing Miriam's growing isolation from her colleagues after the revelation of her bisexuality, participants commonly put the blame on Miriam, pointing to a lack of honesty on her part as the following conversation suggests:

*Female 2:* "So if she came', if she was a bit more open and honest it would probably be far more"

*Female 3:* "Because paranoia wouldn't set in then".

*Female 2:* "Cos, yeah, cos people can't gossip if"

*Male 1:* "they know"

*Female 2:* "there's nothing to gossip about. Because it's a discussion".

In other words, if Miriam 'came clean' about her bisexuality there would not be a problem as everything would be out in the open. By contrast, by keeping her true nature to herself, she is described as "being a fake to her mates". As seen above, the right to know or intolerance of not knowing was often associated with words like 'honesty' and 'trust', with one participant considering 'betrayal' as an appropriate description of Miriam's lack of openness. Moreover, when some participants referred to the news about Miriam's bisexuality as "a shock", their own embarrassment and uncertainty about the situation is re-packed as Miriam's 'paranoia', putting the onus on Miriam to disclose her bisexuality.

The intolerance of not knowing also appears to be related to people's fear of saying the wrong thing or of offending Miriam. In other words, by 'knowing', people can better police themselves, avoiding causing offence and embarrassment to others and themselves. However, as seen below, the need to know also reflects a fear of homosexuality, or not feeling safe.

Here participants express the possibility of becoming a target of Miriam's feelings:

*Female 1:* "If people do, are avoiding her, are they avoiding her because they feel uncomfortable. All of a sudden you might get a bunch of, oh I mean, just, she might get a bunch of women working in her office start to think, has she fancied me for five years. You don't know. So they kind of back off thinking, that she is more of a threat."

*Female 2:* "And because she's not, um, she doesn't want to talk about it, it's like the elephant in the corner, isn't it, the unspoken subject, so people are embarrassed and walking on eggshells, am I going to slip up on what I'm saying, or you know."

In some respects this discussion demonstrates a sexualisation of non-heterosexual identities, as people seemingly need to take particular precautions they otherwise would not do when considering heterosexual colleagues. Altogether, with very few bisexual role-models around, and if organisations fail to address bisexuality as an issue, it is likely to remain a mystery and a curiosity at best, with the few who dare disclose their bisexuality becoming potentially vulnerable to prejudice and discrimination.

## 7.8 Stereotypes & Stereotyping

In a third scenario, participants discussed the experience of Esther, a lesbian, who is in a civil partnership with another woman. Here we only draw attention to one of the issues raised and discussed in the focus groups, namely Esther's colleagues' comments on the way she dresses.

Participants agreed that the comments made about Esther's way of dressing could cover a variety of things, from being very complimentary about her dress sense, being very smart, to outright condemnation and disapproving comments, which would include 'wearing too short a skirt' or 'a top with a cut too low' or even dressing in what could be considered "scruffy". However, it was also clear that many read more into the scenario, as expressed in the following comment:

"My assumption when I read the statement was based on the fact that the comments were being made what she was dressed in relation to her sexuality. So that was a way of expressing her sexuality".

Others interpreted the remarks about dress as "not dressing femininely enough or at all well, I think people may perceive gay men and gay women as dressing in certain ways, different to straight people, whether that's the case or not".

Statements like these emerged in most groups and caused a lot of discussion. It became clear that although many were cautious, with some even hostile to interpreting the comments in this way, seeing this as resorting to stereotypes, the majority were well aware of existing stereotypes of lesbians as well as gay men which include the way they dress. The following comment was typical

"You understand where it's coming, because you've got this stereotype of what gay women look like when, a bit butch, jeans, short hair, lumberjack shirt kind of thing, stuff like that, and, you know, it's sort of stereotyping in a way, isn't it, because we all go off drinking in town and we've got a lot of gay female ...and when you go out for a drink with them, they all sort of dress in a sort of stereotypical way, with jeans and shirt hanging out, kind of thing."

Overall the discussions demonstrated that stereotypes are a reality and known to most heterosexuals. Returning to the previous section about disclosure dynamics and the role of stereotypes, it would, therefore, seem somewhat strange if these were to play no role in encounters between LGBs and their straight colleagues.

## 8.0 LGB workplace experiences in context: case study accounts

**We now turn to our case studies where our LGB interviewees, our HR and trade union key informants and heterosexual focus group attendees worked.**

### 8.1 Inside Middleton: an NHS Trust

Middleton, not its real name, is a large regional NHS body serving a mixture of urban and rural populations. Employing some 13,000+ staff it is a large employer with a blend of acute as well as conventional medical services. At the time of our study Middleton faced a significant budgetary reduction from central government and was expected to save in excess of £60 million across a five year planning cycle.

We undertook two focus groups with heterosexuals and a number of in-depth interviews with LGBs as well as interviews with HR and trade union officials. Our in-depth interviews with a senior HR Director and head of the largest trade union revealed a lack of understanding of generic equality and diversity issues. An example of this came in response to our question about the existence of an LGB network where the senior HR Director said he wasn't sure if one existed or not. This tone on a lack of action on equalities issues was extended when the same HR Director reported "we used to have an ethnic minority forum but that no longer exists because of a lack of interest". The response from the trade union leader was equally passive with no real sense of sexual orientation or other equality and diversity issues or agendas. We were left with the distinct impression that equality and diversity was only dealt with in a piecemeal way with no sense of promotion of rights amongst those with protected characteristic status.

Our two NHS focus groups provided fascinating insights into how heterosexuals view non-heterosexual experiences. In general terms, focus group attendees did not feel LGBs were discriminated against in the three stories we presented to them, and neither did they feel there was an intention to discriminate. In one of our stories, the case of Amir, a gay man, his ethnicity was completely overlooked when members of the focus group discussed his case, which involved the telling of gay jokes. Members of the focus groups felt it was Amir's responsibility to intervene if he found gay jokes upsetting, yet had not considered whether Amir was 'out' at work and what effect his intervention in joke telling may have had on him. A commonly held view among the focus group attendees was that Amir only had himself to blame if he failed to intervene in the telling of gay jokes. Overall, there was little censorship displayed in telling gay jokes but a high degree of censorship in telling racist jokes.

Joke telling was seen as human nature and telling gay jokes was a sign of LGB acceptance in workplaces. Acceptance was also seen in the form of a 'healthy curiosity', namely that it was ok to be curious about work colleagues' sexuality. Interestingly, neither of the NHS focus groups showed any understanding of bisexuality.

Our interviews with LGB employees showed that a large number of LGBs work in the NHS and that many gay men work in A&E and gravitate towards mental and sexual health specialisms. Nevertheless, as researchers we encountered some respondents who had been 'set-up' to take part in our study without their knowledge; in other words, their colleagues had volunteered their contact details when we were recruiting participants, even though they were not LGB. We did not encounter this in any other of our case studies. This suggested to us that sexuality was seen as 'fair game' or humorous to some NHS employees.

Some interviewees felt pressured to 'play down' their sexuality to fit in, yet we were surprised to find that some gay men thought it was an advantage to be the only gay man in their unit, as they would be well looked after by their female colleagues. This was not the case for lesbians. In the absence of an LGB network, we were told that many LGBs looked out for and after each other. Somewhat disturbingly we were also told that managers were unwilling or unsure about handling a severe case of harassment involving sexuality. This involved the case of Kerry that we reported earlier. Kerry's exposure to extreme harassment and personal torment at the hands of some of her colleagues led her to raise this with her line manager, yet she was advised that the matter was of a "personal nature" and not a workplace issue.

Overall, LGBs in our NHS case study felt strongly that they did not want their sexuality to be disclosed to patients, possibly because many felt they were often exposed to homophobic comments from patients and their relatives. Many of our interviewees also felt they were not always respected by their colleagues, with one reporting a comment from a colleague "you gay guys are very promiscuous aren't you". An inappropriate statement to make, but especially from within the NHS.

## 8.2 The Royal Navy

In 1999, Richard Young was dismissed from the Royal Navy because he was gay. Four days later a decision in the European Court of Human Rights over four dismissed non-heterosexual military personnel forced the UK government to suspend the dismissal of gay and lesbian staff from the armed services.

Whilst the culture of the Navy has shown significant positive changes towards non-heterosexuals, like many of our other case studies, LGBs were assumed to be heterosexual unless they 'fit the bill' in terms of gay or lesbian stereotypes. Our interviewees told us that working in a team with other LGBs helped the disclosure process, but that the nature of working in the Royal Navy with regular and frequent deployments and rotations meant disclosure was a multi-episode experience. Other interviewees told us that simply associating with other LGBs was sufficient for people to be assumed lesbian or gay. As a result, many were forced to keep their personal lives separate and private.

The gender composition in the Royal Navy (15% women and 85% men), affected lesbians and gay men differently. Whilst lesbians seemed to cluster together gay men generally didn't. Some gay men felt they were used as "poster boys" in promoting gay rights in the Royal Navy. They also felt that they were assigned special roles because of their sexuality. Lesbians, in contrast, reported more difficulty being a woman than a lesbian, suggesting sexist currents in the services. As an example two women had very negative experiences. Neither of them linked this to their sexuality, but claimed that 'envy' and 'moodiness' of the individuals in question played a major role in the process.

Life in the Royal Navy for our interviewees showed a highly sexualised existence with matchmaking, and cross rank relationships proving difficult. Even grouping together as friends proved problematic for LGBs, fuelling envy from other colleagues, mostly for leaving everyone else out. A group of lesbians could also be seen as 'predatory'. We then came across examples where emails had been sent from a gay man's account seemingly advertising his sexual services in a very explicit manner. A few complained that colleagues asked intrusive sexualised questions and events such as 'Secret Santa' (the giving and receiving of small anonymised gifts within a team), were also highly sexualised. With this in mind it is perhaps not surprising that LGBs felt anxious about communal living on board ships (i.e. using public showers and sharing cabins). In most cases, however, their fears were misplaced as colleagues did not seem to have a problem with sharing facilities with LGBs, but their colleagues' partners did.

All Royal Navy personnel are encouraged to 'deal with' issues in as informal a way as possible, even if this means face to face. In view of this, LGBs were expected to stop 'gay' banter, but by doing that they also ran the risk of being labelled a "party-spoiler". The result was that much banter was left unchallenged, simply because most LGBs did not wish to be labelled killjoys and remained quiet instead.

HR, who in many respects actively engaged with LGB issues, also seemed somewhat disconnected from the official LGBT network. Recently, an alternative unsolicited LGBT network emerged on Facebook and was regarded as more empowering than the official one, particularly for gay men. Many LGBs underlined the importance of formal and informal LGBT networks and the role of HR in promoting rights, not just to LGBs but to all recruits and trainers as their experiences during training were often dampened by feelings of isolation, marginalisation and frustration.

The focus groups in the Royal Navy followed similar patterns to the NHS where the fictitious character Amir was partially to blame for feeling discriminated against as explained by one straight colleague here:

"He sort of sums up his feelings derived from the fact that, one, people are curious, as people always are when someone's slightly different or whatever. So I don't think that's discrimination. And he feels discriminated because they're making the odd joke, well that's human nature isn't it? It's what we do, so I wouldn't have thought that's much discrimination against him really"

Bisexuality was particularly negatively viewed by some heterosexuals where it was described as "having your cake and eating it". In the bisexual story about Esther discussed in focus groups, there was confusion about whether a person is gay or bisexual and several participants thought bisexuality ought to be aired publicly so as to avoid uncertainty making statements such as "they're sort of perhaps hearing rumours and are left in flux and limbo. They don't want to offend her, so they stand off ... everyone feels uncomfortable". The exchanges that took place about Esther's bisexuality suggested there was a lack of understanding amongst straight people and that bisexuality left them feeling unsure as how to behave.

### 8.3 Hillside Prison

Hillside is a high security male prison with a staff population around 1,000. Whilst the prison is managed by what members of staff often referred to as 'the regime', prison officers also assert a lot of control, leaving limited voice and authority to staff in other positions. Hillside is often described as a 'masculine' or 'testosterone fuelled' environment, but at the same time, it is also described as a 'negative' or 'miserable' environment where the morale is low. Complaining about other members of staff seems common practice, underlining their alleged 'laziness' and 'incompetence'. On top of this, 'your business is everybody's business' at Hillside.

The HR representative readily acknowledged the lack of knowledge about LGB issues, in his words 'we don't pretend to be experts at it'. Of more concern were comments made by their trade union representative. He explained:

"I don't see somebody as a lesbian, a gay, or a bisexual. I see them as a prison officer. Um, so when they turn up at the gate in the morning, that's what they are; they're a prison officer. Um, and I've often, I've often thought about, you know, why do we have, um, the LGBT network and things like that to promote and support, um, gay and lesbian or bisexual prison officers? Um, I've always sort of tried to understand why we have that organisation. And I suppose it's the same for, um, Ethnic Power, which supports, um (long pause) sort of black and Asian type prison officers... because I don't fall into, um, either, I don't, personally, I don't fall into a minority group. So it's difficult to, um, understand, if you like, why they need support".

The notion of leaving social identities 'by the gate' extended to 'opinions' amongst focus group participants, primarily 'because as one of them stated, 'it's professional to do that'. LGB members of staff made no such inferences. In fact, the gate did not erase their sexual identities, nor did the uniform.

LGBs were deeply concerned about keeping their sexuality away from prisoners, but worried that they would possibly overhear conversations between their colleagues. This was possibly the only issue, which lesbians and gay men had in common, other than that their experiences seemed to differ. To begin with, gay men seemed reluctant to be open about their sexuality at work and hesitated to come forward for the study. Although this seemed to be common knowledge within the prison walls, no one seemed to question why.

Gay men also expressed fears about using the changing rooms and described socially awkward situations whereby their sexuality had been drawn into a conversation for no apparent reason, or their colleagues would regularly state that they were 'not gay' or 'heterosexual'. Lesbians, in contrast, seemed to have a more positive experience. Those who described themselves as 'one of the boys' and matched the 'butch' stereotype seemed to fair best. They were also unlikely to receive questions in relation to their sexuality. For non-heterosexual women, this was not the case. They both faced intrusive questions about their sexuality and sexual offers from their male colleagues.

The 'need to know' about non-heterosexuality seemed to tie in with a culture of banter and teasing at Hillside. Heterosexual colleagues tried their best to confirm their suspicions about non-heterosexuality by asking LGBs directly. Once confirmed, the rest of the team was informed to stop homophobic banter. Without LGB members within the team or awareness of their non-heterosexuality, homophobic banter seemed to be left unchallenged.

Heterosexual colleagues also seem tempted to fix lesbians up with each other. Whilst such matchmaking was generally camouflaged with playfulness, the women involved did not appreciate it. This could also include heterosexual colleagues as we witness here:

"Everyone winds me up saying that I fancy this girl and I don't and she's got a bit of a gay look about her, and she's not and she's straight and she's going out with a guy who works on another wing, so everyone winds me up saying, oh I fancy her and then they wind her up and they say that we look like one another, but it's just like an on-going joke do you know what I mean".

In general we were surprised to find how much emphasis was placed on keeping staff's non-heterosexuality away from prisoners, when most negative experiences involved colleagues. To some extent 'being picked on' had been normalised as a 'part and parcel of being gay'. Similarly, sexism and sexist comments were left unchallenged. For some this 'depressive environment' had taken its toll with high sickness absence, but thanks to prisoners, the volume of negativity between colleagues was believed to be turned down.

## 8.4 Foundations Financial Services

Foundations, a financial services institution employs over 100,000 people worldwide. We focused on one UK based location with around 3,000 employees. At the time of our study, Foundations had been badly affected by the financial crisis prompting organisational restructuring, pay cuts and redundancies. Moreover, negative press had dented their corporate image and public trust had reached an alltime low point. Despite the gloomy outlook, Foundations were keen to present themselves as a 'gay friendly' institution and an 'equal opportunities' employer.

Key to their approach was positive external exposure. This was substantiated with large financial investments promoting LGBT related issues. In return, much less emphasis was placed on internal matters and Foundations were about to replace their policy on sexual orientation with an 'all-inclusive' equality and inclusion policy for all minorities. The aim of this policy change was to tackle what their HR representative referred to as 'unconscious biases' towards people in any minority groups. In simple terms, sexuality was not believed to warrant specific policy or need different protection from other minority groups.

Their union representative expressed concerns about the reluctance to get employees involved with LGBT issues at Foundations, linking it to 'general mistrust' of the organisation. In some ways, the LGB interviews echoed this as many struggled to be open about their sexuality, particularly women. Two of the women were 'closeted' (not open about their sexuality) for nearly ten years and a further two went back into the closet, one after being repeatedly passed over for promotion and the other following bullying and social exclusion related to her sexuality.

Gay men seemed to fare better at Foundations than women. They were more likely to be open about their sexuality and they were also blessed with senior role models within the institution. Some gay men, however, had a tough time at Foundations. One of them reported being bullied by a gay colleague whilst another interviewee faced relentless bullying as he was suspected of being gay. This man, John, claimed that one of his colleagues 'didn't like the look' of him.

This same colleague had been asking everyone at work if they knew John, where he was from and more importantly if he was gay. To his face, this same colleague made repeated negative remarks about gay men and tried to set him up by asking him what male movie stars he found attractive. John tried to kill these conversations, but his personal space continued to be invaded. Just recently he was contacted by a stranger who happened to be gay. Apparently this man had been

approached by his colleague with the intention of setting a honey trap for John, egging him out of the closet.

In spite of negative experiences, people were reluctant to report this at Foundations. Mainly because they did not trust that matters would be handled professionally or kept in confidence. Some people were also convinced that reporting would not improve or change anything, or worse, feared that it would bar their career progression.

At Foundations, sexist comments, gay jokes/banter and homophobic comments were largely left unchallenged, except when they were made by a client/subcontractor or expressed in writing. On the whole, these practices were supported by the focus group participants who struggled to set boundaries, leaving LGBs with the responsibility of stopping such negative behaviours. Heterosexual colleagues also seemed well aware of common stereotypes of LGBs, but when probed, were reluctant to pinpoint them. They also seemed to have little understanding of bisexuality.

The LGBT network faced fierce criticism amongst LGBs, mainly because it was viewed as a 'social club' servicing the needs of men. It was also criticised for focusing on other UK regions and for falling short of female role models.



## 8.5 Goodwill – a nationwide charity

As a charitable organisation, Goodwill supports people in emotional distress. Most of their services are delivered over the phone, but also face to face. Goodwill operates across England and Wales employing around 1,500 people as well as managing over 5,000 volunteers. Goodwill is largely described as a 'PC' organisation that attracts 'nice' people with 'a certain ethos'. Despite the fact that women occupy 75% of their workforce (paid and unpaid), we were unable to recruit non-heterosexual women at our chosen locality, London. This meant we had to broaden our catchment area and interviewed women online.

The interviews with the HR representatives revealed conflicting information about sexualities, privacy and organisational trust. Whilst Goodwill was generally described as a 'very open' organisation, the annual staff survey failed to substantiate this- at least for the heterosexual majority. At present, 75% of the staff population is unwilling to state their sexuality. Partly this reflects the normative status of heterosexuality at Goodwill, but also how intrusive questions about heterosexuality are regarded amongst staff and how openness translates to non-heterosexuality alone.

On that note, non-heterosexuality was presented as 'a non-issue' at Goodwill, even amongst our LGB interviewees. The following statement reflects this.

"On the whole I think it's an organisation where your sexuality, to a certain extent, is irrelevant, in a good way. It's not something that needs to be an issue. Um, and as far as I'm concerned, that is a positive thing because I want to be judged on what I do in my work rather than my sexuality. As far as I'm concerned, it's who I am, and so I don't want someone, um, you know, discriminating or bringing it up as an issue. But at the same time, um, it's not an issue for me, so it shouldn't be an issue for them either. And as long as that's the way it stays, I'm quite comfortable. So yeah, I think ... that's about it really".

This sort of narrative was confirmed by the focus groups with heterosexual colleagues. They generally reflected understanding of the needs of LGB employees and the importance of setting appropriate boundaries. As a group heterosexual colleagues also accepted more responsibility for stopping banter and gay jokes. Our LGB interviewees had witnessed this kind of behaviour, especially when they made jokes about their own sexuality. Yet the focus groups with volunteers revealed different sets of attitudes with

negative stereotyping of LGBs and lack of sensitivity around sexualities. Again our LGB interviewees confirmed this as many had experienced more negativity from volunteers than their other colleagues.

Given the general impression of inclusiveness and acceptance at Goodwill, we were surprised to find how important it seemed to keep a low profile as an LGB member of staff. Comments like 'I don't have an actual loudspeaker', 'I don't shout it from the rooftops' and 'I am quite quiet' were common amongst our LGB interviewees. One woman also received anonymous complaints about the way she dressed, but the details of the complaints were never explained to her fully.

All things considered, most LGBs felt comfortable about being open about their sexuality at work. The problem is that they assumed this would apply to other LGBs at Goodwill as well. This was not always the case. Penny was told off by one of her colleagues for 'outing' him. She had assumed that he would be all right with disclosing his sexuality to other colleagues. Penny explains how their relationship changed and ultimately, her outlook on sexuality:

"I now feel a bit paranoid about it. Yeah. Not about myself, but about other people. I feel like I've got a responsibility to them now, now that I'm aware of those issues, um, and it makes me moderate the conversations that I have sometimes. I'm nervous about it happening again".

As we have seen, feeling open about non-heterosexuality and being open about non-heterosexuality could mean different things to LGBs, causing tension between them. To illustrate this point further, a gay man expressed anger towards another gay colleague for 'pretending' to be straight. The man in question had this 'horrible fear' that he had 'unknowingly been in the closet.' Some also assumed that their career history (i.e. working for LGBT organisation or on LGBT matters) would indicate their sexuality. This did not necessarily materialise.

On the whole, most LGBs had positive experiences at Goodwill. Yet some had been exposed to negativity by their clients or asked intrusive questions by their colleagues. Framing 'intrusive' questions as part and parcel of educating colleagues often downplayed these experiences.

## 8.6 Fairprice – an International Retailer

Fairprice is a major UK retailer with more than 1,000 stores and employing over 100,000 members of staff. Women occupy around 55% of their workforce, yet they are underrepresented in senior management roles. Around 13% of their staff population identifies as black or ethnic minority and around 2% identifies as non-heterosexual. Due to events beyond our control, we had to limit our research to LGB interviews at Fairprice. We also had to interview many online, largely because our catchment area was too large, but also because we struggled to recruit non-heterosexual women - a repeated story from Foundations and Goodwill.

Most of our LGB interviewees worked in Fairprice stores. They describe a culture of 'being watched on camera all the time' without knowing by whom or why, placing unnecessary pressure on people and forcing some to 'hide away' at the back of the store. Women, who were not based in stores, raised different concerns. These were related to limited access to the 'boys club' and how this could potentially bar their career progression. These concerns were backed up by figures from their annual survey illustrating that women only occupy around a quarter of senior management roles.

All, but one of our interviewees were open about their sexuality at work. For some, it was important to disclose their sexuality straight away, mainly to prevent awkwardness or potential misunderstandings about their sexuality. Although most of our interviewees had a positive experience at Fairprice, we were somewhat surprised to find that this was often linked with the fact that they were well 'liked' amongst colleagues, suggesting that popularity may dampen negative experiences for LGBs at work.

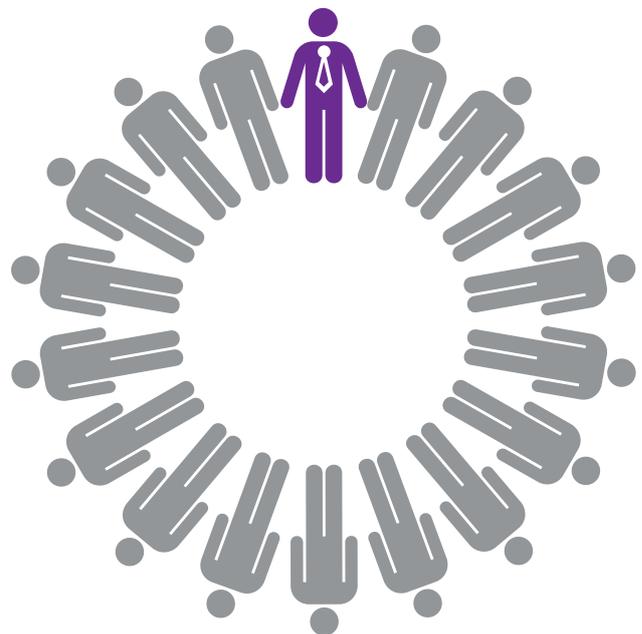
The most extreme example we came across involved a gay man working in one of the stores. He felt 'stared at' by his colleagues and complained. As matters unravelled, over 15 complaints had also been made against him and he was ultimately accused of being 'too gay for the store'. The remaining interviewees had generally good relationships with their colleagues. However, one was accused of having HIV, and others complained about constant matchmaking by their colleagues and assumed attraction between LGBs.

On the whole, our interviews were mostly concerned about customer interaction, including verbal abuse and personal safety in stores. Oscar explains:

"I used to work at [location], it's quite a rough area, um, full of ... um, Polish, heroin addicts and drug users, and I must admit when I was on late night on my own, I refused to do it. The male managers, um, they're fine, male straight managers should I say, and I sometimes feel a bit intimidated when I'm on my own in that context in that area. So if there's no security on I say, right, I'm not staying by myself, because there's quite a lot of theft in that shop and people walking out with items, and I'd feel less', I always felt a bit less', more uncomfortable should I say. Um, because if some big muscly man comes up saying I'm going to deck you, I'm going to knock you out, I'd be like quite worried. But whereas if I had sort of like another male manager with me, I'd be more comfortable. Um, I sort of said to my line manager, 'I don't want to be left on my own'. Um, and he said, 'no, that's fine, because he wouldn't leave the women on their own', so I told that to him in confidence".

As a result of this conversation, two managers were placed on duty every night of the week. The employee in question was never mentioned in relation to this new incentive.

Most of our interviewees had some experience of the internal LGBT network at Fairprice. The overwhelming feedback was one of 'disappointment', especially for those who had applied for a job at Fairprice on the basis of the external exposure of the network, which was seen as a positive attractor to work there. The internal emphasis of the network was both criticised for being male dominated and lacking in seniority amongst the membership.



## 9.0 Conclusions

**With a representative sample of 500 lesbian, gay men and bisexual (LGB) employees interviewed in their own homes, and as the first study to systematically explore LGBs' experiences of bullying and discrimination in the workplace, this study provides comprehensive and robust research evidence of the realities facing many non-heterosexual employees in UK workplaces.** Having obtained data from a similar sized sample of heterosexuals, it has also been possible to compare LGBs' experiences to those of heterosexual employees. Moreover, by integrating survey data with in-depth interviews with LGBs and organisational key informants, focus group discussion with heterosexual employees and interviews with HR and trade union representatives, a fuller picture of LGBs' experiences in UK workplaces is emerging.

Altogether, LGBs were found to be more than twice as likely to be bullied and discriminated against as their heterosexual counterparts. The forms this takes are often linked to their sexuality, with many reporting examples of intrusive, sexualised and intimidating behaviour. Equally, although much less explicit, LGBs more often find themselves socially isolated, being excluded from their work colleagues and team members. With such behaviour proven to have the most detrimental effects on targets' behaviour and health, this is particularly worrisome. However, whilst it is important to state that LGBs share certain negative work experiences, it is equally important to highlight the gender dimension revealed by our research. Although often overlooked because previous research often suffers from small numbers of LGB respondents, our study reveals lesbians and bisexual women are often much worse off than their male counterparts. Not only do they report substantially higher levels of bullying and discrimination, their health status, physically and psychologically, is also worse than that of gay and bisexual men.

Whilst our survey shows that one in ten LGBs has experienced homophobic bullying, our six organisational case studies suggest that traditional forms of homophobia, particularly of a verbal nature, are rare. Whilst this might be expected given these organisations' formal emphasis on equality and diversity and their respective policy frameworks, this does not suggest that LGBs' experiences were trouble-free, far from it. However, with a restrictive vocabulary many LGBs find it hard to express their negative experiences, and in every respect often avoid blaming it on their sexuality. In what resembled a mirror image, when examples of LGB's negative experiences were discussed by heterosexual employees, any reference to discrimination was keenly denied, alternative explanations readily produced, and the blame for any negative experiences frequently laid at the LGB person's own door. Equally, when inappropriate jokes at the expense of LGBs were discussed, it was considered the responsibility of LGBs to establish the necessary boundaries. In this respect, we dare to ask when, and what will it take before UK employees adopt a similar attitude to homophobic jokes as they currently do to racist ones.

Our study also shows that disclosure or 'coming out' for many LGBs is a more dynamic process than described in the LGB literature with heterosexual colleagues often playing a key role by posing questions based upon assumptions of non-heterosexuality. Stereotyping lies at the heart of such assumptions which include stereotypes about looks, dress and mannerisms, indeed often held and reproduced by LGBs themselves. Yet, as many of these stereotypes are negative, particularly those describing lesbians, they need to be openly acknowledged to be challenged. This is particularly important as such stereotyping is central to many LGBs' experience of bullying and harassment, although in very different ways for men and women. Therefore, whilst fitting stereotypes is hazardous for gay men, or anyone assumed to be gay, it is lesbians who do not correspond to stereotypical images who are at the greater risk. Their feminine persona is often not taken seriously, seemingly representing a challenge to some heterosexual men and a threat to some heterosexual women. Further light was thrown on this by our focus group discussions about the isolating experience of a bisexual woman, assumed heterosexual by her colleagues, whose decision to keep her bisexuality private was not accepted and rather deemed dishonest when her bisexuality became public knowledge. Indeed, it also revealed considerable ignorance about bisexuality altogether.

To make progress on some of the key problems identified by our study, it must be the responsibility of organisations to discuss and establish behavioural standards and boundaries for acceptable conduct with respect to sexual orientation, as with other protected employee groups, and the duty of managers to ensure that such standards are respected and upheld without being considered moralists and killjoys. Equally, although less overt but at least as damaging, managers must also challenge attempts at social exclusion of LGBs. Furthermore, to counteract the existing negative stereotypes of LGBs there is a need for a frank and public discussion, involving employers, trade unions, the LGB movement and its advocacies alike. Moreover, our study reveals the impact that a disregard for the organisation's equal opportunity policies, workload, adequate resourcing and control of work tasks and the time taken to complete them, all directly affect the levels of bullying of LGBs, clearly indicating there is much organisations can do to improve the work experience of LGBs. Finally, the fact that the presence of supportive managers not only seems to make it easier for employees to be open about their non-heterosexuality, but also to somewhat mitigate the risk of bullying, should be taken as an encouraging finding and one which should move organisations into action.

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