

## **SILENT MINORITY: EXPLORING GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN'S ACCOUNTS OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN BRITISH UNIVERSITY PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENTS**

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**Abstract:** This study explores the experiences of gay and bisexual men who have studied/are studying psychology at universities in the UK. The study utilises a qualitative framework, incorporating thematic analysis informed by grounded theory techniques. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of 18 current and ex-students (ages range from 21-45 years) from 11 different institutions. Three higher-order categories emerged: (a) 'Exclusion and estrangement', (b) 'Managing heteronormativity', and (c) 'Disciplinary loyalty'. In general, participants reported instances of exclusion from course material and feelings of estrangement within the learning and teaching environment. The curriculum was often described as homophobic and heterocentric and participants recounted strategies for protecting themselves against homophobia and heterosexism which included self-imposed segregation. We also interpret a degree of ambivalence conveyed by participants with respect to the limits of inclusion for sexual minorities. Overall, these experiences had an adverse effect on the overall learning and teaching experience of these participants and we argue that this is a result of a ubiquitous heteronormative disciplinary and institutional milieu, which by its very nature, is difficult to concretely identify and challenge. This milieu serves to marginalise and routinely silence lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) individuals, lifestyles and research in Psychology. Finally, we make recommendations with respect to fostering LGB affirmative learning and teaching practices.

**Key words:** Homophobia, Learning and teaching, Lesbian and Gay Psychology.

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## INTRODUCTION

Very little is currently understood about the learning and teaching experiences of gay and bisexual men (and other sexual minorities) in UK universities. We do know, however, that lesbians, gay men, bisexuals (henceforth LGB) and members of other sexual minorities have to deal with the material and psychological consequences of living in a culture that systematically rejects and routinely pathologises them. This research explores the experiences of gay and bisexual men who have studied or who are studying psychology at universities across England, Scotland, and Wales; it particularly focuses on students' perceptions of psychology's treatment of sexuality within its subject matter and the experience of being gay or bisexual in a university Psychology Department.

Survey research continues to show that the majority of lesbians and gay men in the UK have experienced some form of homophobia<sup>1</sup> and in many cases even violence and physical assault (Barlow, 2002; Douglas, Warwick, Kemp, & Whitty, 1997; Jarman & Tenant, 2003; Mason & Palmer, 1996; Moran, Paterson, & Docherty, 2004). In a national LGB survey conducted by Stonewall<sup>2</sup> (Mason & Palmer, 1996) it was found that one third of all men and one quarter of all women had experienced violent attacks, while 32% of all respondents had been harassed, 73 % had been verbally abused, 31% had visited the police, and 40% of violent attacks on participants aged eighteen and under had taken place in school (in 50% of these attacks the perpetrators were fellow students).

Western society and culture remains deeply heteronormative –where this term refers to a complex of values, morals, practices and ideals that operate at individual, institutional, social and cultural levels and place heterosexuality (especially monogamous marriage) at the centre of understandings of love and sexuality. Sexualities that fall outside these norms are routinely devalued or pathologised. Homophobia and heteronormativity operate at many different levels and through many different mechanisms; for example, in relation to issues of visibility and media representation through to experiences of prejudice, discrimination, heterosexism and

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1. Homophobia is normally defined as some form of irrational and persistent fear or dread of 'homosexuals' (there are debates as to who from the LGB community this term includes) or their lifestyle/culture.

2. Stonewall is a UK based LGB campaigning organisation founded in 1989, see their website at: <http://www.stonewall.org.uk>

fear of verbal or physical attack. Furthermore, since their birth, various psychological practices have been implicated in the oppression of lesbians and gay men through the pathologisation of any form of sexual expression that falls outside the heterosexual norm (Kitzinger, 1999). Kitzinger (1990) previously highlighted the problem of anti-lesbian and anti-gay bias in psychology learning and teaching, including the issue of exclusion of lesbian and gay affirmative material from the curriculum and from introductory textbooks. Almost twenty years ago, in 1989, a lesbian student described her sense of exclusion from her degree course thus:

«There are...lesbians and gay men in every college of Higher Education, whose needs are barely acknowledged, let alone met. Our existence should be acknowledged and reflected not just in the lecture room but in the curriculum as well» (Clarke, 1989, p. 5).

Lesbian, gay and bisexual issues remain a neglected area in education. This exclusion is partly due to the effects of government policy (in particular the recently repealed Section 28 of the Local Government Act<sup>3</sup>) and partly because those who work as lecturers routinely avoid the issue (education, it is often suggested, belongs in the public domain whereas sexuality belongs in the private domain). Such beliefs make it difficult to address the needs and concerns of lesbian, gay and bisexual persons in an educational setting (Epstein, 1994; Norris, 1992). Moreover, this public/private dualism is not only manifested in individual behaviour but also has an influence upon the operation of institutions including the rela-

3. "Section or Clause 28" refers to an amendment to the UK Local Government Act 1986 which took place in May 1988 initiated by the then Tory government under Margaret Thatcher; it was eventually repealed in November 2003. The amendment stated:

(1) A Local Authority shall not:

- (a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality;
- (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.

While no one was ever successfully prosecuted under this clause it produced a climate of fear across the public sector, and especially in schools, where teachers no longer felt able to freely discuss LGB issues in the classroom. Groups and services for LGB persons were forced to close because of fears of prosecution and/or removal of funding. Many at the time felt this clause was deeply homophobic and the recent campaign for its repeal still met with challenge.

tions between institutional policies and practices and those individuals who are subject to them. Some teachers and lecturers take an explicit position against LGB persons and lifestyles. Eyre (1993), for example, identified compulsory heterosexuality in the university classroom finding that prospective teachers often viewed anti-heterosexist pedagogy as equivalent to promoting homosexuality and that such 'promotion' was morally wrong.

Previous studies have examined the overall student experience of life at university as a means of evaluating the "campus climate" (see for example, Hill, Childers, Childs, Cowie, Hatton, Lewis, MacNair, Oswalt, Perez, & Valentine, 2002; Rhoads, 1995; Slater, 1993; Waldo, 1998; Waldo, Hesson-McInnis, & D'Augelli, 1998). These studies suggest that the campus climate is often hostile towards LGB undergraduate and graduate students and that this hostile context adversely affects their educational experience. The physical and psychological consequences of such a hostile environment have been systematically researched through the identification and exploration of what has been termed "minority stress". This refers to the effects –manifested through stress, anxiety and other causes of negative well-being– of living as a member of a sexual (or other) minority in a homophobic and heteronormative environment. Empirical studies have demonstrated clear links between minority stress and negative health outcomes in some individuals (Meyer, 1995; Ross, 1990). Meyer (2003, p. 675) defined minority stress in this context as:

«... a chronic psychological strain resulting from experiences and expectations of prejudice, decisions about disclosure of sexual identity and the internalisation of homophobia and homonegativity.»

There is a significant body of literature on this topic and here we argue that minority stress will negatively impact on the learning and teaching experience of gay and bisexual students. Minority stress appears to be experienced more intensely during adolescence and early adulthood (Savin-Williams, 1994), which may in part be related to struggles with identity formation and issues related to coming out. The difficulties of coming out within a higher educational setting are usefully illustrated by a student who participated in a US study of coming out experiences on campus—he described his experience as follows:

«Coming out involves taking all the negative things that you've heard about yourself, heard about "those people", and just saying to yourself that none of it matters as much as you do. It means opening up the door and letting out all the internalised hatred, fear, self-doubt and self-worthlessness. I think it's the point of breaking. You either come out or you sort of die» (Rhoads, 1995, p. 9).

Thus, for younger students –perhaps arriving at university directly from school or college– the experience of minority stress may be acute.

Social and family support appears crucial in buffering these stressors (Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995), along with quality of relationships and assistance from life-partners (Kurdeck, 1994). Internalisation of cultural stereotypes has also been linked with minority stress (McLean & Link, 1994), which may arise not only from the environment but also from internal 'psychological' processes, including internalised homophobia (Gonsiorek, 1993). Thus, the denial and concealment of emotions and identity can also be a cause of minority stress and this may be most relevant for students who have yet to come out (to themselves and/or others) and live openly as a gay or bisexual man. Hiding one's true feelings through self-denial and self-concealment each and every day can take its toll on both physical and psychological well-being.

There is also reflection within the literature upon the psychology curriculum with respect to LGB issues. The primary finding of these studies and commentaries, many of which analyse not only the curriculum but also the content of introductory textbooks, is the invisibility of LGB-related course content and the all-pervading presence of heteronormative bias. For example, Pilkington and Cantor (1996) asked 64 students taking professional psychology degrees (clinical or counselling psychology) to report incidences of anti-lesbian or anti-gay course materials. Participants identified forty two heterosexually biased texts. Fifty offensive lecturer comments were also reported and in almost half of these cases the lecturer appeared oblivious to her or his conduct.

Simoni (1996) reviewed the content of 24 introductory psychology texts and found very limited coverage of lesbian and gay issues. Moreover, when these issues were in fact discussed, they routinely appeared in sections related to sex but tended to be absent from other potentially relevant sections, for example, relationships, parenting and child development. Simoni concluded that this selective absence served to underscore the notion that

LGB issues not only lacked importance but were also deviant in some way. In a recent review of the relevant literature Phillips and Fischer (1998) argue that there is clear and irrefutable evidence of heterosexist bias in the undergraduate psychology curriculum. They call for further research into what would constitute effective and appropriate training in LGB issues for those taking applied/professional psychology degrees.

There has been increasing interest and attention in recent years to issues relating to equality of access to higher education among minority groups, especially black and ethnic minorities and those from residential areas which have a higher representation of people with lower incomes. Skelton (1999) has suggested that policy documents, such as the Dearing Report and the Government's Green Paper "The Learning Age" (Department for Education and Skills, 1998), which aim to provide strategies for intervention with respect to issues of inclusivity in higher education, have focused on "inclusive access" at the cost of "inclusive experience". Taking into account the actual experience of minority and other excluded groups, Skelton argues, would require an approach which calls for both structural and cultural changes to higher education provision.

We concur with Skelton and maintain that the emphasis on access, while valuable in many ways, fails to address the specific experiences of minority groups in higher education and has produced a conceptual and policy framework in which the needs of LGB students have been almost completely ignored. Moreover, by emphasising the structural aspects of inequality of opportunity (for example, in relation to increasing the numbers of students from particular postal areas), the focus on access obscures other key issues, especially the routine practices of exclusion (both individual and institutional) that may be identified in university settings. We have offered two examples of such practices: the absence of LGB issues within the psychology curriculum and the chronic effects of minority stress, or what have been termed the continuous "micro-aggressions" (Boyd-Franklin, 1993) that result from a hostile, homophobic and heterosexually biased environment. This research aims to provide a starting point for an evidence-based discussion of these issues through documenting the experiences of gay and bisexual male psychology students. This research is also part of a larger study conducted by the WiDER (Westminster Diversity in Education Research) group exploring the experiences of three groups of minority psychology students; black and ethnic minority students, lesbian and bisexual women, gay and bisexual men (Hodges & Pearson, 2005; Jobanputra, 2006; Pearson & Hodges, 2006).

### ***The present study***

In this study we seek to understand the student experience both in relation to the University/Departmental environment in general and discipline-specific concerns in particular. Through an in-depth qualitative analysis we focus upon four key areas: first, *student expectations*; this includes the initial decision-making processes with regards to applying for a degree course and the images and understandings of the discipline that participants held prior to commencing their degree. Second, we are interested in students' experiences of the curriculum, in particular the extent to which participants are able to or wish to relate course content to their own lives (with respect to apposite topics) and the occurrence of any inappropriate or offensive material. Third, we seek an understanding of participants' *learning and teaching environment*, that is, their experience of lectures, seminars and tutorials and their relationships with staff and students within the department. Fourth, we examine the broader experience of university life as a whole, including the social and personal environment –for example, the kinds of social life that students are able to develop. In this way we aim to explore the various relationships between students and psychology; through its operation as an academic discipline and as it is related to institutional forms (for example, university Psychology Departments) and practices, (for example, learning and teaching practices). As far as the authors are aware this is the first study of its kind in the UK.

## **METHOD**

### ***Design***

This study utilises a qualitative design within a social constructionist framework. Thus, we are primarily interested in the subjective meanings which participants ascribe to the experiences and events under examination, where language is conceptualised as in part constructing the subjects and objects referred to in participants' accounts. We take a somewhat relativist stance to our data and do not assume these accounts represent a more or less accurate version of events but rather conceptualise them as versions relative (and bound) to their social, cultural and temporal location. Given this is an exploratory study, we sampled for diversity to secure as many viewpoints and experiences as possible. Thus, we were aiming to include as varied a

range of participants as possible within a sampling frame conditioned by the requirement to represent a range of institutions (within the restricted remit of the study) and limited by participants' self-selection.

We sought to analyse our data using a form of thematic analysis (cf., Boyatzis, 1998; Patton, 1990) influenced by grounded theory coding procedures, (cf., Charmaz, 2006). Thus we aimed to uncover the recurring patterns in the data through an iterative process of 'open' and 'focused' coding (cf., Charmaz, 2006) derived from a process of constant comparison to provide maximum flexibility in generating themes and categories from participants' accounts. We also sought, however, in line with our constructionist position, to interpret those accounts in relation to the wider institutional and social context. In this way, a more detailed, in-depth understanding of the learning and teaching experiences of students may be assembled in a form suitable to contribute to resources for intervention which are relevant to the lived-experience of gay and bisexual male psychology students.

### ***Participants***

Participants in this study self-identified as gay or bisexual. We use the term "gay" to refer to men who primarily relate sexually and affectionally to other men and "... primarily to identities and to the modern culture and communities that have developed among people who share those identities" and the term "bisexual" to refer to men who 'relate sexually and affectionally to women and men'. These definitions were adapted from the APA website. We sought to include bisexual identified men as they are often ignored in studies concerning sexuality. However, we acknowledge the important variations in the meanings that identity terms may have for individuals and aimed to provide a forum within interviews for participants to discuss these issues, including any perceived differences between the experiences of gay and bisexual men.

Eighteen participants were recruited through informal contacts (for example, poster campaigns and via student publications) with ages ranging from 19 to 45 years ( $M = 27.7$ ,  $SD = 8.1$ , Median = 25, Mode = 26). Of them 14 self-identified as gay and 4 as bisexual. Their nationalities were as follows: White UK (10), Black UK (1), White Irish (1), Argentina (1), Denmark (1), Germany (1), Greece (1), Iraq (1), and USA (1). All participants had completed at least two years of their degree course or had graduated less than five years prior to inclusion in the study.



The invitation to participate was worded thus:

«Lecturers at the University of Westminster are carrying out a study into the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender psychology students. This is a very under researched area and the results of this study will be extremely valuable for developing teaching and research policies.»

«If you are currently studying for a degree where psychology constitutes at least 50% of your programme or you have graduated in the last five years we need you! The study involves a fully confidential one-to-one chat about your experiences as a psychology student.»

Although we advertised for transgender students to participate, none came forward to take part in the study. Interviews were conducted during the period 2002-2006. Throughout the study the confidentiality of participants has been guaranteed and maintained including the names of the universities attended. Overall 11 different universities were represented in the sample and these included “old”, “new” and “red brick” universities<sup>4</sup>.

### ***Procedure***

Data was collected using semi-structured one-to-one informal and confidential interviews, which took place at the University of Westminster and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. An interview schedule was developed from pilot data which were collected using one-to-one and small group discussions with LGB students. The interview protocol consisted primarily of open-ended questions, such as: (1) Have your expectations changed over the period of your degree? (2) Do you relate to more than one identity category, for example, gay/bisexual, and black? (3) Did you experience any homophobia, either overt or covert from staff (students)? (4) Did you come out to or talk to other students (staff) about being gay/bisexual?

Interviews were conducted by the authors in a non-directive manner and intended to encourage disclosure of participants' accounts and perspectives

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4. So called “Red brick” universities were established during and after the 1960s, “New” universities were established post-1992 and tend to be ex-Polytechnics (Higher Education institutions which specialised in technical and vocational education) and less commonly ex-Colleges of Further Education.

concerning the issues discussed within a safe and trusting environment. Prior to each interview, participants were fully briefed concerning the nature of the study and gave properly informed consent to participate; this included the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time and to approve a copy of their interview transcript. We communicated clearly to participants that they were free to say anything they wanted to and that we were not seeking any particular kinds of answer other than their own points of view. Participants were debriefed after the interview and invited to raise any questions or issues that had emerged.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim without editing, according to accepted conventions (cf., O'Connell & Kowal, 1995). The transcripts were then scrutinised by a research assistant using a thematic analytic approach (Boyatzis, 1998; Patton, 1990), drawing upon grounded theory coding techniques (cf., Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify themes and categories with the greatest explanatory power. Two other members of the research team (involved in other WiDER projects) and the authors also provided input to the coding process. This consisted of an initial phase of line-by-line (open) coding where detailed and primarily descriptive codes were produced for each entire transcript. This was followed by focused coding where the codes from the first phase were re-analysed for common themes and higher-order meanings. This resulted in a small number of focused codes which were, in turn, refined and taken back to the transcript data to produce a minimal number of explanatory categories which made best overall sense of the data. At this point we terminated the analysis, based on the consensus reached.

## **RESULTS – DISCUSSION**

Four key areas were explored during the interviews and the thematic analysis revealed three higher-order categories: (1) Exclusion and estrangement, (2) Managing heteronormativity, and (3) Disciplinary loyalty—we deal with each in turn in the following section. The names of participants have been changed and any potentially identifying features within excerpts have also been removed or changed. Interviewer comments and questions are included where it helps make sense of the data.

In general terms students reported a positive overall experience of their degree course, although there were some exceptions to this including two

cases where students had experienced very severe homophobia, primarily from other students. Participants also appeared loyal to psychology both as discipline and practice and as an eventual career path (Category 3). However, there was broad disaffection and frustration regarding the exclusion of sexuality within the discipline and university courses and the experience of estrangement while studying as a gay or bisexual man in the university setting (Categories 1 and 2).

### *Exclusion and estrangement*

Participants reported many instances of exclusion and feelings of estrangement which occurred in a variety of forms and settings. Experiences relating to exclusion were primarily reported with respect to the subject and curriculum, while estrangement was linked to the learning/teaching and social environments, where students often engaged in a variety of forms of self-exclusion in order to protect themselves from homophobia and other forms of rejection. The following excerpts are typical reports of exclusion from the curriculum:

**Interviewer:** So is it fair to say that you didn't really have anything about bisexuality on the course, is that fair?

**Robert:** That is a very accurate statement yeah.

**Mike:** As a gay man you do have particular life experiences that straight people won't experience and none of that came up apart from within one or two lectures...

**Sam:** I don't think that I've had any lectures directly on gay issues or sexuality issues; it has never really come up, so in that respect it hasn't really included anything yet.

**Paul:** It was all about quantitative research I think, as I've said and there was not much lesbian or gay kind of issues that came up within psychology. I had to search elsewhere to identify as a gay 18-year-old at University... There was nothing on my course to kind of... build it up or reiterate who I was as a gay student...

Many participants mentioned that they had difficulty relating to course

material, though this was primarily reported for content where there was already an expectation that it would map onto lived experience, for example, social and developmental psychology and personality/individual differences:

**Dean:** I think to be honest I found it difficult to apply quite a lot of it, I felt that in general terms it was quite removed from reality as I saw it... but it [developmental psychology] missed out whole areas to do with how people might actually construct for themselves some sort of identity or identities and I don't know whether they felt that was simply too complicated to include at that stage or whether they really weren't thinking beyond the, quote, norm... I think they were thinking in terms of statistically normal people, as opposed to us oddities.

It was not expected that other subjects, for example biopsychology and cognitive psychology, would easily map onto any lived experience:

**Interviewer:** Were you able, say you're sitting in the lecture, were you able to think, "Oh yeah this makes sense because I experienced it?"

**Kevin:** Oh yeah, completely not then. I suppose, well you can't sort of like sit there in a cognition lecture and think, or a perception lecture and think, "Oh well, I've thought of that before" because you don't tend to think of it in a normal process. The thought process is not a part of your experience...

There was support for greater inclusion of LGB material in the syllabus to more accurately reflect the lived experience of gay and bisexual men (though this was modulated by an ambivalence which appeared to normalise the lack of representation of minority concerns. We explore this in detail with category three):

**Peter:** Because if it doesn't [get included] students only get a certain fraction or percentage of... They only learn about a certain type of person. They are not learning about the full range of human behaviour.

**Ben:** If the course had been more open about kind of sexuality or addressed more issues to do with sexuality then I might have felt more comfortable talking about my sexuality.

**John:** I feel that there were a lot of opportunities to bring either studies or theory about sexuality and they weren't taken up on really, which I was a bit disappointed with. I think they could have pushed equal opportunities a bit more...

There was also a sense that LGB issues were generally excluded from the learning/teaching environment, that is, it was simply not talked about in the University environment and that there were implicit and explicit messages signalling that they should not be talked about (we also explore this in more detail in the next section). This preferred invisibility led to feelings of fear within and estrangement from the learning/teaching and social environments, such as:

**Richard:** I had to be careful who I came out to, had to be careful what I said about my (sexuality) even though the university was supposed to be equal access to all and one, but no I still felt I couldn't be as open as I (wanted) to be.

**John:** There were quite a big group of kind of youngish Indian guys who were really, really homophobic and the guy in my group that I worked with, just an ordinary kind of London guy who was really homophobic, but it did feel like, it felt like the group was more menacing and more vocal about the homophobia and they'd say things like, they'd say really homophobic things and they'd say, "Oh you're not like that are you?" to different people and it was a bit... a bit weird. So at that age I didn't really know what to say.

The sense of exclusion from the curriculum and the sense of estrangement from the university environment reported here may be conceptualized as a means through which psychology, as a discipline, marginalizes those who fall outside the heterosexual norm. Where LGB issues were included they were almost always mentioned in the context of the unquestioned requirement to provide an explanation for 'different' sexual identities and lifestyles. Here students are reporting a process of what might be termed normalized absence and pathologised presence, and this we argue indicates a deep-rooted heterosexual bias within psychology both as discipline and with respect to educational practice. Foucault (1989, pp. 65-66) famously argued that universities provide an "artificial" environment for all students through which they are rendered «safe and ineffective, socially and politi-

cally castrated». The “rituals of exclusion” to which Foucault refers are operating here in a much more selective way. Here gay and bisexual identities are either erased from the university environment or – if students choose to reveal or discuss their sexuality, or if their sexuality is revealed by someone else – they are often powerfully regulated through a process of “Othering”, that is a process whereby identity is, at best, marked as problematic and, at worst, repressed, stigmatised or pathologised.

### *Managing heteronormativity*

All participants described an awareness of the heteronormative nature of the university environment, though in different ways and to differing extents. Experiences ranged from overt homophobia from both staff and students to a general feeling that the environment was not conducive to being open about one’s sexuality (illustrated above by Richard and John). Direct experiences of homophobia usually took the form of prejudiced comments; for example, it was very common for participants to report anti-gay or anti-lesbian comments from fellow students:

**Kevin:** That’s another thing, this bloke [fellow student] was like, “Are you gay?” to me on the first night in my halls, I was like... He apologized later, but it was just like the fact that it’s like, “Are you fucking gay?”

**John:** ...but I just remember I was always working in the same group of people. One of them was okay, one was really, really homophobic and kind of expected me to join in with his homophobic comments, and the other person, in the small group was someone I was having this sort of relationship with and he was having a lot of problems with himself, and I just feel generally it was a very, very unsafe environment.

There were also incidents of homophobic statements from staff though these were much less common. Reports included explicit and implicit homophobia:

**Joseph:** It’s more I think that sometimes I get treated a bit different actually, you can sort of just tell that the lecturer doesn’t like gay people, perhaps I feel there’s one or two, more the seminar tutors

perhaps, so I do sort of feel, I'll say something and they'll sort of brush me off at times...

**Kevin:** I mean like we did developmental, in the developmental stuff there was one lecture where we talked about homosexuality, but the lecturer had made some vile comment, and I was just like, "Oh my god" my jaw dropped to the floor

One student told of death threats (investigated by the police) which he received because of his involvement in a student union LGB organisation, while another had dropped out of higher education altogether because of the level of homophobia (primarily from other students) that he experienced at his university. It was more typical, however, for students to describe a more subtle and complex experience of heteronormativity where staff and students made routine assumptions that all persons are heterosexual, that this is the only normal type of sexual relation and that any other form of sexuality required some kind of explanation (personally and/or theoretically). The following students discuss their experiences of firstly a class (student) presentation and secondly avoiding being alone with two homophobic male students:

**James:** I think with the presentation I did feel the way they were, and I can't remember sort of the specifics of it... you did feel that they were talking about gay people as 'them', you know as someone else and this group and you felt, "Okay now I'm really being put in a box" but that wasn't obviously any of the lectures [inaudible] that was that group. And it wasn't that they were saying anything offensive, it was just sort of them, maybe the wording or the way that they... I mean if they'd done the same thing about [racial] prejudice because there was a big mix of people here they would have probably been a bit more sensitive, because there would have been a lot of either black or Asian people in the audience. Whereas because they can't see that I'm gay they probably just assume that maybe I'm straight... just the way they were talking about gay and lesbian, that there was definitely 'them', separate from 'us'.

**Kevin:** ...I could feel a bit awkward if there's only two people in the computer room I suppose, so occasionally if I'm in a stressed or in a bad mood I won't go in the computer room, it's just too [inaudible] because I just know there's sort of like an underscored hostility...

Almost all participants reported that they had developed strategies by which they protected themselves with respect to their relationships with both staff and students; for example, there was an indication that difficulties with the personal and social milieu resulted in a clear separation between university and domestic environments:

**Bill:** I don't think I went to any official functions, any of the parties or clubs at all, we went into the student bar a few times but not particularly I didn't go to the university gym ... I don't think the student union here is representative of all students at all, it's got quite a very narrow focus.

This excerpt reflects a common means among participants of coping with the dominant (heteronormative) value system as reflected in both departmental and university culture. Participants' personal lives were routinely self-censored to enable a sense of fitting-in with the prevailing social climate. Those who were open about their sexuality reported a highly conditional form of acceptance – described as more like tolerance – from other students. These strategies can be conceptualised as ways of coping within a heterosexually-oriented institutional context. Psychology departments do not appear to be any less heteronormative than UK culture/society in general, thus gay students must carefully navigate their relationships with students and staff while at the same time finding ways to cope with the heteronormative value systems and structures of university psychology departments. We see here the subtlety and complexity of contemporary homophobia and heterosexism. Over thirty years ago Dennis Altman (1971, p. 59) described the ambivalence of much liberal opinion in the West – with its mix of conditional tolerance and lack of meaningful acceptance:

«... [M]ost liberal opinion is horrified by persecution of homosexuals and supports abolishing anti-homosexual laws, without really accepting homosexuality as a full and satisfying form of sexual and emotional behaviour. Such tolerance of homosexuality can coexist with considerable suspicion of and hostility towards it, and this hostility is reinforced in all sorts of ways within our society.»

Thus, we might observe that the instances of institutional and self-exclusion described above (including Category 1), can only serve to sustain this ambivalence and hence perpetuate hostility and suspicion in the university environment.



***Disciplinary loyalty***

While all students described some negative experiences as explicated in Categories 1 and 2, when asked to sum up their experience almost all said that overall they had a positive experience at university. In general, students described a strong investment in the value and significance of psychological research and practice and remained loyal to the discipline despite their reservations concerning its treatment of sexuality and their experiences of exclusion. Thus, the difficulties and frustrations of studying in higher education as a member of a sexual minority did not appear to have a detrimental impact on participants' loyalty to psychology as discipline and practice. The following excerpts are illustrative of students' overall positive evaluation:

**Interviewer:** ...[H]ow would you describe your experience of being a gay man in your Psychology Department, what's it been like?

**Paul:** I do feel at times I have been treated a bit differently but apart from that I haven't really felt it's been a bad experience. I've really liked being there and I've realized studying psychology at university, I mean there are quite a few gay people there... so its been a good experience...

**Interviewer:** How would you sum up your experience of being a gay man for you in [name of university]?

**John:** I think overall it was very good for me. I think that I feel like I've met a lot of different people and I've experienced people's different views... I felt that it's perhaps more life changing than other degrees and I feel like it's changed me a lot...

In addition to an overall positive report of their experience, participants' accounts of how psychology should deal with issues of diversity were complex and sometimes ambivalent. While students expressed a desire for more LGB research and issues to be included in the curriculum, many also suggested that given lesbians, gay and bisexual men are a small minority, it may not necessarily make sense to do so:

**Joseph:** ...I'm in a minority and psychology is a discipline and most of the research and stuff is done on the generalized populous...

**James:** But I think it's one of those things when you are the minority that obviously some of the curriculum is you know, sort of have to cover everything and probably take more consideration to the majority and that's just how it is... if you really want to deal with those issues there are opportunities for it, but it's not in any of the core modules. It's not sort of any mainstream thing that's taught... I feel. I don't know if it should be, you know I think it's good that the opportunities are there and you can take them if you want to, but again it might not be as relevant for other people.

Also in contrast to clear calls for greater inclusion of LGB material in the curriculum were arguments from some participants that it was not appropriate to reveal or discuss sexuality and sexual identity in a university environment:

**Harry:** I've not emphasis [sic] in your gay life in the university, because it's the wrong place, you know... Sorry but it's the wrong place... University is a place to achieve the knowledge and to improve knowledge, not to show your sexual behaviour or your sexual orientation in life.

**Brad:** No I think, because the career of psychology is not to say psychology is for gay men, no, no. The career must be open, very neutral, must be open for everybody and some topics could be interesting, some more interesting for you and not interesting for another one. Apart from that, I don't to talk for the rest of my life reading topics relating for gay man, common gay man in the street, because in the end you are giving an answer as a professional, not as a gay man...

**Robert:** In the same way that I would feel that a lecturer who was focused on their political beliefs or their race or their gender, if a lecturer was, unless it was a specific course was sort of sexuality sort of oriented, a lecturer who focused solely on that when they could have been providing a much broader base of knowledge I would feel would be a flaw to teaching...

We suggest this is another example of the operation of the public/private

dualism mentioned earlier (cf., Epstein, 1994; Norris, 1992). This finding contrasts with the much more politicised position of lesbian and bisexual female psychology students who described the dominance of majority concerns in psychology as one of the key shortfalls within the discipline and a powerful barrier to equality (Pearson & Smith, 2006).

There is another dualism possibly underlying these accounts, which we argue also enables us to make broader sense of all three categories described here: the scientific (neutral, disinterested) nature of psychology contrasted with the political (and therefore potentially biased) nature of sexual identity (including arguments for greater recognition and inclusion). Our findings in this study point to the ways in which the construction of the 'individual' embedded in psychological theory and practice (including educational practices), do not properly reflect the cultural complexity of the communities and societies to which research conclusions and practical interventions are often applied. That is, we argue that to make broader sense of the findings here we need to reflect on the 'psychological' subject and its exclusions. Referring to the history of empirical psychological research Danziger (1994, p. 88) observed that

«...[P]sychological research on populations had a tendency to replace the social categories that defined populations in real life with populations defined in terms of nonsocial categories.»

However, here we argue that the assumed 'subject' of psychology rather than belonging to a general 'nonsocial' category, is in fact highly specific; such that persons identifying as other than white, male, heterosexual, and middle class are somehow made 'Other', that is, they become subject to a variety of forms of regulation, whether for example, through the notion that occupying 'Other' identities necessarily leads to bias in the researcher's own position or through the processes of normalized absence and pathologised presence mentioned above. This is more than an issue of competing models of the person (cf., Chapman & Jones, 1980) but rather points to the unspoken, taken-for-granted characteristics of those models which reflect the unmarked nature of certain (central) identity categories within western culture (cf., Hodges, 2004) and the ways these are bound up with notions of disinterest and neutrality within (social) scientific practice.

In further relation to the notion of the psychological subject and its exclusions, we interpret the third category (Disciplinary loyalty) as possible

evidence of a process of alignment with the mainstream values of psychology, that is, it may reflect the extent to which students have a personal investment in the accounts that psychology routinely offers about itself as scientific/disinterested/apolitical and which are articulated with culturally embedded understandings of scientific authority. Given this, if sexual minority issues are conceptualised as fundamentally political, they cannot then count as an element of an apolitical discipline. Hence, while there were clear calls for greater recognition and inclusion of LGB issues within course content (and a more open atmosphere with respect to gay and bisexual identity), there was also –for some– a desire to limit these changes to ensure that the key values of psychology were upheld and protected. This notion of a process of disciplinary value alignment raises difficult questions about the ways in which (any) students may buy into the potentially oppressive aspects of psychological research and practice. We argue that this provides an example of the powerful means through which psychology can partially incorporate issues of difference and diversity without having to properly challenge its foundation in heteronormative values. Moreover, this is particularly powerful because students themselves often come to acquire the values of scientific neutrality that psychology wraps around itself and not least because any evidence that psychology has not (historically) been disinterested is very rarely found in the content of psychology degree courses.

## DISCUSSION

The results of our analysis indicate that individual and institutionalised homophobia and heterosexism may have a detrimental impact on students' experience through exclusionary practices evident in areas such as curriculum content and the departmental and social/personal environments. The first two categories which emerged in this study have one key element in common: they constitute what we might term "silencing practices", that is, they close down opportunities for openness and recognition not only of the experiences, needs and concerns of LGB students but even the very recognition of their presence within university departments and psychological research itself. Moreover, we have argued that the disciplinary loyalty (Category 3) described by most of the students in our sample may also, in part, constitute a silencing practice through limiting or censoring those aspects of identity which are incompatible with neutrality and should, there-

fore, remain in the private domain. Such an institutional and disciplinary context can only serve to reinforce the oppression of sexual minorities even when universities claim to implement equal opportunities policies and other strategies of inclusion.

We contend that psychology as a discipline has always tended to be conservative in its values, and this manifests itself in the enduring construction of lesbian, gay and bisexual identities and lifestyles as in need of explanation, as in some sense 'Other'. Historically, the discipline has provided models of LGB persons rooted in pathology (Kitzinger, 1995), however even where these constructions have been more recently challenged, psychology remains underpinned by heterosexist and heteronormative values. Over two decades ago, Apple (1982) argued that education, in general, and the curriculum, in particular, are essential components of those apparatuses that sustain existing patterns of structural inequality and social privilege, thus preserving a social order stratified by class, gender, and race. One of the key barriers to change, he suggested, related to the ways in which those apparatuses are not recognized as such. This lack of recognition has been and remains a powerful barrier to the development of learning and teaching practices which properly cater for the needs of LGB students. We must identify and recognise the effects of our practices not only with respect to the ways that we teach but also through the messages and models we (intentionally and unintentionally) provide concerning the worth and value of LGB persons and their lifestyles.

### *Limitations of the study*

This was an exploratory study and we would like to clarify its limitations with a view to defining further work required. Our sample has several limitations. First, it might be argued that including gay and bisexual men in the same study is problematic in that their experiences may be fundamentally different. While we readily acknowledge this possibility, here we sought to be as open and inclusive as possible in our sampling and invited participation from gay, bisexual and transgender students. Moreover, bisexual participants were given every opportunity to talk about any perceived differences in their experiences, the results of which have fed into other work focusing on the common architecture of oppression among a range of minority psychology students (Smith, Jessen, Hodges, Jobanputra, Pearson, & Reed, 2006).

It is difficult to determine precisely how this sample compares to British psychology students in general as there are very limited statistics available concerning gender and ethnicity. Among the total first year domiciled UK male psychology student population during 2004-05, 19% self-identified as Black or ethnic minority (BEM), categorised as Black, Asian or Chinese<sup>6</sup>; this suggests that our sample is less varied in this respect given only 11% identified as BEM. Thus while nationality was varied most participants would still be categorised as white.

All participants volunteered for this study, thus participants were self-selected. As with most social research this limits the sample in ways that we can never clearly identify. This is the only way to conduct a confidential in-depth study of this kind where self-identification is a basic requirement of ethical conduct. However, we need to acknowledge that key voices may be left unheard and sometimes they may be the voices we most need to hear. Sensitively conducted large scale survey research along with the resources for larger-scale qualitative studies would go some way to reducing these limitations.

### ***Conclusions***

This study raises many questions for psychology as a discipline and for university departments in particular, especially with respect to learning and teaching practices. For example: To what extent does psychology continue to problematise and pathologise LGB sexualities? How can LGB research, concerns and issues be meaningfully incorporated into university curricula without ghettoising or pathologising minority sexual expression? How can psychology departments foster safer and more open environments for LGB students? From the accounts of students given here we suggest that in order to achieve these goals, first, psychology needs to fully recognise LGB persons and lifestyles as normal forms of sexual expression. Second, both universities and the institutions that govern psychology (in the UK, the British Psychological Society) must implement procedures and policies that will enable more inclusive teaching and learning practices and, third, there is an urgent need to implement staff training programmes in this regard. We hope that, if the above recommendations are effectively implemented, in

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6. Latest available figures taken from HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) at <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/>

time LGB affirmative learning and teaching practices will become taken-for-granted aspects of best practice in the provision of all forms of psychology and higher education.

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