Coming out at work: performativity and the recognition and renegotiation of identity

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Abstract

This paper is about 'coming out' and the process of disclosure and non-disclosure of minority sexual identity in organizations. The process of 'coming out' is important for the individual lesbian or gay man since it is concerned with the discursive recognition and renegotiation of their identity. The study uses storytelling and a double narrative approach, where 92 individuals were interviewed to produce 15 stories of coming out, which were used for discussion in focus groups. The research took place within 6 organizations – 2 emergency services, the police and the fire service, 2 civil service departments and 2 banks. A conceptual framework is developed to explain the process of disclosure, showing it to be a continuing process rather than a single event. The concept of performativity is used to explain how in coming out the discursive practice and the telling of sexuality performs the act of coming out, making it an illocutionary speech act, and one which is made as an active or forced choice. The performative and perlocutionary speech acts interact with available subject positions thereby impacting on the individual's subjectivity. Sexuality is an under-researched area of diversity in work organizations, as well as being one of the most difficult to research, so the level of access afforded by this research and the framework it produces provides a significant contribution to our understanding of minority sexual identity at work.

Introduction

The research grew out of a perception that amongst diversity categories, minority sexual orientation continues to be under-researched by organizational researchers, and struggles to be a recognised element of the diversity agenda within organizations (Hancock and Tyler, 2001; Klawitter, 1998; McQuarrie, 1998). There is a lack of information on what the issues actually are, and contextualised research into the experience of coming out and how the experience impacts identity and relationships with others at work.

The research utilises a novel discursive research method, a double narrative approach. It is based on research in six case study organizations – two banks, two government departments and two public services, the police and

the fire service. Each case study was conducted separately, and the first stage of the research involved individual interviews with between 10 and 25 gay, lesbian and bisexual people in each organization, where they were encouraged to tell stories about their experiences and how these have impacted their identity. The stories were then taken to focus groups in the same organization, to discuss, consider and debate. Although the individuals were invited to tell stories of their experience in general, the experience of 'coming out' quickly became the focus in the stories of many of the individual respondents, showing that it was of great importance to their identity. Fifteen stories of coming out emerged from the 92 individuals interviewed, and many others also mentioned this theme, which also dominated discussion in focus groups.

Minority sexual orientation in organizations

One of the most taboo topics within contemporary organizational theory is sexuality, and sexual minorities in particular (Gabriel, Fineman, and Sims, 2000: 183; Hancock and Tyler, 2001; Klawitter, 1998; McQuarrie, 1998; Ward, 2001). References to sexual orientation in the diversity literature in the past have been at best cursory (Cornelius, 2001; Kossek and Lobel, 1996; Ward, 2001); one of the reasons for this is that it is, unlike most other forms of diversity, often invisible (Badgett and King, 1997; Woods and Lucas, 1993), and in many cases silent (Ward and Winstanley, 2004). Forms of diversity where invisibility is possible, such as sexual orientation, have been less researched in the management area than visible forms such as gender or race (Bowen and Blackmon, 2003: 1400; Clair, Beatty, and MacLean, 2002). That is not to say, of course, that a literature with a long tradition about sexual minorities at work does not exist. The 1970s and 1980s saw a number of empirical surveys and analyses of discrimination against lesbians and gay men in organizations, often initially produced as small-scale studies and pamphlets (Beer, Jeffrey, and Munyard, 1983; Burrell and Hearn, 1989: 23; Campaign for Homosexual Equality, 1981; GLC, 1985; Taylor, 1986).

Although many gay people choose not to reveal their sexual orientation at work, a recent study found that homosexual employees who are more open about their orientation are also more likely to feel psychologically committed to their current organization and experience less conflict (Day and Schoenrade, 1997). Nevertheless, the decision to come out is one of the most important career decisions faced by gay employees and one that many others do not have to make (Clair et al., 2002; Bowen and Blackmon, 2003: 1401; Lucas and Kaplan, 1994; Ragins and Cornwell, 2001: 1). Many sexual minorities will carefully assess the prevailing organizational climate before disclosing their sexual orientation (Clair et al., 2002: 1401; Mintz and Rothblum, 1997; Schope, 2002). There are a number of reasons why people decide to come out and Humphrey suggests three main ones. First, there is an issue of honesty and integrity at the personal level; second, there are significant

benefits in building open relationships at the professional level; finally, some people think that it is important to educate colleagues about sexual minorities (Clair et al., 2002: 1402; Humphrey, 1999: 138).

Disclosure of minority sexual orientation

Poststructuralist approaches to identity, supported by the Queer theorists, suggest that identities are multiple and fragmented. This is just one in a long tradition of theorising lesbian and gay identity since the inception of a homosexual identity in the late 19th century (Weeks, 1977, 1989), when science and medicine focused on the homosexual as an object of study. It was only in the latter half of the 20th century that a sociology of homosexuality emerged (Seidman, 1997: 87), moving on from the view that it was an abnormal and perverse social type with the publication of the Kinsey report, which viewed sexuality as a continuum (Seidman, 1997: 87). Sociologists contributed significantly to our understanding of homosexuality (Goffman, 1963; Weeks, 1977), but the perspective that homosexuality was a discrete identity, remained largely unchallenged (Seidman, 1997: 87) until Foucault conceptualised sexuality as a category of knowledge (Foucault, 1976). It was this latter view that led onto poststructuralist approaches, conceptualising identity as multiple and fluid. This postmodern view of sexual identity has made it difficult to continue to focus on the individual as a subject of study (Gamson, 2000), and as Gamson (2000) puts it, 'hardly the stuff that allows a researcher to confidently run out and study sexual subjects as if they are coherent and available social types.' Not surprisingly then discursive processes in organizations as a means of constructing individual sexual identity have been under-theorised and under-researched.

The theoretical position of Queer theory and social constructionist approaches on the one hand and the earlier positivistic view of sexuality as a 'real' category on the other can be placed at two irreconcilable and incompatible extremes in their most fundamentalist positions. However this is in part a semantic hoax and linguistic trick as even Butler herself suggested that to view everything as socially constructed would be discursive monism, and that even she cannot totally reject the label of lesbianism. Likewise rather than seeing homosexuality as a biological given and 'type' and instead to see it as having subjective connotations moves the two positions closer. Our position allows for an integration of the two by focusing on public subject positions (visible in interaction) and subjectivity (private notions of self that may be in part constituted by interaction but may also be left publicly undisclosed).

The notion of the closet is one area of dispute on the theoretical level. It has been suggested that the 'Closet' is a major metaphor for lesbian and gay people in the workplace (Woods and Lucas 1993). However its appropriateness as a means for comprehending sexual identity has been hotly disputed by Queer studies. For example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 'Epistemology of

the Closet' explores contradictory conceptual models of homosexuality as both a representation of the identity of a minority, and at the same time constitutive of heterosexual identity (Sedgwick, 1991). In a typically deconstructive move, she attempted to show the unhelpful side of binary oppositions, the prime example being that when something is 'out', it implies something else being 'closeted' (Parker, 2001: 42). Sedgwick proposes that the Closet is an impossibly contradictory place. You cannot be in the Closet, since you can never be certain of the extent to which are have actually succeeded in keeping your homosexuality secret. But you can never be fully out of the Closet either since those who come to know refuse to give up the privilege of restricted knowledge and treat your sexuality as a secret to which they have special access. Coming out is also too soon and too late. It is too soon when affirmation of homosexuality is greeted with dismissal; it is too late because in coming out you have lied (Halperin, 1995: 35; Sedgwick, 1991).

This paper suggests that the concept of identity formation through interaction with others and the notion of coming out of the closet is important in theorizing identity, as it exposes the lack of congruence between the subjectivity of the individual and the subject position that is available for the individual to take up.

Some people choose not to take up the subject position of 'gay' or 'lesbian', choosing not to reveal their sexuality. The result of people remaining in the closet is a paradox; employees seem fully integrated, and yet an important aspect of their identity is almost entirely ignored (Woods and Lucas, 1993: 5). Living a double life can have a tremendously negative impact on the individual, in terms of their self-worth and esteem. It can also negatively impact on the organization, as gay employees spend a disproportionate amount of their energy developing and maintaining coping strategies. Of course, the positive side of non-disclosure is the maintaining of privacy and avoidance of negative reactions and, for those that seek it, a barrier between work and home. In addition, the cost of being out in the workplace can be high, as found in the research presented here.

When a gay man or woman feels unable to come out, they often develop coping strategies to manage their identity. This can range from not giving details about one's private life, or referring to friends in a gender neutral way, or even making up a heterosexual lifestyle, with fictitious girlfriends or boyfriends. There are four main ways in which lesbians and gay men manage their identity in the workplace (Griffin, 1992 in Croteau, 1996) which are described as follows:

- **Passing:** this where the individual lies in order to be seen as heterosexual;
- **Covering:** not disclosing information;
- **Being implicitly out:** using explicit language and artefacts to indicate sexual orientation;
- **Affirming identity:** encouraging others to view him or her as gay.

Interestingly, in certain occupations, like the police and the fire service discussed in the study below, passing and covering are identity management strategies that are followed at work *and* outside it. The result is that one identity develops at work, that of police officer where his or her sexual orientation remains undisclosed, and another, off-duty life, where the identity is lesbian or gay, but where the occupation is a closely guarded secret (Burke, 1993: 92). For example, heterosexual at work and a bank clerk in the evening (Burke, 1993: 92). This may mean that these occupations are particularly difficult for gay men and women. Previous research has shown a strong commitment from individuals to both their professional and their gay identities (Shallenberger, 1994: 129); working in the police or the fire service may force people to choose. Of course, not everyone goes through all four stages, but because of the presumption of heterosexuality, anyone who wishes to be out at work, has to go through a process of 'Coming Out'.

The decision to come out cannot be taken lightly; indeed there are a whole host of concerns to be considered. There is the level of homophobia in the workplace, the attitude of colleagues towards lesbians and gay men, and how they are treated (Woods and Lucas, 1993: 219). There are more personal considerations, such as the individual's confidence to challenge homophobia, or the way that they are going to respond to colleagues once they have come out (Woods and Lucas, 1993: 220). The form of disclosure is crucial, as the 'performance' of coming out will determine the subject position that they adopt. This research will show that individuals do not always take the decision freely, and whilst some people will give careful thought to coming out, others will have the situation thrust upon them. The decision to come out may be fraught with difficulty – choosing the right people to talk to may be a possibility, but choosing the right moment for most is almost impossible. The moment is often thrust upon them, or they can even be 'outed' by their colleagues. Some people struggle to find the right time and place to come out, and their difficulty in finding the right frame sometimes means that they fail to come out altogether (Woods and Lucas, 1993: 174). In one study gay women suggested that their 'secret' was not always in their control, revealing their lesbianism through their physical appearance (Hall, 1989: 131). A lesbian who wore jeans to a clerical job said, 'The way I dress I was, in a way, forcing it down their throats'. Another woman said 'At the time they started suspecting, I made a mistake and cut my hair short. That was the tip-off' (Hall, 1989: 132). Some try to take a minimal approach, dropping hints or allowing others to stumble across evidence such as photographs of partners; it is quite common for stigmatized individuals to play down their presence for fear of a backlash, just as Kanter (1977) described how women try to become socially invisible in the workplace (Woods and Lucas, 1993: 176).

In a piece of research by Boatwright, where ten gay women in a variety of occupations are interviewed, the respondents suggested that coming out was an important experience; one of them said that she had 'captured something' that had previously been 'denied'. The coming out process was also described

as a second adolescence, but because they were older, they had better coping strategies (Boatwright, Gilbert, Forrest, and Ketzenberger, 1996). Coming out is indeed a process of disclosing something that has previously been hidden, but it also the fashioning of a new identity (Stein, 2003: 132). In other words, being gay or lesbian is not a truth that is discovered, it is a performance, which is enacted.

The concentration on the first time a person comes out suggests a single undifferentiated act; this is misleading for two reasons. First, coming out is something, because of the constant presumption of heterosexuality, which the lesbian or gay man, has to do in every new work situation. Second, once 'out' they constantly have to manage information about themselves that is potentially discrediting (Goffman, 1963). This is particularly relevant to the work situation, where the individual is constantly being put in new situations, and it is not unusual for the individual to find themselves back in the closet – not by choice, but because of the presumption of heterosexuality by other people. The individual has to then go through the process of coming out again.

In summary, empirical studies have begun to identify a number of ways in which issues of disclosure are central to the experience and identity of sexual minorities in organizations. Queer theory could take this understanding even further through its preoccupation with discourse and also the identification of some theoretical concepts that could further this understanding, and it is to one such concept – that of 'performativity' we move in the next section.

Disclosing sexual identity is a performative act

The concept of performativity, which has its historical origins in the work of the linguistic philosopher, J.L. Austin (Hood-Williams and Harrison, 1998), takes the idea of performance, as expounded by Goffman (1969), and develops it in a linguistic sense by suggesting that much of language consists of performative utterances, 'in saying what I do, I perform the action' (Hood-Williams and Harrison, 1998). Austin was able to demonstrate the considerable extent to which language is used performatively. Austin also maintains that the words have to be said in the right context to become performative; for example, the priest declaiming the marriage vows is only performative during the wedding ceremony, but not outside it (Hood-Williams and Harrison, 1998). Performativity should not be understood as a singular or deliberate 'act', but rather, as a reiterative and citational practice (Butler, 1993: 2) as shown by this example as it consists of both speech and an act, which can be cited and enacted again and again. The repetition is in the ceremony which is utilised far and wide, but going beyond Austin we would suggest the original vows are echoed every time a married couple proclaim 'We are married' in speech and through actions such as the wearing of a ring. Derrida deconstructed Austin's approach and the performative uses of language and maintained that to be properly performative, the language must be
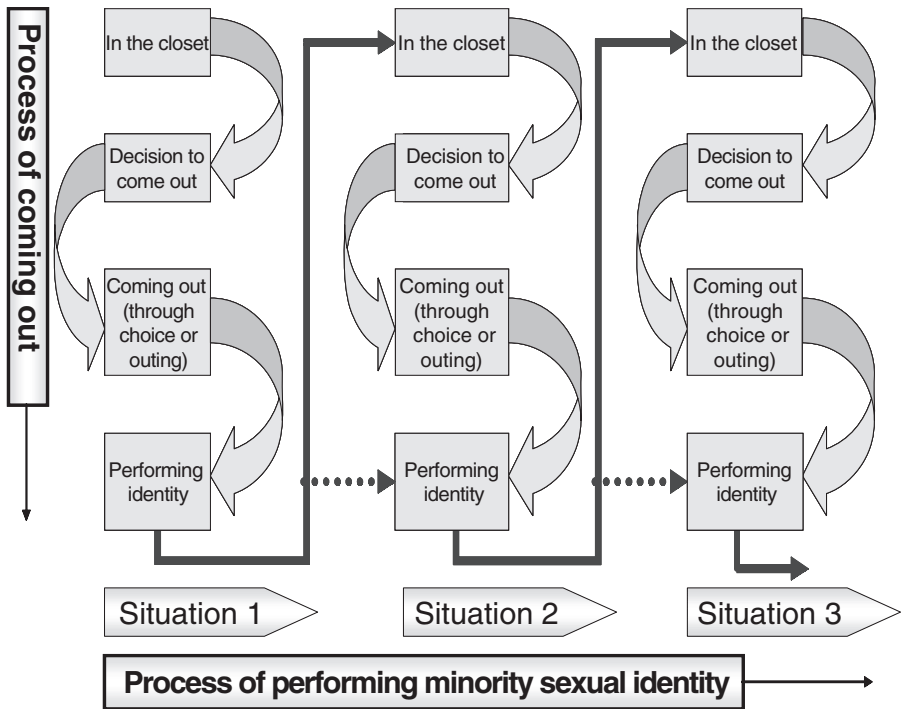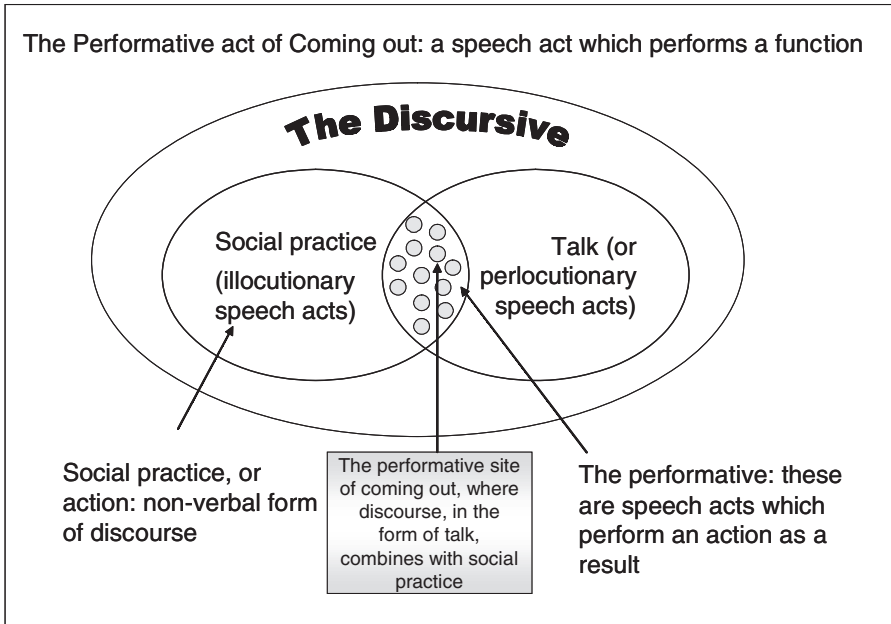
Figure 1 *The Repetitive Iterative Process of Coming Out*

sincere; if said by an actor, or as a joke, it will in some sense be void (Derrida, 1976, 1978).

Foucault, supported by later work by Butler, reveals sexuality as a socially constructed 'ideal'. Sexual identity is performative because coming out means taking up a subject position, which, theoretically at least, is a fiction. It is also performative because the declaration is a performative act (Butler, 1997). The concept of performativity emphasises that much of language consists of performative utterances where discourse becomes social practice, or, in other words, talk becomes action. It is in the repetitive nature of this action that the practice becomes performative, as in every new situation and faced with new contacts, the coming out process has to be repeated, as in figure 1. By studying this repetitive action, expressed as social practice, the researcher is able to identify the means through which discourse produces its effects.

Of course, the act of coming out is not always one which is desired or intended by the individual concerned; sometimes coming out is forced. In other words, someone can be outed, which, in effect, is the performative naming of someone as lesbian or gay, described by Butler as 'the divine power of naming' where to utter is to create the effect uttered (Butler, 1997: 32). Interestingly, this performative naming does not have to happen with the

The Performative act of Coming out: a speech act which performs a function

The Discursive

Social practice (illocutionary speech acts)

Talk (or perlocutionary speech acts)

Social practice, or action: non-verbal form of discourse

The performative site of coming out, where discourse, in the form of talk, combines with social practice

The performative: these are speech acts which perform an action as a result

Figure 2 *Model showing the effect of discourse and performativity on social identity*

subject's knowledge. Indeed one can be named or constituted out of earshot (Butler, 1997: 33).

The process of coming out can be considered in two key parts, illustrated in figure 2:

1. The performative or illocutionary speech act of coming out. This in turn is sub-divided into making an active choice and being forced out;
2. The discourse or perlocutionary speech acts surrounding the act of coming out; in other words the reactions from other people to the act of coming out;

This performative act leads to the adoption of the available subject position of out gay man or lesbian.

The research context

One of, if not the major, complication in carrying out research into sexual minorities in organizations is that it is difficult to get people talking about the subject at all. A key challenge of this research was to create an approach and research method that would get people talking about this subject.

The data was conducted by one of the authors, himself a gay man, and the project was driven by both a personal interest as well as a perceived organizational need to have a better understanding of this aspect of diversity management. The study utilised a double narrative approach where data was collected in two ways to resolve the tension between the individual and organizational level of analysis and to access what can be very private experiences of sexuality in organizations.

The data collection method for the individual interviews was story-telling. The interviewer raised issues such as whether the individual was out at work, how they managed their identity, what coming out was like and so on. Beyond this loose structure, however, respondents were encouraged to tell their stories in their own way. Story-telling is a relatively recent addition to the area of discourse analysis, but one which is growing in importance as researchers explore their power to communicate the character of the organization in stories which are essentially part of the fabric and life of organizations (Gabriel, 2000).

The study involved looking at three industry groupings, including:

- Emergency Services;
  - **A rural Police constabulary**: the largest rural police force in the UK covering the largest geographical police area in England, extending 180 miles in length. During the summer months, the influx of tourists increases the population to be policed from 1.5 million to 8 million;
  - **A semi-rural Fire Service**: a medium-sized regional division of the UK Fire Service, employing approximately 850 people. It is in a semi-rural location, with a number of medium-sized towns, and therefore there is a mix of whole-time and retained, or part-time, fire-fighters;
- The Civil Service;
  - **A small government department:** it has approximately 4,000 employees. It was formed in 2001 from the demerger of one of the larger departments, a policy department with very little public contact outside its immediate area of expertise. It has a headquarters in London with regional offices;
  - **A very large government department**: one of the larger government departments, employing approximately 84,000 people. It is a major 'processing' department and therefore has operations as well as policy. With a head office in London and major offices in all large towns, it is, nevertheless, a fragmented organization, with offices all over the country and enquiry offices in the smallest of communities.
- Banking;
  - **An international investment bank:** this Bank has an annual revenue of just over $18 billion, has its Headquarters in New York, and operations in 50 countries worldwide. In 2000, at the time of the research, the Bank had just gone through a major merger, combining one of the

world's largest commercial banks, with one of the world's best known investment banks.

○ **A large British international banking group**: one of the largest financial services groups in the United Kingdom, made up of seven business groups: Personal Financial Services, Business Banking, a credit card division, Private Clients, Global Investors, Capital Markets and 'Bank Africa'. The Group has a presence in over 60 countries and serves over 20 million customers world-wide, and has over 78,000 employees.

In total, 92 individual interviews with lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transsexuals were carried out. Collecting stories is an intensive form of research (Gabriel, 2000), not least because not everyone we spoke to is a good story-teller. We collected 15 good coming out stories. The selection criteria were:

• The story was more than just a report; that is to say it had a narrative, a plot and some degree of causality;
• The individual was out at work; many of the people we spoke to were still 'in the closet' or only out to a few people at work. Clearly to be able to recount a coming out story, axiomatically, the individual had to be out at work.

Roughly the same number of interviews were carried out in each organization; there were far more coming-out stories collected from the Police (7), than the Fire Service (2), the Civil Service (3), or the banks (3). There may be a number of reasons why this is the case. We suggest that the Police does make a more likely terrain for stories on coming out because coming out itself is about bringing the hidden out for scrutiny, it is about investigation and uncovering, and this reflects the activities of the Police themselves. Focus groups were then carried out in the organizations to collect reactions from organizational members to these stories. Stories collected in one organization were used in focus groups in the same organization only.

Reflection on the different organizational contexts

The Fire Service is unique in having a work environment which conflates work and home life; there is such a significant amount of downtime, while firefighters wait for an incident, that there are many opportunities for interaction with colleagues, whilst shift patterns, different to the other emergency services mean that long night shifts with rest periods are spent the Fire Station. Not only do they cook and eat together, but they also sleep in dormitories and shower in open facilities that leave the individual with very little privacy. This may lead to the significant amount of joking around and humour that is present in their working environment. Of course, anyone may be subject to the effects of banter and joking, but sexual minorities are particularly

vulnerable because being gay is considered to be such a taboo in the Fire Service. There is a real split during the working day, or night, when the fire-fighters respond to an emergency, when they are working and they feel as if they are doing something, and when they are at work, but waiting for an emergency to happen. This means that, unlike other organizations, there is no consideration of sexuality with the 'customers' of the Fire Service; focus groups were adamant that everyone received the same treatment irrespective of who they were. In addition, when responding to an emergency, fire-fighters only cared about whether their fellow team members were capable of helping them out in a crisis. Their sexuality only came to the fore when they returned to the station.

In the Police there seems to be a real concern about image, and about the performance of being a police officer. Does the officer concerned portray the physical attributes required of him or her? How does the police officer come over to members of the public? Visibility becomes a real issue in the police as does issues of how the body plays out its role in the organization. This is clearly comparable to other emergency services; for example Tangherlini (1998) recounts how paramedics are viewed by members of the public. They are expected to run everywhere, because that is how they are portrayed on television, even though in real life this may not be the safest course of action, or they may be carrying heavy equipment (Tangherlini, 1998: xix). In addition, one of the unusual aspects of the Police is how many lesbian, gay and bisexual people maintain 'double-double' lives (Burke, 1993: 85; 1994; Goffman, 1963); the animosity between the police and the lesbian and gay communities is such that they pass, or cover, at work and at play.

In government departments and banks, being bureaucratic organizations, there is less interpersonal interaction (Greenberg and Bystryn, 1996: 95), which may mean that it is easier to be in the closet, though debatable whether there would be a reduced risk associated with coming out. The banks involved in this study were the only private sector organizations to take part, but the discussion of the business case justification for improving the situation for sexual minorities was far more prevalent than in the other organizations. The Bank is very advanced in terms of technology compared to the public sector organizations in the study and everyone in the company had access to email. Technology had increased the visibility of, amongst other things, membership of distribution lists, and the importance of this will be seen in the story 'Coming Out on the Trading Floor'.

Discussion on the ethical challenges of storytelling research

There are a number of ethical challenges which come to the fore with story-telling research, particularly with relation to the information the researcher gives to the respondents.

Research looking at organizational stories does not *necessarily* address the dynamics of power, dominant groups and lesser heard voices, but they are a very good vehicle for doing so. One aspect of the power relationship is the balance of power between the researcher and the respondent, and at the very least the researcher should be open about their aims and perspectives in conducting the research. All stories have meaning and purpose, and although stories such as these give voice to the respondents, they are also being used by the researcher whose meaning and purpose may be different. In meeting the ethical challenge of this sort of research, it is necessary to identify the perspective of the researcher, so that the limitations of the researcher's point of view are identified, whilst explaining why the researcher has analysed the stories in a particular way (Boyce, 1996: 20; Alexander, 2002). As previously mentioned, one of the researchers is a gay man, which helped to gain access to the respondents and helped build up the trust required to carry out the interviews. It is important to acknowledge this as it may explain why these stories have been analysed as they have been; it also helps to develop the idea of a reflexive interaction within the research engagement (Linstead and Thomas, 2002: 17).

Secondly, another ethical responsibility in carrying out this type of research is to inform respondents that their stories which may not have been heard before are going to be shared with other members of the organization, and perhaps more widely in publications. Researching the experiences of a minority which often remains silent for reasons of self-preservation, and then repeating the stories in a wider forum, might be described by Derrida as an 'act of violence'. In the same way that Czarniawska (1999) set up a conversation between various texts that otherwise not have spoken to one another (Czarniawska, 1999: 104), this project has also given life to texts that otherwise might have remained hidden. By sharing these texts, opposing texts have been forced to talk to one another on the terms set out by the researcher, and by carrying out the analysis, the researcher has had the last word. The clear ethical dilemma, therefore, is remaining faithful to the voices from the field, the voices that have previously remained silent. It is important in recognising this challenge, that the researcher makes it clear to interviewees that their stories are going to be shared, albeit anonymously, in a wider forum, which was done in this case. However, since each story was used in a focus group in the *same* organization, there was always a danger, which was pointed out to interviewees at the time of the interview, that someone might recognise them through the event being retold.

Another ethical challenge is that of retelling narratives which may not be true (Riessman, 1993: 21). Stories are unique amongst discursive devices in organizations in that they have a plot, but also claim to represent reality (Gabriel, 2004b: 19). Poetic licence is a vital feature of the storyteller's voice (Gabriel, 2004b: 19), but does this mean it should not matter whether the story is true or not? The answer to this is often that the truth of the story lies not

in its accurate depiction of facts but in its meaning (Gabriel, 2004b: 20; 2004c). Since one of the aims in this research was to develop a method which could access personal experience as well as examples of discourse within the organization, this interpretation is an important one.

The risk in organizational research is that the voice of personal experience may be made up of illusions and self-deceptions and yet may still be accepted as the authentic source of understanding and sense-making in organizations (Gabriel, 2004c: 73). This risk implies a potential new direction for storytelling research, in two ways. First, that the researcher themselves become responsible for disentangling the voices, understanding them and privileging those that deserve to be privileged and then silencing those that deserve to be silenced. Second, the researcher's task is not merely to retell the story or narrative, but to use the story as a vehicle for accessing deeper truths in the organization (Gabriel, 2004c: 74).

Discussion of data

Our research provided rich and varied examples of coming out. To illustrate how important these stories were to the individuals, we should note here that one of the things we asked during the interviews was for the respondent to describe the high point of their career so far. A few chose a specific work-related incident such as negotiating a major contract or making an important arrest, and some described the moment when they received a major promotion. But for the majority of respondents it was their coming out at work.

Despite the varied nature of the accounts of coming out, however, there were some strong themes that arose. We have presented our data according to these themes, which are:

- Undisclosed subjectivity;
- The performative act of coming out, which we have presented in two sections; making an active choice and being outed;
- The reactions to minority sexual identity.

1. Undisclosed self-identity

The following story illustrates the phenomenon of undisclosed self-identity, in other words, the closet. This is a story told by a gay man working in the civil service, who had previously worked in a small regional office. He felt that he could not come out, and the story is concerned with his creating a new identity for himself.

Story 1: 'A Fresh Start'

I desperately wanted to be straight, and then I realised that there was no way that that was going to happen. So I thought if I can't be straight and I don't want to be gay, then I'll just be nothing. I'll just got to work, go home, watch telly, go to bed, just do nothing and that went on for many years. But then bizarrely I saw a report on telly about a gay man in Manchester who'd been murdered and thrown in to the canal, and they showed some newsreel footage about the inside of a gay club, and it wasn't even a Manchester club, though it was about a Manchester murder, and when I saw this footage of people dancing in a club, I thought I'd like, just once in my life, to go and see that. Not to make a habit, but just to see it once. And so I did, one day, and then I thought it was brilliant, it was the best night of my life, I must go again, and I did, and then by the time I went a 3rd time, I thought I had to be openly gay. I thought I want to be like these people, I don't want to be hiding and ashamed and feeling wrong, and bad, and evil. I want to be happy and positive and enjoy life and find friends and find someone to love, and participate in real life. So I made a plan to become openly gay, but in those days I was working in a small office in a small town, unlike now, where I'm in a very large office in a city. I'd worked with some of those people for 20 years, and I felt I can't tell these people, I can't face having lied to you for all these years some of them knew and guessed, but it hadn't been discussed. I thought the only way I can do it is to move, change jobs, move to a new office and a new town and a new city. Move home and change my name and completely come up with a brand new life. A new identity, and that way I knew I could be openly gay, but it had to be from a fresh start. I severed all connections with my previous life. About two years after my decision, it took a long time to organise it all, but I finally got my transfer to the Manchester office which was more of a gay environment, there was the gay village, there was somewhere I could go. I started in the new office that I wasn't going to let it slide again, I wasn't going to go back into this cocoon again of being straight, or letting people think I was straight. I decided I must let people know as soon as possible that I was gay. Yes, I changed my name. The name I have now is not my original name. But it was part of the process that I needed to go through to become the person that I wanted to be. I didn't want any connection with the old person, because the old life was miserable and I wanted to cut that off completely.

Story 1 demonstrates the importance of sexual identity to this individual, as well as the impact on the individual of a dissonance between undisclosed subjectivity and the subject position he wanted to take up. This person knew 'inside' that he was gay; to him it felt real and was an essential part of his nature. He felt that it was not possible in his current environment to come out; the alternative, for him, was to be nothing and to deny his identity, which reflects the comments of a respondent in the study by Boatwright et al. (1996), where the coming out process was described as capturing something, which had previously been denied. Interestingly, 'being and doing nothing' included for this man going to work, coming home, watching T.V. and going to bed, activities which constitute the normal routine of life for most of us. None of these activities meant anything to him, however, because of the dissonance that remained unresolved between his self- and social-identity. This story is powerful because it has a confessional quality about it (Foucault, 1976); he explains his wanting to come out in terms of not wanting to feel wrong, bad or evil any more. But when he comes to explain his method of coming out – that is to say adopting a new subject position – the tense of the verb in the account changes (Fairclough, 1989), and he actually addresses his audience as if it were his old colleagues again 'I can't face having lied to you for all these years.' Another occasion on which this respondent came out was to the researcher; the meeting place was in a gay bar and he was wearing various 'insignia', for example a rainbow badge and others, which suggested at least a sympathy with minority sexual orientation.

The focus group participants reacted with great sympathy to this story, and the following quotation is not untypical,

> *One of the sad things in there is wanting to change name and location, because he obviously feels guilty he's been lying to people. But why should he feel guilty – at the end of the day – it's his sexuality.*

Many people in the focus groups felt that to work in a small office can be very challenging: '*It's like a lot of smaller offices; people have more set ways than in a bigger environment*'. One participant from a focus group, which took place in a small community in rural Scotland, said,

> *It's very difficult to get a transfer to a small office; when I put to come here I was told that I would have to wait until someone died. They have great difficulty accepting you if you're somebody else, never mind your sexuality. It's very cliquish.*

2. The performative act: coming out

Making an active choice

In making the choice to come out, it often means choosing the moment as well as the person. However, it is not always a considered act: sometimes it is

an impulsive act in response to teasing, and sometimes it is in response to co-workers asking and wanting to know. In the next story, the coming out event was actually created by someone who wanted to ask, but could not. We also see the important influence of the working environment and working practices in the Fire Service:

Story 2: 'Straight people find it difficult to ask' (Fire Service)

While I was at training centre, I didn't want to tell anybody. I'd only known everyone about 10 weeks. I've got enough grief here just trying to get through. Also the male showers were a bit antiquated, just one big tiled wall, with shower heads coming out, so it was very open and exposed. And the changing room was just one big room with benches around. I didn't really need the added grief of people all walking out of the shower because I was in there. So I thought I'd just leave it and if anyone asks, I'd tell them. We then had two weeks training in breathing apparatus, we finished that and started on the final training. At lunchtime I walked into the lockers where all the other lads were sitting and someone started whistling the theme tune from Police Academy, the one they played when they were in a gay bar called the Blue Oyster Club. I walked in, I sat down and they stopped. I thought don't be paranoid, obviously there's a joke going on, you've walked in the middle of it, and you think it's all about you. That Friday, I was in the changing rooms, just cleaning my shoes, and this guy comes in and he's pacing up and down, and I could tell he wanted to say something and he couldn't. He kept trying to talk to me and he couldn't. It became blindingly obvious to me what he wanted to ask me, and it's a bit sad really, but I found it quite funny because he was finding it so difficult; hey, there are only a few perks you get when you come out. So eventually I turned round and said,
'What do you want to ask me?'
'I can't say' so I said,
'The answer's yes.' There was all relief and stuff. That night we all went down the pub. I don't know how it came up in conversation then, but this bloke says,
'Oh yeah everyone knows!' I went,
'What?' And as it turned out they'd all known for about 3 weeks. Due to the alcohol and the shock, I burst out crying. There were about 5 of them there and they took me to one side and there were hugs, 'it's not a problem' and all that. That was quite an eye-opener. And then nothing was said after that, it was just one of those things.

In the model in Figure 2 we can see that social practice has an effect on identity, even though it is not strictly part of the coming out process. Indeed, in this story, we can see that the social practice of fire-fighters showering together has an impact on the individual and his readiness to come out at work. The story is also about embarrassment. As he says, he 'didn't really need the added grief of people all walking out of the shower because I was in there'. This story is very illustrative of the performative aspect of the act of coming out. The colleague wanted to ask and was pacing up and down. And then, by saying 'the answer's yes', this individual had performed the act of coming out. By saying the words, he had also performed the deed. This individual told this story of coming out at training school, but then he went on to recount about how he had sought a transfer:

> *They moved the Fire Rescue Unit, which carried all the heavy lifting and cutting gear from Station 'A' up to Station 'B'. I'd put in to transfer to 'B' and do a course to drive the FRU. Nothing came of it and I was told that there weren't any vacancies. But then the person in charge of the FRU approached the training staff for some advice because he had a problem. And the problem is that there is a gay guy who wants to transfer to train up on the Rescue Unit, and the guys on the Watch aren't happy about it – so how does he handle it? I've spoken to my Governor, but I want to work it out myself. The best thing to do is to work it all out, because either I won't get there, or I will get there and I'll have to work with them.*

In response to both of these stories, the focus groups of fire-fighters insisted that they did not have a problem with sexual minorities, though there was a limit to this, as follows,

> *95% of people in this job don't have a problem with anything . . . as long as it's not flaunted in front of them, literally flaunted in front of them; I'm on about the actual person. If you get a gay person that goes over the top and winds you up that way, that's when the problem starts. I could take you to quite a few people that you wouldn't know about their sexuality until they actually told you. They are the ones that people don't have a problem with. It's the people that feel they are being victimized and they go out and out to flaunt their sexuality.*

Indeed, it was not uncommon in focus groups of fire-fighters and police for participants to talk about the 'flaunting' of minority sexuality. In the following story, we see that there is a power switch from being victim to persecutor, and the story demonstrates very powerfully Foucault's concept, described earlier, of reverse discourse:

Story 3: 'Offensive remarks' (Police)

This story is interesting because minorities are not only created, but made stronger and empowered by hostile discourse; and in this case the act of resistance (Fairclough, 1989) is a clever wrong-footing of the persecutor. In this case the act of resistance is synonymous with the act of coming out. This again demonstrates Butler's (1997) point about the injurious effects of discourse becoming the painful resources through which people are able to perform the act of coming out.

> There were a couple of incidents at the training centre in Cwmbran. One of them, I was walking with a classmate and a couple of other people and this person said he hated fucking queers. I think he said it for effect. So I said,
> 'Why's that then?'
> I think he thought gay people mostly go cottaging, his own little perception. So I said,
> 'You don't hate me, do you?'
> 'Why'
> 'Because I'm gay – do you hate me?'
> And the colour just drained from his face. Other people had heard about this and some of my roughty-toughty mates had a word in his ear, which wasn't necessary, but quite sweet really.

In the focus group, the consensus seemed to be that there are not many out gay people around in that particular police force, which means that people do not get the chance to find out what they are like. One participant, whose remark was not untypical, said,

> *"Having said that we've got someone senior in the Force who's quite open and it's the first time I've had to confront it. When you get to know them you find out they're quite similar to you."*

Being outed

There is often a moment of surprise, either for the audience, or for the individual themselves when agency is reduced still further, and the act of coming out is performed as a result of either accident or deliberate force. In the next story the 'force' is quite gentle, but still the person is put in a situation where he is forced to come out:

Story 4: 'Coming out again and again' (Major Investment Bank)

> I work in a very international atmosphere where I think it is fair to say that for some people it is less of a problem than for others. Some colleagues I detected a distinct cooling off. Others couldn't be warmer; we have a great joke about it. One night, we had a team dinner and a new colleague came along with her husband. There maybe 8 or 9 of us. I had come out by this point, but, as she was new, she obviously didn't know about me. And again, it's not something I'm going to tell someone about automatically. And I remember her question, well, she said,
>
> 'so, you know, I want to know about everyone's personal lives here, you know, want to work out so and so, well we know that John's married and you know Jake's engaged and erm you know Michael, well he's just split up with his girlfriend and then there's Rupert. Well we're not quite sure about Rupert . . .'
>
> Of course, she meant it in the sense of, I'm not quite sure about Rupert because I don't know whether he's married or not. But immediately, two of my colleagues including my boss immediately got terribly defensive about this on my behalf and said, 'it's just being different, that's all it is', sort of leaping to my defence and in fact they were being overly sensitive about a comment that was just totally harmless.

This story is important, however, because it illustrates the reiterative and citational nature of the performative act. In other words, 'performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names' (Butler, 1993: 2).

In the focus groups, this story caused a lot of laughter as people could see the funny side of the story. However, on a more serious note, it introduced a discussion about whether other people should disclose someone's sexuality, and the most frequent comment was that '*It's up to him if he wants to tell anyone*'.

In the next story in story 4 the protagonist of the story is persuaded to put his name on the email circulation list of the lesbian and gay network. He is warned that his name would be visible, but he never imagined that people would deliberately look to see whose names were on the list 'for a bit of fun'.

Story 5: 'Email naming' (major Investment bank)

There was a colleague of mine, a graduate trainee, who joined InvestCo and wanted to join the lesbian and gay network. He was a little bit concerned about the e-mail mailing list that we had within our group, because technically, anyone could just look up the groups name and see who the members of that group are. And we advised him before he put his name on, well, yes, technically, anyone could see who the members of the network were, if they wanted to. We could have made it a secret group, but what message does it send out to everyone else, if the members of the group themselves aren't prepared to be out? And then this person said OK I'll go on the group mailing list. Soon afterwards, he came back to his workplace one afternoon, and realised that his colleagues, and his direct manager, thought that for a bit of fun they would look up to see who was in the gay group at InvestCo. He was standing behind them, and they were scrolling down the list of names, and then, all of a sudden, they stumbled on his name. There was an awkward silence and a long pause. Then the ribbing started and there was some dreadful language used to his face. He didn't know what to do – his direct manager was involved with the horseplay, the gestures and the joking around. He was new to the organization and didn't feel comfortable – ultimately he had to live with the group and didn't want to make a fuss. And so since then, he just let that die a quiet death.

Agency in this example clearly does not belong to the individual. This example illustrates the approach to discourse theory supported by the critical school, who would reject human agency as a determining influence, and decentre the human subject. Indeed, as Foucault states: 'discourse is not life; its time is not yours' (Foucault, 1991: 71). This story also illustrates what Butler describes as power understood as the divine power of naming (Butler, 1997: 32). Human speech rarely mimes the divine effect because there is usually some recourse to refute that power; in this case, however, the individual has no power to refute the accusation. The performative act of naming him as gay is supported by the evidence of the email list, in front of everyone's eyes.

The individual's direct manager abuses his position of power, though he is demeaned as a result through the retelling of the story. The word 'bullying' is not mentioned in this story, even though the story is told by a gay man, and therefore someone who potentially should be able to understand the dynamics of workplace bullying. The words he actually used were 'horseplay, gestures and joking-around'. The researcher requested a meeting with the individual, but he was unwilling, due to the difficulties he had had to date in

the organization to put himself further at risk by taking part in this research project. His fear, therefore maintained his silence.

   The following story supports Butler's view that coming out is in some sense 'conventional'. It becomes convention because it is often part of another reiterated act, which in the story is represented by the Team Meeting.

Story 6: 'Coming out – its official' (Police)

> I didn't take part in the banter that goes on. It's a very macho culture, very bawdy, so you get these guys leering out of the windows of the van, making sexist comments, you know, real Neanderthal, early man type behaviour. Because I didn't take part, it just reinforced the rumour that I must be gay, not making comments about so-and-so's tits. Then things started happening; I had some damage to my locker, some minor damage, some people put some stickers on my locker, abusive stickers. And then you know those forms where you have to present you driver's documents and driver's licence? They're self carbonating and someone had written on it with a pen top or the back end of a pencil or a pen, so the top copy appeared clean. I stopped a motorist and wrote the top copy out, tore it off and there was 'dirty faggot' written underneath. That happened a few times. And I had things through the internal despatch, things about AIDS. It got to the point where I was trying to make a decision about whether or not to stay in the Police. I made a decision to speak to my Chief Inspector; the options were either a full investigation, which would be like a witch hunt, or to speak to the team and tell them the rumours were true. The following Thursday, about 3 in the morning, we had a team meeting. I was first on the agenda! And the subject was all the things that had happened to me. There were about forty people there – Inspector, four or five sergeants and about thirty PCs. Everyone had their heads hung quite low. They knew what was going on. It was nerve-wracking. It was absolutely horrendous, to have to justify yourself in front of 45 people. And you're an agenda item! You're sexual orientation is top of the agenda for a team meeting! It is quite bizarre. They were shocked to bits. A couple of people had refused to work with me, on the grounds that they were Catholics, and their religion prohibited it, but they hadn't come to me about it. They went to one of the sergeants and asked for their duties to be changed because they were due to be posted in a vehicle with me. What is even more bizarre is that I happen to be a Catholic as well! So I told the team and then I went up to the canteen to wait; it was horrible, like waiting for an exam or something. Then one by one people came up, the women first, to say it was OK.

The shift is addressed by the officer in charge, the sergeant, or in this case, the Chief Inspector. During the research project, this story was presented to a team of police officers at the beginning of a shift. The police offices themselves identified how ironic it was that whilst the story was about the idea of sexuality being an agenda item in a team briefing; here they were again sitting in a team briefing discussing sexuality. In the focus groups, the reaction to this story was generally one of disbelief. One focus group participant's suggestion was that the details of the story were a 'magnification' of the truth:

> *It's a magnification of some aspects of reality; some of the sort of petty snipes that are coming at the individual. I can see that some of those sorts of things, it'd be naïve to say that those sorts of things didn't happen, but I think it's been . . . I'd like to think it's a magnification.*

Clearly the word they failed to articulate was 'exaggeration', but they chose the word magnification instead. This was not the view of all people, however. A good number of participants actually recognized that these sorts of things went on:

> *I think to the contrary, rather than being magnified, I think if the full story were told, I think there'd be a lot more; I have been aware of similar incidents.*

One participant suggested that the way that sexual minorities are treated in the police has vastly improved in recent years, as it is now sniping rather than physical attack:

> *The focus has changed in the last 20 years – as an ex-serviceman we used to deal with gays in a far more physical manner than we do today. It's more sniping today than physical attack and extermination. We used to be quite brutal.*

It is interesting that this individual has used the word extermination for the way in which sexual minorities were treated in the past. Indeed, one focus group participant suggested that it was grounds to be dismissed from the police force altogether. In the next story, a fire-fighter comes out to his shift almost by accident. This was traumatic for the individual at the time, although even he thought it was amusing in the retelling, and this story created much laughter in the focus groups.

Story 7: 'Mr Gay UK' (Fire Service)

> I entered Mr Gay UK believe it or not. I hadn't entered it voluntarily; it was done through getting pushed onto a stage one night in a nightclub. So I got onto the stage a little bit drunk, and won the heat, it was straight into the final. And I didn't know, but they filmed it for the television. I was in Barbados for a couple of weeks and when I came back from holiday and I got a phone call to say 'do you know you've been on telly?' from a member of my family. I went to work. Nothing was said on the day shifts, and then the night shift, it started to creep out you know with people saying 'Did you see Passengers (the T. V. programme) the other night?' Until someone pulled me to one side and said 'Oh, by the way, we saw you on telly the other night – Mr Gay UK – I think you'd better start being open to people'.

So what does this story tell us about performativity? One of the famous examples of performativity is Austin's example of the marriage ceremony; Butler used this and developed the idea by using the example of drag (Butler, 1990; 1993: 230) as exemplary of the performativity of gender; even if drag is performative, not all performativity is drag (Butler, 1993: 230). The Mr Gay UK contest is subversive, both in terms of parodying heterosexual beauty contests, but also in providing an alternative example of performativity, beyond the marriage act, and the performance of the drag artist (Butler, 1993: 231). It puts the male body in the position of sexual scrutiny. As in Butler's example, the Mr Gay UK contest represents an embodying, in this case the repeated process of embodying sexuality. The contest and the fact that it was broadcast on television also underlines the theatricality of the performative act. Butler warns that the theatricality of performativity need not be conflated with self-display or self-creation (Butler, 1993: 232), although this is clearly part of it, in this case. What this example does do, with the individual coming out semi-naked, on television and in a gay beauty contest is to mime and render hyperbolic (Butler, 1993: 232) the discursive convention of the heterosexual fire-fighter that it also reverses.

Although this story caused a lot of hilarity, one of the participants in the focus group told the researcher of a similar incident where a fire-fighter from their service had gone on 'Blind Date' (a well-known television show where men and women who have not previously met are sent on a blind date) and was horrified to think that this may have brought the service into disrepute. They explained that having fun was a facet of working in the Fire Service, but that some people went too far.

3. The perlocutionary speech act: discourse about minority sexual identity

Focus groups were carried out in each organization, and stories collected in one organization were used in focus groups in the same organization. Examples of discourse were therefore collected from all the organizations in the study, although in this section we have restricted the examples to the Fire Service. Many of the fire-fighters that took part in the focus groups were at pains to point out that sexuality and gay people in particular were 'not an issue'. But as Fairclough (1995) pointed out, power can control and put limits on alternative discourses, and so 'not being an issue' was not without its conditions. Having gay people around was acceptable, as long as they did not remind you that they were gay. As previously quoted in this paper, the Firefighters did not want it '*flaunted in front of them, literally flaunted in front of them.*' This respondent was suggesting that he accepted lesbian and gay colleagues as long as they kept their minority sexuality secret. They should not talk about their partners, friends and family, nor what they do at the weekend, if it were to imply their sexuality. This respondent also equates those people who are up front about their sexual orientation with those who claim to be victimised at work. Another respondent suggested that by coming out, sexual minorities were really just spoiling people's fun. For example,

> *You wouldn't join in with all the gay jokes, the banter, and the next time you heard a gay joke, you'd actually feel offended, because you'd be thinking of your friend.*

In this way, the respondent is acknowledging the power of resistance within the act of coming out, but feels that this is unfair and it reduces his possibilities of joining in with the gay jokes. How fire-fighters and employees of the Fire Service would react if one of their colleagues came out as gay was discussed. There was the acknowledgement that there would be a reaction, as the following respondent describes:

> *When you find out someone's gay, there's always that thing where you want to keep them at arms length, then you just realise that they are the same person that they were before, and I actually think that it's to do with fancying people, . . . you're just that little bit more aware, and then eventually you would behave just as you normally would.*

The above respondent suggests that he would initially keep the gay person at arms length because he would be afraid that they would fancy him. But he recognises that eventually things would get back to normal. However, another respondent was quite adamant that his relationship would change if a gay colleague were to come out.

Usually, 'respecting difference' is understood as meaning respecting minorities. However, we found that, in the Fire Service in particular, this can also mean respecting those who are prejudiced or homophobic. There was a widely held view amongst the fire-fighters in our focus groups that prejudice should be accommodated. That is not to say prejudice in the sense of discriminatory behaviour; their views were quite firm that this should be dealt with firmly. The kind of prejudice that fire-fighters believe should be accommodated is where a fire-fighter has a problem working with a gay person. An example of this view is as follows,

> *The management have got a duty to keep everybody happy; if someone's got a problem with a gay person, they can go to their boss and say 'I'm not happy with this, can I transfer to another watch?' I think the manager has a duty to try and accommodate that person.*

One view went so far as to suggest that when people are appointed to work on a particular station, they should be made aware if there are any out gay people there, so that the new recruit can refuse if they do not find working with gay people acceptable.

> *You have to make people coming in that there is a gay person on the station; If someone's overtly gay, you could be putting someone in who doesn't like gays but has been put in under false pretences.*

Above all, if someone holds homophobic views and refuses to work with lesbian and gay colleagues, they should not be made to feel embarrassed about holding these views,

> *If he can't work with them because they're gay and it's upsetting him, he should ask for a transfer, but he shouldn't be made to feel embarrassed about it because that's his personal view.*

These views are contentious, and yet paradoxical. On the one hand, minorities are seen as needing protection from the majority's actions and reactions, and ultimately legislative solutions are seen as being a clear route to achieving this. However, even laws cannot counteract hostile feelings, only hostile acts (Sullivan, 1995: 158). These views are paradoxical because they express the liberal 'problem', which is that by giving freedom for some to express their minority sexual identity, others are given less freedom to express or even hold views hostile to that particular identity. Of course, part of the problem of seeing these opinions as innately wrong is that sexual minorities are then constantly cast in the role of victim, and puts the responsibility for change on the shoulders of others (Sullivan, 1995: 166). This raises the question of whether tolerance should indeed go both ways.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted a discursive approach to considering the process of coming out, and has suggested that coming out is a reiterative process and also the concept of performativity can add to understanding of both the act and the process of coming out. Coming out is a process in terms of the different stages that lead up to coming out, it is a process in terms of the performative nature of the act itself, and it is a process in terms of the performative nature of living a minority sexual identity. Coming out is performative in the sense that it is reiterative which is consistent with Butler's view of performativity and this reiteration is exemplified in figure 1 and was borne out by our findings; the story of the manager in the investment bank who had to come out to a new colleague supports this (story 4).

Our model in Figure 2 suggests that coming out is performative because the individual, in saying that they are gay, is also doing what they say, that is to say coming out at the same time. It is therefore an illocutionary speech act. But we have seen in our findings that it is not just the stages and act of coming out that are important, but also the reactions and impact. It is therefore essential to remember the perlocutionary aspect, that is to say the discursive response of others to the act of coming out. This response could take the form of social practice, although we have covered this in our paper in less detail. Before coming out there is a dissonance between subjectivity, where the individual believes that they have a minority sexuality, and the available subject position of gay man or lesbian in the workplace which has not yet been adopted by the individual, thereby not revealed to others. We do not suggest that this reintegration is always a positive move, because the eventual impact on social identity is so dependent on the reaction from others. In other words, coming out may increase individual self-esteem, but the reality is that reactions and context have a major impact on the individual. Stories 2, 3 and 4, identified positive reactions leading to greater self confidence, but it is equally likely that other stories could find evidence for the reverse case as in stories 5 and 7.

This paper has taken previous discussions of coming out in the organizational literature (Boatwright et al., 1996; Day and Schoenrade, 1997, 2000; Ragins and Cornwell, 2001), and in particular has highlighted where the literature has covered levels of coming out, for example passing, covering, being out and affirming identity (Croteau, 1996), and suggested that our understanding can be enhanced by building on the existing literature by considering the reiterative nature of performing a minority sexual identity. In addition, we believe that considering reactions in both talk and action can help our understanding of the impact on minority sexual identity in terms of social identity and we believe that further work, in terms of our own research at least, should look in more detail at the impact of context or work organizations on both the performative act, but also the reiterative performance of

minority sexual identity. Although concentrating here on the discursive in terms of talk and social practice, we do not suggest that context is not relevant, in fact this surfaced as very important. For example, there is more interpersonal contact in the Police and the Fire Service than the other organizations we looked at, and it is perhaps harder for people in those organizations to carry on a masquerade of identity. The close personal relations in these organizations also means that the costs are higher for coming out because of the dangers of potential negative reactions. In government departments and banks, there is less interpersonal interaction which means that it is easier to be in the closet, but also a reduced risk associated with coming out. We suggest therefore, that in terms of the drama of performativity, it is important not just to focus on the actors, and what they say and do, but also to describe the stage and set, and we believe that further work, in terms of our own research at least, should look at developing this area. For example, are reactions different to coming out in these different work contexts? We also acknowledge that, ironically the stories themselves focus on one particular act of coming out; the stories have therefore captured accounts of coming-out as 'one event'. It would be useful for future research to capture different occasions when the same respondents have engaged in the continuous work of coming-out, to see how the experience changes for them and for others.

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