

# Women's Experience of Workplace Interactions in Male-Dominated Work: The Intersections of Gender, Sexuality and Occupational Group

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Informal workplace interactions are powerful organizational processes producing inequalities in male-dominated work, where sexuality is frequently employed as a means of control over women. The article considers whether women can derive support from interactions with male and female colleagues, drawing on qualitative research with women working in the UK construction and transport sectors. The article contributes an empirical application of McCall's intercategory approach, examining gender, sexuality and occupational group. It highlights the benefits and challenges of extending McCall's multi-group method to qualitative analysis. Stereotypical associations of lesbians with 'masculine' work are challenged, showing how gendered and heterosexual norms constrain workplace interactions for both heterosexual women and lesbians. Therefore organizational measures should address not only formal workplace processes, but the informal interactions affecting women's survival in male-dominated work.

*Keywords:* intersectionality, heterosexuality, lesbian sexuality, informal interactions, male-dominated work

## Introduction

Informal interactions while 'doing the work' have been highlighted by Acker (2006) as one of the organizing processes that produce inequalities of gender, race and class in work organizations. Informal workplace interactions take place at the 'boundary between work and the social' (Pringle, 2008, p. S113), often beyond the reach of formal organizational policies and practices and with the capacity to undermine their good intentions (Healy *et al.*, 2011). In male-dominated work, as this article argues, informal gendered practices have particular power to significantly affect the day-to-day experience of women who are in a minority in highly gender-imbalanced work settings. Gendered interactions in such environments frequently take a highly sexualized form, invoking sexuality to re-assert male control over formerly male domains (Collinson and Collinson, 1996; DiTomaso, 1989; Paap, 2006; Watts, 2007).

Women's presence in traditionally male occupations is of interest to researchers seeking to undermine essentialist ideologies of 'male' or 'female' work, that produce persistent patterns of occupational gender segregation, and there is extensive literature in this area. Yet while the sexualized nature of workplace interactions in male-dominated industries or in management positions has been well documented in this literature, little attention has been paid to the actual sexual orientation of the women workers. This is despite the high levels of interest shown by men in women's sexual

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availability and orientation, together with presumptions about lesbian sexuality, when women enter male work (Paap, 2006). The result of this lack of scholarly attention is not only that lesbian experience is under-researched, but also that gender is not sufficiently disentangled from heterosexuality, which is normalized within the concept of gender (Dunne, 1997; Pringle, 2008). Thus the experience of heterosexual women of such male-dominated settings may also be insufficiently analysed beneath presumptions of heteronormativity, which assumes institutionalized heterosexuality as the standard for legitimate and prescriptive arrangements (Ingraham, 1994, p. 204).

This article is therefore employing an intersectional methodology to an examination of *both* heterosexual women's *and* lesbians' experiences of working in the male-dominated construction and transport industries in the UK. Additionally, it differentiates women's experience by occupational group within these industries, examining professional and non-professional women's workplace interactions. The contribution of the article to the study of intersectionality in work organizations is twofold. Firstly, it offers an empirical study that seeks to operationalize the complex concept of intersectionality, over which there has been much theorizing but fewer empirical applications, in an examination of lived experience of work. Secondly, it focuses on one of the least explored subjects for intersectional analysis — sexuality (Hines, 2011). Additionally, intersections of sexuality and class have been a particular absence (McDermott, 2011; Taylor, 2007). Alongside gender and sexuality, this article includes occupational group as a category of differentiation. It is recognized that occupation is an imperfect proxy for 'class' (Crompton, 2008, pp. 51–2; 2010, pp. 11–12) as it fails to capture the complexity of class relations, including cultural meanings (Skeggs, 1997). However, the purpose here is to draw attention to differences in the experience of women in professional and non-professional occupations within the same industries.

Two types of workplace interactions experienced by women in male-dominated work are explored: relations with female colleagues, where they exist; and workplace interactions with male colleagues. Women in the study commonly have little or no contact with other females in their daily working lives due to the male dominance of their occupations or sectors. Nevertheless, women's perceptions and expectations of working with other women are revealing about the contexts in which they work. For women in a gender minority, contact with other women can either be a source of support or competition (Rodriguez, 2013). Interactions with male colleagues are, of course, prominent in male-dominated workplaces. Some have argued that studies of sexuality in work organizations have focused too much on coercive forms of sexuality and neglected women's agency within sexualized interactions (Pringle, 1989), as well as the pleasurable aspect of heterosexualized interaction that can enliven dull work (Halford *et al.*, 1997) and the extent of consensual sexual activity (Williams *et al.*, 1999). Sexual and homophobic harassment, alongside other forms of sexualized interactions, have been explored in the author's other publications (Wright, 2011, 2013), while this article focuses on the extent to which workplace relations and interactions experienced by women in male-dominated work could be experienced as positive or supportive.

The intersectional method employed by this research is McCall's (2005) intercategory approach, which assists in uncovering the relationships of inequality among social groups as the centre of analysis — in this case focusing on gender, sexuality and occupational class. This enables consideration of both advantage and disadvantage. However, while McCall employs an intercategory approach to a quantitative study, this article applies it to a qualitative investigation. This itself raises some methodological and analytic challenges which will be discussed in the conclusion.

## Gender, sexuality and workplace interactions in male-dominated work

In a development of the literature on gender and work, sexuality has been shown to be integral to organizational life (Hearn and Parkin, 2001; Hearn *et al.*, 1989). This has a particular resonance in male-dominated domains, where sexuality becomes a focus of interest once women workers are present (Bagilhole, 2002; Cockburn, 1991). Male workers are eager to establish women's sexual availability, ready to label them as 'dykes' if seen as unavailable (McDowell, 1997; Paap, 2006). The

deployment of sexuality as a means of control over women is evident in the sexual harassment commonly observed in male-dominated work (Bagilhole, 2002; Collinson and Collinson, 1996; DiTomaso, 1989; Watts, 2007).

Some have argued, however, that the feminist emphasis on sexual harassment as a form of coercive sexuality overlooks women's agency: in the boss–secretary relationship, for example, women may use sexual pleasure to gain empowerment, according to Rosemary Pringle (1989). Similarly, stressing coercive forms of sexuality may downplay the ubiquity of consensual sex in the workplace (Williams *et al.*, 1999). The pleasurable or playful element in heterosexual interactions may enliven otherwise dull work (Halford *et al.*, 1997).

A focus on friendships at work that cross boundaries of sex and sexuality has been proposed as an alternative perspective on the sexual dynamics of workplace relationships from that offered by examining abusive forms of sexualized interactions (Rumens, 2012). The importance of workplace friendships has been overlooked by scholars, according to Rumens (2008, 2010, 2012). He argues that cross-sexuality friendships, particularly those between gay men and heterosexual women, can challenge 'the heteronormativity of contemporary organizational life' (2010, p. 151). This prompts the parallel question of whether there is a similar benefit for lesbians in overcoming minority status within male-dominated work, which this article explores.

A further dynamic for women in male environments is the possibility of gaining support from other females, whether in the workplace or externally through industry or professional networks, for example. However, women may be criticized when they fail to support each other (Mavin, 2008), and solidarity between women cannot be assumed (Bagilhole, 2002); instead, women, and managers in particular, may face criticism from female colleagues (Rodriguez, 2013). Again this raises questions about interactions between women across differences of sexuality, about which little has been written.

Some research suggests that lesbians may be particularly attracted to, or prevalent in, male-dominated work, being more likely to reject pressure to pursue gender-traditional interests and occupations than heterosexual women (Fassinger, 1996; Lippa, 2002; Morgan and Brown, 1991). Personal observations have suggested that lesbians may be disproportionately represented in the construction trades, although no statistics exist to verify this (Wall, 2004, p. 163; Weston, 1998, p. 96). However, this risks perpetuating stereotypical associations of lesbians with masculinity, stereotypes which 'collapse lesbian into mannish, masculine, butch' (Weston, 1998, p. 97). Indeed, male workers and employers may make presumptions that all women in the construction trades are lesbians; by positioning women as 'exceptional' this can explain their presence in what is considered masculine work (Denissen and Saguy, 2014; Paap, 2006). Furthermore, 'dyke-baiting' of all women, gay or straight, acts to assert male power over women transgressing traditional gender roles (Frank, 2001).

Nevertheless, the experiences of lesbian workers are rarely discussed in studies of women in male-dominated work (Wright, 2011). Furthermore, the sexuality of participants is rarely explicit in research on women in management more widely (Pringle, 2008, p. S114). However a handful of recent exceptions indicate that lesbians are making an appearance in some US studies, for example of the fire service (Chetkovich, 1997), the police (Martin and Jurik, 2007) and the construction industry (Denissen and Saguy, 2014; Frank, 2001; Paap, 2006).

There is, however, increasing interest in research on minority sexuality and sexual orientation (Colgan and McKearney, 2011), although this tends to be within a field of studies looking at gay and/or lesbian experience rather than mainstreamed into gender studies. It has also been noted that in intersectional analyses, less attention has been paid to sexuality than other social divisions (Hines, 2011; Richardson and Monro, 2012; Taylor *et al.*, 2011), with intersections of sexuality and class a particular absence (McDermott, 2011; Taylor, 2007).

Furthermore, studies of women in construction, particularly in the UK, have mostly focused on professional and managerial occupations (e.g., Dainty and Bagilhole, 2006; Greed, 2000; Powell *et al.*, 2009; Watts, 2007, 2009a, 2009b), although there is a growing international body of literature on women in construction trades (e.g., Clarke *et al.*, 2004b; Denissen, 2010a, 2010b; Frank, 2001; Smith, 2013). Few studies compare the experience of both groups. Women working in professional and operational transport roles have received little academic attention in general (Wright, 2011). Therefore

the adoption of an intersectional approach focusing on gender, sexuality and occupational class can add to empirical understandings of the heterogeneity of women's experience of workplace interactions in the male-dominated construction and transport sectors.

## Employing an intersectional approach

Intersectionality is a much debated, complex and 'murky' concept (Nash, 2008), originating in the work of Crenshaw (1991), which highlighted the 'multidimensionality' of the experience of marginalized subjects, in particular black women. The concept has generated much interest among feminist scholars, even resulting in claims that it is now 'outmoded' or 'outdated' (Taylor *et al.*, 2011, p. 3). However, this claim seems premature given the continuing interest in debating intersectionality evidenced in conference streams, journal special issues and other recent collections (e.g., Lutz *et al.*, 2011). However, much of the debate has focused on explicating the theoretical, conceptual and political challenges posed by intersectionality, rather than its application at an empirical level to understanding lived experiences in work organizations (some exceptions include Healy *et al.*, 2011; McCall, 2005; Taylor, 2007).

In terms of applying intersectional frameworks to the study of practice within organizations, Holvino (2010) and Acker (2006) have provided valuable conceptualizations. Holvino (2010) conceptualizes gender, class and race (and adds sexuality) as simultaneous processes of identity, institutional and social practice. Holvino links the level of individual identification to organizational structures and ways of working and to wider social structures that frame and reproduce the inequalities that are experienced in organizations. Thus the interconnections between social structures of gender, race and class — and I would add heterosexuality — are examined for their relationship to organizational processes and identity formation. These simultaneous processes are observable in the workplace interactions in male-dominated work environments. Complementing this approach, at the level of work organization, Acker's framework of inequality regimes offers a tool for analysing the 'loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations' (Acker, 2006, p. 443). One of the six components of inequality regimes Acker identifies are the organizing processes that create and recreate inequalities, which can include the organization of work and hours; recruitment processes using gender and race to determine suitability for jobs; and informal interactions while 'doing the work', which might cover exclusion from social events and sexualized forms of interactions, as well as sexual harassment. Such informal interactions may be the most difficult to address in terms of changing gendered organizational cultures, and are the focus of this article.

In a useful discussion of the methodological challenges in analysing intersecting and complex social relations, McCall (2005) outlines three broad approaches, which illustrate some of the difficulties and differences associated with both theorizing and researching intersectionality. She identifies three broad approaches — anticategorical, intracategorical and intercategorical. The anticategorical approach is based on deconstructing analytical categories such as gender and race, the effect of which is to 'render suspect' not only the process of categorization itself, but any research that is based on such categorization (McCall, 2005, p. 1777) as the use of such categories reproduces inequality in the process of producing difference. This approach is typically found in poststructuralist and postmodernist feminist writings. McCall's second approach is the intracategorical one, which examines the experiences of multiply marginalized subjects to expose the dangers of categorization, but does not entirely reject the categories themselves. Studies following this approach tend to focus on particular social groups at neglected points of intersection, for example using a case study method as the starting point for analysis of a new or invisible group, which then reveals wider social processes. The analysis 'works its way outward to analytically unravel one by one the influences of gender, race, class, and so on' (McCall, 2005, p. 1787). The third approach — intercategorical — is the one favoured by McCall, and the one that I adopt for this study. In contrast to the single-group studies favoured by the intracategorical approach, the intercategorical approach employs multi-group studies, taking the relationships of inequality among social groups as the centre of analysis and seeks to uncover the links between inequality and the

categories themselves. It has the benefit of examining 'both advantage and disadvantage explicitly and simultaneously' (McCall, 2005, p. 1787). Thus it is not assumed that lesbians necessarily face a double disadvantage based on their gender *and* sexual orientation, rather the relationship between gender and sexuality in women's experience is examined, without presuming the nature of advantage or disadvantage in advance. In considering both women in privileged and marginalized positions in relation to heterosexuality, and women in professional and non-professional occupations, this article makes visible the class and sexual identity locations of women managers and professionals, occupying comparatively privileged positions (Holvino, 2010, p. 263).

McCall (2005) employs the intercategory approach in a quantitative analysis of wage inequalities in US regions, examining patterns of race, gender and class differentiation. My study, instead, applies this approach to qualitative analysis, which presents particular challenges of complexity in relation to data collection and analysis, which will be discussed.

## Methods

The article analyses qualitative data gathered for research among women working in male-dominated occupations: the construction and transport industries were chosen as the two most heavily male-dominated UK sectors. The fieldwork was carried out between October 2008 and September 2010 and research methods included: 38 semi-structured interviews with women working in male-dominated professional and non-professional occupations in construction and transport; two focus groups with women working in construction trades; and 15 interviews with key informant experts on the employment of women in non-traditionally female work. A key question of the research concerned women's day-to-day experiences of working in these sectors, and this paper draws primarily on the 38 interviews conducted with women workers and some perspectives from focus group participants to consider women's accounts of interactions with male colleagues. The key informant interviews focused on policy and industry context, rather than workplace interactions, so are not analysed in this article.

Of the 38 women workers, over half were in construction (22 interviewees) and 16 were in transport occupations. Three-fifths (23) identified as heterosexual and 15 as lesbian.<sup>1</sup> The majority (27) identified as white, while 4 were Black Caribbean and another 4 were Indian, and one each identified as mixed heritage and Black African. Based on their current occupations, interviewees were grouped into 'professional/managerial' and 'non-professional' using the Standard Occupational Classification.<sup>2</sup> Half worked in professional or managerial occupations (primarily engineers, surveyors and managers) and half were in non-professional occupations (mostly the manual trades and bus and train operators). A commonly used definition of a non-traditional occupation is where one sex represents less than one third of all workers (Bagilhole, 2002, p. 4). Using this benchmark, all but two interviewees who gave details of the gender breakdown of their workplace (two-thirds provided some data) were in non-traditional roles for their gender, and most were in highly gender-segregated work environments, with several being the only woman in the team or at her level in the organization.

Two focus groups were conducted in the construction sector, one with 10 women entering the building trades, and a second with six tradeswomen working directly for a local authority in housing maintenance. The focus groups generated interactive discussions of gendered workplace interactions. Such reflections on experiences that are both shared and distinctive are not accessible to the same degree through individual interviews.

In order to reach both heterosexual and lesbian participants in male-dominated sectors, a variety of routes was used to access interviewees. This included seeking volunteers through women's professional networks; trade union groups for women and lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) members; and employer-established staff networks. Additionally, some participants suggested further contacts among their acquaintances. This resulted in a sample reflecting a diversity of employers. The access routes used result in a sample that may have a greater propensity to participate in groups or networks than is typical; nevertheless, a variety of attitudes towards seeking support from other women was expressed by interviewees. All interviews were recorded with permission

and transcribed in full; analysis was carried out using NVivo qualitative analysis software as a tool for organizing and coding data. An initial framework of thematic codes was created, which was developed as coding progressed and new themes emerged. To ensure anonymity, which is particularly important when researching minority sexuality, pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

## Attitudes towards working with female colleagues

Most interviewees had little or no experience of working with other women in their teams or work roles, due to the extent of the gender imbalance in their occupations or organizations. Broadly speaking, women fell into two distinct categories in terms of their attitudes towards working with other women. One group expressed a preference for working with men, finding them easier to work with, an attitude which typically coincided with negative feelings about working with other women. The second group welcomed the few opportunities that they had to work or socialize with other women, and sometimes sought out these contacts, finding women easier to relate to than male colleagues. Only a small minority felt that working with women was not very different from working with men, or described neither particularly negative nor positive opinions about working with women.

Senior surveyor Tanya typified those with an identification primarily with male colleagues, with whom she claimed to get on much better. However, she was friendly with a lesbian surveyor in the team, who she said shared a similar way of relating to male colleagues:

I prefer working with men, to be honest. I mean a lot of my friends out of work are male, and I know that the other girl upstairs, she's the same, and it's ... a lot of the women in the office when we have banter and joking going on between the site teams, they don't understand it, because I am one of the lads I suppose, and I think Jo is as well. [...] And I am very into cars as well, so I find I get on well with a lot of the blokes because they like talking about cars [...] Jo's the same, she's quite into cars and quite into football. (Tanya, heterosexual, quantity surveyor, construction, 30s)

Her colleague Jo was mentioned several times during the interview, indicating a close working relationship; however, the commonality that Tanya emphasized with Jo was not based on any shared 'female' attributes or interests but rather on their way of relating to male colleagues, emphasizing similar 'male' interests. Stressing shared 'masculine' interests is one strategy for being accepted into male-dominated work, while at the same time creating distance from other women (Denissen, 2010b). Tanya feels that other female colleagues do not understand her style of interaction with male colleagues; in this way she positions herself as different from 'ordinary' women (Hatmaker, 2013).

Tanya stresses her difference from 'women in the office' in contrast to the shared understanding with her lesbian colleague, indicating a cross-sexuality bond. Some lesbian interviewees similarly expressed greater comfort in male-dominated work settings, explicitly associating female-dominated offices with a heterosexual culture with which they felt little in common. Transport manager, Steph, said:

I'm being judgemental, but a typical straight woman [...] they are all high heels, made up to the nines and I just couldn't, I could probably get on with them, but I wouldn't feel comfortable, because they're not my kind of people. (Steph, lesbian, project manager, transport, 20s)

Thus sexuality is an anticipated or real barrier for some lesbians in interactions with presumed heterosexual female colleagues. Steph's view of a 'typical straight woman' and a predominantly female working environment is a narrow one, of course, but is contrasted with her preference for working in a male-dominated team, where she feels more comfortable. Her minority sexuality distances her from other women, another means of differentiation from 'typical' or 'ordinary' women. Thus we see that both heterosexual women and lesbians in male-dominated occupations may create distance from femininity by 'mobilizing masculinity' (Martin, 2001).

Interactions between women are framed and shaped by the male-dominated setting in which they operate. Indeed, fear of how male colleagues may react to contact between women prevented train driver Femi from associating with the small number of female drivers during her breaks:

I didn't want to be seen as having a clique of women, I didn't want to be seen as that, I just wanted a peaceful environment, just come to work, do my job, [...] go home. I didn't really want to be in like a women's organization of fellow drivers. [...] because they just look at us and think 'ooh look at them' you know. (Femi, heterosexual, train operator, 40s)

In male-dominated environments, negative reactions from men to women meeting together informally can act as a deterrent to women participating in formal networks for women, established to provide precisely the support that isolated women may need. Particularly when new recruits, women's priority is to become accepted as 'one of the lads', which can mean eschewing contact or support from other women (Bagilhole, 2002; Hatmaker, 2013). As Kanter (1977, pp. 227–8) noted, 'token' women in organizations were often subjected to 'loyalty tests' in which the price of being 'one of the boys' may be a willingness to turn against 'the girls'. Heterosexual maintenance technician Marsha observed that men try to provoke tension between women: 'Sometimes the men can stir it up and everything can blow up [...] men are very, very good at doing that.' Other studies have found tradesmen pressuring women to avoid associating with other females to undermine women's attempts at collective resistance, including by labelling women's support groups as unfair or 'special privileges'. Additionally, they may invoke the stigma of lesbianism to deter women, both heterosexual and lesbian, from participation in women's groups and informal contact between women (Denissen and Saguy, 2014). However, in some cases, sexual identity differences may overcome gender-based competition. When she started as a station assistant, Lesley initially perceived hostility from her female supervisor, who Lesley believed was jealous of the attention she was receiving from male colleagues. But Lesley recounts that as soon as the supervisor found out that Lesley was a lesbian and 'that I wasn't any threat [...], she was still getting plenty of attention', there was no longer a problem and they became good friends, including socializing outside of work. This case further illustrates that women's interactions are highly dependent on the predominantly male environment in which they take place, where (hetero)sexualized interactions are prevalent. Lesley was only able to establish a positive relationship with her female colleague once her lesbian sexuality was known, which eliminated her from competition for male attention in her colleague's mind.

For the second group of women, though, female support had been crucial to their retention in male-dominated work. Carrie described her response to a women's group established when there were only three tradeswomen working for the local authority:

You'd probably only see one female from one week to the next and so it was a good thing that we all got together. [...] where there are limited women, it's very good for the support, because, you know there were times when I had trouble with my supervisor, I didn't know who to turn to, I'd be in tears some weeks and then you had that group to talk to and you know, guided you the right way in who to talk to, and obviously got through it because, you know, you stay. (Carrie, painter and decorator, local authority focus group)

Carrie's employer was unusual in having an active policy of seeking to recruit tradeswomen, and recognized the need to offer support. As Carrie points out, this helped her to remain in the job. The employer therefore took measures to create a different setting from that experienced by Femi above, who did not feel organizational support and feared aligning herself with other women. This suggests that when organizations are recruiting women into non-traditional occupations, consideration should be given to the need for support, as well as the potential difficulties of accessing this in a hostile setting.

Among professional women, the handful who described positive working relationships with women often actively sought out these contacts. Frances, for example, a lesbian building surveyor, felt she had little in common with her heterosexual male colleagues in the office, and valued the small group of women she had met through wider work circles who socialized once a month. Jess, a heterosexual manager of an all-male team of highway engineers, had friendly working relations with the female administrative staff: 'I think if there was no females here maybe I'd go mad'. She was able to 'have a banter' and chat easily about the previous evening's television programmes. For heterosexual associate director Fiona, a feminist identification informed her conscious efforts to

build links with women in the organization across occupations. Not only did she value the contact with women in support roles, she also firmly believed that such bonds could be instrumental in improving the working lives of women support staff, for example by challenging cultures of sexual harassment across occupational hierarchies. It is notable that interviewees had so few opportunities for interaction with female colleagues in their own occupations, that when discussing relations with female colleagues, they referred to women in administrative, support and more typically female roles.

Given the small numbers of women who had experience of female colleagues, it is not possible to draw firm conclusions about differences between those in professional or non-professional occupations. However, what is apparent from interviewees is that where there exist other women in similar roles, organizational culture and context shapes their willingness to interact together. Research has indicated that women in manual occupations may tend to encounter greater male hostility than women in professions (discussed below), which has the potential to affect their relations with other women. It may also be the case that women in professional occupations have greater opportunities for gender-based support through professional or industry networks outside the workplace.

### The possibility of supportive workplace interactions with male colleagues

Women in professional and non-professional occupations described some very positive relations with male colleagues. For railway engineer Judith, who had mostly worked as the only female in her team, this was the best aspect of her job:

It's really the people that I work with I think, I love everyone I meet, they're all passionate about what they do and they're nice people, good for a laugh and will help you out, really supportive. (Judith, heterosexual, senior engineer, 30s)

She had established firm friendships with men at work, including 'really old-fashioned railway types who have never worked with girls before'. She suggested that her presence on the team had helped 'old-fashioned' colleagues to overcome their gendered preconceptions about the role.

Painter and decorator Gina put into perspective her feelings about the majority of male colleagues, in contrast to the difficulties experienced with a few:

We sound down on the men, but 99 per cent of them are great [...] they treat you the same, they don't treat you any differently, you know, they're really good people to work with and I wouldn't still be here after 13 years if I didn't enjoy working with them. (Gina, painter and decorator, local authority focus group)

However, there are additional power relations inherent in the training and apprenticeship system of the building trades, with a reliance on learning on-the-job from experienced workers rooted in the apprenticeship tradition (Byrne *et al.*, 2005; Clarke *et al.*, 2004a). These relations gain an added dimension when the trainee is female. Therefore getting along with male colleagues is not just about a comfortable working environment, but also affects career progression. Women were relieved when they found support from men during their apprenticeships or while on work placements. Carpenter Elaine described how she would latch onto a helpful guy and follow him 'like a puppy'. Similarly Norma had needed support on a placement as a trainee electrician, which she valued:

The guys really pushed me. [...] they really pushed me to do stuff, they said 'we'll show you what to do, and then you can do it'. And when I told them I was leaving, I was coming to the end of my contract, they started testing me 'how would you wire this, how would you wire that?' until I got it, which was quite nice as well, it really was encouraging and supportive. (Norma, heterosexual, trainee electrician, 40s)

Norma and Elaine's relief at finding supportive male colleagues is significant in the context of the frequently hostile and exclusionary reactions to female entry into previously male trades (Denissen,

2010a; Paap, 2006; Wright, 2013). Women's exclusion from male networks, including the information exchange needed for career advancement, is well known (Ibarra, 1993; Perriton, 2006). Such exclusion is usually written about in terms of professional careers, but we see here how in the manual trades, exchange of information with co-workers is an essential part of learning the job and gaining the necessary qualifications. Yet women often do not gain the opportunities to consolidate their qualifications with workplace experience (Byrne *et al.*, 2005; Clarke and Gribling, 2008). While women in professional occupations in construction are also reliant on relations with male colleagues for career progression, they can gain professional qualifications through higher education institutions outside of the workplace that increase their employability. Even when women gain qualifications in construction trades, they are often unable to attain the required work experience to enable them to enter the labour market; women are found in much higher proportions on construction trades training courses than in employment (Byrne *et al.*, 2005).

Research by Rumens (2008, 2010, 2012) has identified that cross-sexuality workplace friendships between gay men and heterosexual women can be particularly strong and have the potential to challenge heteronormativity in organizational life. However, different gendered dynamics occur in cross-sexuality interactions between lesbians and heterosexual men in male-dominated work, where lesbians have a dual minority status in terms of gender and sexuality. Rather than offering opportunities for strong bonds, as observed between gay men and heterosexual women, for some lesbians, minority sexuality compounded the distance from male heterosexual colleagues. Lesbian surveyor Frances commented that 'men are a bit alien to me as a gay woman [...] they are a bit of an alien species'. This contrasts with findings that lesbians can sometimes find easier acceptance as 'one of the guys' through bonding with heterosexual men over masculine interests and activities, albeit with the risk of participating in misogynistic work cultures (Denissen and Saguy, 2014; Wright, 2008). Frances's views reflect the heterogeneity of lesbian identities (Moore, 2006), and further challenge stereotypical associations of lesbians with masculinity. Many lesbians are no more comfortable with bonding through masculine norms than are many heterosexual women. Yet lesbians may feel themselves to be even more 'other' in heteronormative workplace cultures where women are already a minority.

Other lesbian interviewees, however, reported good working relationships with heterosexual male colleagues. Indeed, Lesley had invited several of her male train driver colleagues to her same-sex wedding the previous year. The particularities of Lesley's workplace dynamics are important though: when she started as a station assistant she found a mixture of gay men and women and heterosexual male and female colleagues, who provided a supportive environment in which she felt able to be open about her lesbian sexuality. She reported continued good relations with heterosexual male colleagues when she moved within the organization to become a train operator. Furthermore, Lesley had met her partner at work and had not found it problematic to be open about the relationship to colleagues. This suggests that both the numbers of open lesbians and gay men in the organization, together with favourable organizational policies and practices, produced a positive environment for workplace relations to counter heteronormative cultures. While cross-sexuality friendships contributed to this environment for Lesley, relationships with other lesbian and gay colleagues were of particular significance. None of the other interviewees referred to working with gay men, perhaps reflecting the lack of visibility of minority male sexuality in highly masculinized working environments (Burke, 1993; Ward and Winstanley, 2006).

In another example of support on the basis of shared minority identity, Femi raised the possibility for cross-sex workplace relationships to draw on shared ethnic minority identity. As a black African woman she recognized the potential for solidarity with black male colleagues, although this was double-edged:

The people who were friendliest to me when I started were the black male drivers, but then [...] they were either friendly because they thought 'well you have my support' or they were friendly because they thought 'mmm' [appreciative noise] you know, so sometimes [...] they were *too* friendly. And that to me was very insulting. (Femi, heterosexual, train operator, 40s)

Thus ethnicity can intersect with gendered experience offering the potential for cross-sex support and friendship on the basis of shared ethnic minority status in white-dominated workplaces, and may consciously be deployed to downplay gender difference through drawing attention to shared ethnicity (Denissen, 2010b). However, Femi felt that this support was double-edged, with the potential for commonality on the basis of a shared minority status being displaced by a gender hierarchy expressed through an element of unwanted sexual interest. She did not describe whether the sexual interest from black drivers was any different from that of white male colleagues, but her comments imply that she found the behaviour of black colleagues upsetting on account of a greater expectation of solidarity within a white-dominated workplace.

Only one heterosexual interviewee described meeting a partner at work. When working as a coach driver, Annette had had a relationship with a male driver, and recounted no difficulties at work arising from the relationship. On the contrary, she had found it useful to rebut sexual advances from other coach drivers with the response that her partner 'wouldn't like it'. Her relationship thus offered her a form of protection in sexualized interactions with other male colleagues, illustrating how relationships between men are forged through women. Paap (2006, p. 142) has argued that male relations on building sites are established over how successful they are in gaining women's interest, with women a 'proving ground' for men to demonstrate their masculinity. Annette's workplace relationship was exceptional; heterosexual interviewees were far more likely to strongly advise against workplace relations on the basis that this would lead to gossip, undermine the professional position they were attempting to maintain, and cause problems if the relationship were to end. Women were aware of how gossip and rumour about personal relationships was used as a form of 'social punishment' of women, that was not applied equally to men (Rodriguez, 2013).

Thus supportive and positive workplace relations between minority women and male colleagues were found to occur, but we have seen that sexuality is never far from the surface. Women frequently talked in terms of having to 'handle' or 'manage' male sexualized behaviours, which they did in a variety of ways, including avoidance of socializing or situations which they predicted would be difficult. Responses to sexualized banter or 'humour' varied among women, with age and experience intersecting with personal character. Being open about lesbian sexuality sometimes reduced the potential for unwanted sexual interest, but lesbians also commented that men will flirt regardless of a woman's sexual orientation. While the line between acceptable sexualized interactions and sexual harassment is fluid and contingent on personal comfort and organizational context (Williams *et al.*, 1999), many interviewees in the present study had experienced behaviour they perceived as sexual or homophobic harassment (discussed in Wright, 2013).

## Discussion and conclusion

In male-dominated workplaces, informal workplace interactions are powerful organizational processes that shape women's daily experience for both good and ill. In response to arguments that studies of sexuality in work organizations have overemphasized coercive forms of sexuality and neglected the pleasurable or consensual aspects of workplace interactions, this article took up the challenge of addressing the extent to which workplace relations and interactions experienced by women in male-dominated work could be experienced as positive or supportive. Additionally, the article responded to Rumens' (2008, 2010, 2012) exhortation to pay greater attention to cross-sex and cross-sexuality friendships.

To address gaps in the literature on women in male-dominated work concerning differences of sexuality and occupational class, the article has taken an intersectional approach, applying McCall's (2005) intercategory methodology. This enables comparison between those occupying more or less advantaged positions in relation to dominant heterosexuality and within occupational hierarchies, and seeks to better understand the heterogeneity of women's experience.

Relationships with female colleagues were not common among interviewees, primarily due to lack of opportunity to work with other women in their gender-imbalanced workplaces. Additionally,

some interviewees had an express preference for working with men, and 'mobilized masculinity' (Martin, 2001) through identifying with 'masculine' interests to distance themselves from typical 'femininity', and therefore did not seek out interactions with female colleagues. Some lesbians and some heterosexual women favoured working with men, while others, across differences of sexual identity, welcomed opportunities to engage with female colleagues. This finding challenges essentialist associations of lesbians with masculinity, and indicates the value of an intersectional analysis that takes account of gender *and* sexuality to uncover both divergence and commonality. The empirical data did not reveal different patterns of interaction with female colleagues on the basis of sexual identity, but instead highlighted the salience of minority gender status where women's responses to interacting with other women were shaped by the need to fit in with a masculine normative environment and, in some cases, pressure from male colleagues to eschew female company. There were suggestions that men may consciously frustrate attempts at female solidarity by stoking hostility between women in order to maintain male dominance in the workplace.

Women in non-professional occupations — exemplified by a train operator and a painter and decorator — held strongly contrasting attitudes towards the value of interacting with other women in the workplace. Although this article has not examined women's experience of male resistance to their entry into previously male domains, women in non-professional occupations still face considerable male hostility, sometimes expressed as sexual harassment (Denissen, 2010a; Paap, 2006), whereas more progress has been made in recent years in professional occupations to change the workplace culture in relation to sexual harassment (Wright, 2013). Women's different orientations to seeking supportive relations with other women will affect propensity to participate in industry or occupational networks for women, often promoted as a strategy to help women overcome marginalization within male-dominated careers or organizations (Durbin and Tomlinson, 2010; Perriton, 2006). There is a sizeable body of work on women's networking, which focuses primarily on women in professional occupations. The inclusion of occupational group differences as a category for intersectional analysis in this study indicates that for women in non-professional occupations, gender-based support is equally important, but there may be specific barriers to overcome to enable participation where male-dominated cultures are antagonistic to women's solidarity. Additionally, for women working shifts such as bus or train drivers, working patterns may hinder participation in support networks. Furthermore, existing networks may emphasize the benefits of network-building for professional career advancement, which do not have the same relevance for women engaged in occupations with different career structures. Thus further research on the participation of women in non-professional occupations in support networks would be enlightening. Additionally, research could explore whether lesbians have a greater propensity to seek support through LGBT networks, which offer voice and visibility to sexual minorities (Colgan and McKearney, 2012), than through women's groups, raising questions of which identity may be prioritized in certain circumstances.

In women's interactions with male colleagues, supportive and enriching workplace interactions and friendships occurred. For apprentice or junior tradeswomen, such relationships had an additional instrumental dimension in providing opportunities for learning the necessary skills from more experienced workers. Such learning from others 'on the job' was necessary for ratifying qualifications (Byrne *et al.*, 2005; Clarke *et al.*, 2004a), making successful working relationships especially important. Working relations and networks are also important for professional women's careers; however, professional qualifications acquired through higher education institutions offer external validation of knowledge and skills, making them less reliant solely on workplace experience and training for employability. Relations with male colleagues then may have an additional significance for tradeswomen's careers. The intersectional approach adopted here that has foregrounded occupational group differences between women has added to our understanding of the particular difficulties for tradeswomen in pursuing careers in construction. This may be one of the factors explaining why women have made greater progress in the construction professions than in the manual trades in recent decades.

Despite positive experiences of workplace relations with male colleagues, it appeared that sexuality was never far from the surface, containing the potential to disrupt or unsettle everyday

interactions. While it is useful to consider women's agency and the possibility for disrupting men's dominance of gendered power relations through sexuality, or the pleasurable, consensual element of heterosexual interactions (Halford *et al.*, 1997; Pringle, 1989; Williams *et al.*, 1999), in the sharply gender-divided settings of this study, very few interviewees referred to sexual pleasure in workplace interactions (although it is possible that different interview questions or emphasis might have prompted this). Instead, they talked in terms of having to 'handle' or 'manage' male sexuality and several had experienced sexual harassment (Wright, 2011, 2013). Thus, considered as a whole, these findings from heavily male-dominated environments support Wajcman's (1998, p. 117) contention that resisting sexual commodification is more difficult for women who are in a small minority among men. Similarly, Halford *et al.* (1997) recognized the variability in gender power relations across organizations. Whereas some complementarity between the sexes can exist in a more gender-balanced environment, in sharply gender-segregated occupations with a distinct power imbalance, routine sexualization occurred in which the boundaries between sexualized interactions and sexual harassment were 'extremely fuzzy' (Halford *et al.*, 1997, p. 256).

The work of Rumens (2008, 2010, 2012) on the potential of cross-sexuality friendships to challenge organizational heteronormativity raises interesting questions of whether there is a similar benefit for lesbians in overcoming minority status within male-dominated work. However, the intersectional approach taken here highlights the positioning of lesbians as both gender *and* sexual minorities in occupations dominated by heterosexual masculinity, in contrast to Rumens' interactions between gay men and heterosexual women, who occupy closer positions in organizational power hierarchies. In the same way as I have suggested that gender studies can benefit from differentiation by sexuality, equally studies of sexuality should not neglect gendered power dynamics. Gender privilege makes gay men's experience in organizations distinct from that of lesbians, albeit in male-dominated environments there are specific dynamics affecting gay men (Burke, 1993; Ward and Winstanley, 2006).

The application of McCall's (2005) intercategory methodology for intersectional research design and analysis has usefully revealed differences in women's experience of workplace interactions on the basis of sexuality and occupational class. However, the findings also suggest that gender is at times the predominant category shaping daily interactions in settings where women are a very small minority among men. We saw this in relation to women's attitudes towards female solidarity, which crossed boundaries of sexuality, as well as supportive male colleagues, who were encountered across occupational hierarchies. In examining the category of gender across divisions of sexuality and occupation, it is possible to see where women's experience both diverges and converges. This study has contributed an empirical application of McCall's intercategory approach, but taken it further by applying it to a qualitative project, in contrast to McCall's quantitative analysis of wage inequalities across dimensions of race, gender and class. There are both strengths and challenges in implementing a multi-group qualitative analysis, however. Decisions were taken in the research design, principally for reasons of manageability of accessing interviewees for a qualitative project, to focus on interactions of gender, sexuality and occupational class. But the adoption of an 'intersectional sensibility' (Crenshaw, 1991; Healy *et al.*, 2011) revealed that ethnicity offered different possibilities for workplace interaction, cross-cutting with gender and sexuality. These intersections could not be explored fully, but can act as pointers or starting points for further research and analysis.

A further limitation of employing McCall's intercategory approach in relation to sexuality is that use of categories may appear to reify binary notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality, ignoring the fluidity of sexuality both in individual's own life experiences and as a conceptual category (Seidman, 1996). Nevertheless, empirically the interviewees appeared content to identify with binary categories in their daily organizational lives.

Despite the challenges, the qualitative intercategory approach implemented here has offered further empirical understandings of the heterogeneity of women's experience (and could of course encompass male experience) in male-dominated work. It has demonstrated the possibilities for, and value of, McCall's intercategory approach that employs multiple categories, and extended this to a qualitative project. Through linking identity to organizational processes, following Acker (2006) and

Holvino (2010), the analysis has highlighted some challenges for policy and practice within organizations. These include the implementation of strategies for eliminating harassment across occupational categories; the development of supportive workplace cultures for sexual minorities; and the provision of appropriate support and networks to overcome the particular difficulties faced by women in non-professional occupations. Greater understanding of informal workplace interactions across dimensions of gender, class, race and sexuality is needed in order to develop effective formal policy interventions (Acker, 2006; Healy *et al.*, 2011).

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## Notes

1. It was intended to include bisexual women in the study, but no participants who identified as bisexual came forward.
2. The Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) (ONS, 2000) is used to define the 'professional/managerial' grouping as those with occupations in SOC major groups 1 and 2 and the 'non-professional' occupations as all others (which includes major group 3 'associate, technical and professional occupations' covering train drivers, and groups 5, 6 and 8).

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