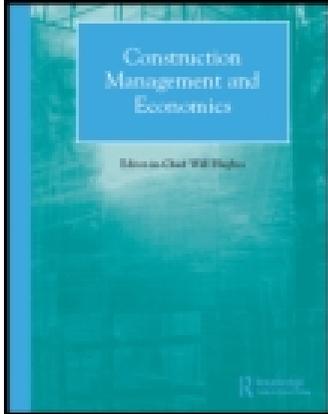


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Uncovering sexuality and gender: an intersectional examination of women's experience in UK construction

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Uncovering sexuality and gender: an intersectional examination of women's experience in UK construction

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UK employers have been broadening their equality and diversity activities to include the issue of sexual orientation; however, the construction industry has been slow to follow. Equally there is a lack of research on the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) workers in construction. While women's sexuality soon becomes a focus of interest when they enter male-dominated work, little research has discussed how sexual minorities—and in particular lesbians—fare in such environments. This article examines how both gender *and* sexuality interact to shape women's working lives within the UK construction sector, drawing on 22 interviews and a focus group with heterosexual women and lesbians in male-dominated occupations in construction. While women share common experiences of heightened interest and questioning, open lesbians can sometimes minimize the sexualized content of workplace interactions. However the potential for exclusion on the basis of minority sexuality also exists. Sexual harassment appears less prevalent for women in professional occupations than in the past, while women in the manual trades reported that the problem persists. Lesbians can experience different forms of harassment, however, from heterosexual women, while employers are less developed in their response to homophobic harassment.

Keywords: Equality, gender, lesbian, sexual orientation, sexuality.

Introduction

While the UK construction industry has begun to address aspects of equality and diversity in recent years, primarily focusing on gender and ethnicity, there remains a silence on the issue of sexual orientation. For example, the recently published equality guidelines for the industry do not cover sexual orientation, focusing instead on age, disability, ethnicity and gender (Peters and Allison, 2011). Academic construction journals have not examined sexual orientation either. However there is increasing awareness of sexual orientation as an employment issue, prompted by the legal requirement not to discriminate introduced by the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations in 2003¹ and the Civil Partnership Act 2004 giving same-sex couples the right to enter legally recognized partnerships, as well as plans to extend marriage to same-sex partners. Many

employers now see a business case for considering the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) employees on the grounds of recruiting from and retaining the widest pool of talent, among other reasons (Stonewall, 2010). The construction sector may therefore be lagging behind other industries; it has been noted that not a single built environment company has appeared in the list of 100 top gay-friendly UK organizations, produced annually by Stonewall (Constructing Equality, 2012b) and it was not until 2012 that the first engineering company joined Stonewall's Diversity Champions programme of around 600 employers seeking to improve the workplace for LGBT staff (Constructing Equality, 2012a).

Yet research on women in construction finds that sexuality immediately becomes a focus of interest once women enter the industry (Henwood, 1998; Denissen and Saguy, 2010), with male workers eager

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to establish women's sexual availability, ready to label them as 'dykes' if seen as unavailable (Paap, 2006). The deployment of sexuality as a means of control over women is evident in the frequent sexual harassment observed in male-dominated work in general (DiTomaso, 1989; Collinson and Collinson, 1996), also a common feature of construction sites (Watts, 2007). A further reason for paying attention to sexuality is that there are indications that lesbians may be particularly attracted to, or prevalent in, male-dominated work, including construction, compared to heterosexual women (Morgan and Brown, 1991; Fassinger, 1996; Weston, 1998; Lippa, 2002; Wall, 2004). Despite this, the experiences of lesbian workers are rarely explicitly discussed in studies of women in male-dominated work (Wright, 2011a).

This article therefore addresses these gaps by examining the intersection of gender and sexuality in women's experiences of work in the UK construction sector. By considering the experiences of both heterosexual women workers and lesbians it enables discussion of questions such as how women present themselves at work in relation to conceptions of 'femininity' and 'masculinity'; how they manage the daily interest in their sexuality; whether lesbians may avoid unwanted male attention once their sexuality is known; and whether sexual harassment is of a lesser or different nature for women assumed to be lesbians. These questions are explored in the article, drawing on accounts from in-depth interviews with 22 women working in the UK construction industry.

Sexuality in male-dominated work

Over the past two decades, women's experience as a minority in traditionally male workplaces has received attention in studies showing how their difference or outsider status is constantly asserted and reinforced by men's comments about their appearance, bodies and physical difference from the male norm (Cockburn, 1991; McDowell, 1997). Women's entry into heavily male-dominated and masculinized workplaces invokes interest in sexuality and embodiment. It has been argued that the sexualization of the workplace is one way in which men seek to assert and maintain their domination over women. This may take the form of sexual harassment, as a means to exert power over women through sexuality (Hearn and Parkin, 2001), which has been more extensive and aggressive for women in male occupations than in typically female employment (Collinson and Collinson, 1996) and been used to exclude women from better paying 'male' jobs (DiTomaso, 1989). More recent research finds that sexual harassment continues

to be a common feature of construction sites (Paap, 2006; Watts, 2007; Denissen, 2010).

Considerable interest in women's sexuality and their availability to men is common when women enter previously male domains and is carefully outlined by Paap (2006, pp. 84–6) in relation to US construction sites. She identifies the 'ManSpot' questions put to women to discover whether they are already involved with a man, are looking for one, or are gay (the only three possibilities considered). Responses to these questions place women within the 'bitch-dyke-whore' taxonomy. Paap argues that men seek to explain women's presence in construction through this taxonomy, as either looking for a man, being a lesbian or causing trouble (a 'feminist with an agenda'). By positioning women as 'exceptional' or having an ulterior motive for being in construction, the essentially masculine nature of the job is maintained. Women cannot be seen to do the same job as men without threatening ideologies of masculinity associated with construction work. Labelling women as lesbians, though, (regardless of their actual sexual orientation) makes them less threatening to these ideologies of masculinity, as they can be seen as 'unnatural' women. Presumed lesbians do not 'disturb the gender order' as heterosexual women might (Paap, 2006, p. 87).

Others show that it is common in some occupations for female workers in the construction trades to be presumed to be lesbians (Denissen and Saguy, 2010). Frank (2001) has noted that in the US building trades 'dyke-baiting' is suffered by all women, gay and straight, as an assertion of male power when women transgress traditional gender roles. However, while the 'lesbian' is prominent as a figure in discourses within many forms of male-dominated work, including construction, her experience as a real-life woman is mostly absent from studies of women in male-dominated workplaces (Wright, 2011a). This leaves heteronormativity—the presumption of institutionalized heterosexuality as the standard for legitimate and prescriptive arrangements (Ingraham, 1994, p. 204)—uninterrogated within studies of male-dominated work.

Two US studies, though, provide an exception, specifically examining the experiences of lesbian workers in construction trades (Frank, 2001; Denissen and Saguy, 2010). Both record that building sites are very difficult places in which to be openly lesbian, but also are frequently hostile places for all women, regardless of sexuality. Lesbians in the building trades face heightened visibility and constant suspicion because of the presumption that women in the trades must be gay, so they engage in complex risk assessments before coming out to their co-workers

(Denissen and Saguy, 2010). Similarly Frank (2001) observes the difficulties for lesbians in being open about their sexual identity in hostile work cultures, although notes the greater confidence of some younger lesbians as a result of late 1990s affirmative action hiring and apprenticeship policies.

Some vocational psychology literature from the US suggests that lesbians may be more attracted to male-dominated work than heterosexual women. As lesbians tend to demonstrate more non-traditional, androgynous gender roles than heterosexual women, they are therefore more likely to reject pressure to pursue gender traditional interests and occupations (Morgan and Brown, 1991; Fassinger, 1996; Croteau *et al.*, 2000). Thus lesbians' day-to-day experience of challenging traditional gender roles may free them to choose occupations that are atypical. A psychological study of gender-related traits (Lippa, 2002) observed that, compared to heterosexual women, lesbians showed significantly more interest in a range of traditionally masculine occupations, such as carpenter, car mechanic and engineer, and less interest in traditionally feminine occupations. Some personal recollections also indicate that the construction trades may attract high proportions of lesbians, noted in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s by Wall (2004, p. 163) and in the US construction trades by Weston (1998, pp. 96–7).

Despite this evidence, sexual orientation remains a topic overlooked in research on construction, and academic construction journals have not yet examined the issue (Chan, 2011). This journal, for example, is among those that has to date published no work addressing issues for gay or lesbian construction workers or employer action in relation to sexual orientation, although gender has become an area of increasing interest (for example, Agapiou, 2002; Byrne *et al.*, 2005; Dainty and Bagilhole, 2005; Powell *et al.*, 2009).

This absence no doubt reflects practice in the construction industry, which has been slow to respond to developments among UK organizations in this area. UK employers are increasingly paying attention to sexual orientation as part of a widening equality and diversity agenda. While the public sector was traditionally at the forefront of addressing sexual orientation equality for both employees and service users (Colgan *et al.*, 2009), there is evidence of a recent interest in the needs of LGBT staff and customers among private sector employers, driven by legal, social justice or business case motivations, in some cases also associated with corporate social responsibility strategies (Colgan, 2011). The business case for considering LGBT issues can be made on the grounds of engaging staff in the promotion of prod-

ucts or services to gay customers (Colgan *et al.*, 2006, p. 37) or recognizing that staff who feel confident to be open about their sexuality in a supportive work environment are happier, able to focus on their work and therefore more productive (Guasp and Balfour, 2008). However the construction sector is slow to catch up with this trend, consistently failing to feature among the top gay-friendly UK organizations identified annually by gay campaign group Stonewall. Its Diversity Champions programme encourages employer good practice on sexual orientation, and has over 600 members, but only gained its first engineering company member in 2012 (Stonewall, 2010, 2011; Constructing Equality, 2012a, 2012b). Reports examining diversity in the construction industry in London and across the UK provide no data on sexual orientation, focusing on gender, ethnicity, disability and age (Greater London Authority, 2007; de Graft-Johnson *et al.*, 2009). It is also notable that the recently published equality guidelines for the industry from the Equality and Human Rights Commission do not discuss sexual orientation, covering only age, disability, ethnicity and gender (Peters and Allison, 2011).

Given the size and significance of UK construction employers to the UK economy, it is likely that large firms at least within the sector will begin to see a need to follow other employer good practice in broadening their equality and diversity strategies to take account of sexual orientation. This article therefore highlights some of the issues that may be useful to consider.

Methods

Qualitative research was conducted 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 or seeking to enter the construction trades; 15 interviews with selected experts on the employment of women in non-traditionally female work, representing industry bodies, employers, trade unions and women's networks; and observation of events for women in non-traditional work. The research foregrounded the intersections of gender, sexuality and occupational group in women's experiences of male-dominated work. It addressed questions concerning the policy

context of gender employment initiatives for the two sectors; women's reasons for entering traditionally male occupations and their experiences of working in these sectors; women's use of support networks; and the interrelationship between domestic circumstances and work.

This article draws primarily on the interviews with 22 women working in construction occupations, as well as evidence from the focus groups. Of the 22 interviewees working in construction occupations, 15 women identified as heterosexual and seven as lesbian. Based on their current occupations, interviewees were categorized as 'professional/managerial' and 'non-professional' using the Standard Occupational Classification.² Twelve were in professional or managerial occupations (primarily engineers, surveyors and project managers); eight of whom identified as heterosexual and four as lesbian. Ten were in non-professional occupations (the manual trades, including carpenters, plumbers, gas fitters, electricians and painters and decorators), seven of whom identified as heterosexual and three as lesbian. The majority of interviews were conducted in the ethnically diverse regions of London and the West Midlands. Thirteen interviewees identified as white, four as Indian, three as Black Caribbean, one as having mixed heritage and one preferred not to say. Among lesbian participants, six identified as white and one as Black Caribbean. White interviewees were more likely to be in professional occupations (nine compared to four in non-professional roles), while among ethnic minority interviewees, five were tradeswomen and three were in professional occupations.

Interviews took between 45 minutes to an hour and a half, and took place in a location of the interviewee's choice; in a small number of cases this was their workplace, but more typically it was a setting away from work.

In order to reach both heterosexual and lesbian participants, and to ensure confidentiality, which is particularly important when researching minority sexuality given that participants may not have disclosed their sexual orientation at work, a variety of routes were used. These included professional and industry networks, and trade union and employer groups for women and lesbian and gay workers. Finding lesbian interviewees using the routes selected was challenging, given both the small numbers reached through each route, as well as issues of trust for those who may not be open about their sexuality at work. Therefore a variety of methods were tried, including personal contacts and approaches through interviewees in the sector. Help was also provided by Women and Manual Trades, a national organization for tradeswomen and those training in the trades, who circulated general

information as well as a specific request for lesbian tradeswomen to come forward. To ensure anonymity of interviewees, pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

Gender and sexuality in the UK construction sector

The article now turns to an examination of the findings from the research under three headings. The first part considers how women express their gender and sexual identities through appearance, which leads into discussion of how lesbians deal with disclosure of sexual orientation. The second section discusses the sexualized nature of workplace interactions and asks whether lesbians can avoid unwanted male attention once their sexuality is known. In the third part, sexual and homophobic harassment is examined, considering whether the experience of harassment is of a different nature for heterosexual women and lesbians.

Gender and sexual identities at work

The discussion of the literature highlighted the attention paid both to women's bodies and their sexuality once they enter male-dominated spheres of work. Presentation of self through dress and appearance thus becomes an important concern, related to notions of 'femininity' and 'masculinity', also entwined with questions of sexuality. The first part of this section examines questions of self-presentation for women in professional occupations (the issues may be different for women in manual trades, constrained by practical and safety considerations, but these are not explored here).

'Fitting in' with the men is a significant concern for women in male-dominated occupations, and studies have found that women seek to minimize their difference from men by adopting masculine clothing (Bagilhole, 2002). This was the strategy of some professional women in my study, although there were suggestions of shifting attitudes among newer entrants to the industry.

There has been a real change for the ladies coming onto site now, the way they dress and everything [...] I still like to wear a shirt, trousers and a jacket. What the ladies wear now is a lot more feminine and they're a lot more comfortable to wear that. Whereas I was always did the dressing as if I was a man, kind of thing, because I felt like I fitted in. (Suzie, heterosexual, director, construction, 30s)

Suzie conforms to a more masculine style of dress that downplays her physical difference from men in

order to be accepted. However she observes a different approach taken by women entering more recently, perhaps in response to women's increased presence in the industry, demonstrating greater confidence to express femininity.

However, expressing femininity is also fraught with difficulty as women make careful choices over appearance in order to appear neither too masculine nor too sexual, as surveyor Fiona explained:

It would be considered unprofessional if you were showing too much cleavage or too much leg, that would be slightly frowned upon, because it's slightly conservative [...] I mean if you went in something terribly male that would be slightly wrong too. (Fiona, heterosexual, associate director, construction, 50s)

Fiona indicates that 'showing too much cleavage' could upset 'conservative' dress codes, but underlying this may be an awareness that sexualized interactions are a feature of male-dominated workplaces in construction (as shown below). Frequently it is women, not men, who are held to account for men's sexual behaviour (Pringle, 1989), and women's appearance becomes a focus for allocating responsibility. Thus deeming display of cleavage or leg as 'unprofessional' situates responsibility for controlling sexuality in the workplace with women. But Fiona suggests that women walk a fine line when making such decisions, as appearing too masculine is also frowned upon. It may be preferable, therefore, to adopt a 'feminized version' of male business dress (McDowell, 1997, p. 146) that avoids drawing attention to female sexuality.

Conforming to corporate dress codes or norms can have particular implications for lesbians. Lesbians adopt a variety of gender presentations, with some more closely associated with femininity, others with masculinity and others combining elements of both (Moore, 2006). Significantly, though, choice of clothing, hairstyle, jewellery, etc. is one means of expressing lesbian identity, as well as signifying one's sexuality to others. Thus decisions about appearance form part of processes of disclosure or concealment of sexual orientation in the workplace. Jo felt that her usual style outside work made visible her lesbian sexuality to others, but she feared that the professional dress required for her job as a consultant in an engineering firm required modifications to her appearance that may obscure her sexuality:

When you make people dress smartly, then it's more difficult to tell, isn't it? [...] I usually wear something vaguely smart and try to keep my hair longer than looking like I've been conscripted [laughs] and not trainers and all the things that you would normally

use to, that would normally make you obvious. (Jo, lesbian, consultant, construction, 30s)

Anna, who identified as a lesbian, and like Jo rejected a feminine gender presentation, had felt a need to wear her hair longer than usual in her previous job as a surveyor, although now that she was working for her own firm, she felt able to shave her head.

For all women, therefore, choice of dress and appearance involve considerations of masculinity and femininity in 'fitting in' where male bodies are the norm. Additionally, in a context of predominantly heterosexual interactions, both heterosexual women and lesbians face further considerations around the signification of their appearance. For lesbians, however, signals may be intended not only for the heterosexual majority, but also to other sexual minorities, and can form part of the process of disclosure of sexual orientation at work.

Nearly all lesbian interviewees were currently open about their sexuality to at least some of their colleagues, and their particular work environment played a key part in these decisions. Consistent with other research on disclosure of sexual orientation, interviewees often 'came out' about—or revealed—their sexuality in a gradual or selective way (Colgan *et al.*, 2007) or took the approach of 'not shouting about it', but not concealing it either. This usually involved telling some of those they worked most closely with, when the subject of partners arose. Jo's approach was common:

A few people know I suppose, you know, if it comes up then I'm not going to kind of de-gender my partner, but if it doesn't come up I'm not going to. (Jo, lesbian, consultant, construction, 30s)

However, like all lesbians and gay men at work, interviewees were very sensitive to the environment in which they worked when deciding to whom or what to reveal. Kath, for example, did not come out when working in a male-dominated local authority department in the early 1980s, which she felt was a very hostile culture for women.

I wouldn't have wanted to [come out], just felt like it's hard enough being a woman really. No, I think it would have felt quite frightening because there was just so much, so much like forces of reaction that I just felt like, why did I want to expose myself to that? (Kath, lesbian, furniture maker, 50s)

Already facing difficulties for being in a minority as a woman, Kath saw no reason to introduce further potential grounds for hostility. While attitudes

towards minority sexuality have changed in many workplaces since the 1980s, there remain contexts in which lesbians may still feel cautious about coming out. Hannah, who had been open about her sexuality in previous employment, was wary of coming out to colleagues at the Christian organization where she had recently started a job as a maintenance worker.

There are some people, some situations you might find yourself in where you can feel there is homophobia, so it is just best not said [...] My instinct is telling me that because it's a Christian organization [...] I just don't need the whatever it is that comes with that, it's just not ... because it could affect ... it won't affect me as a person, but they could take it out on my work or anything else. (Hannah, lesbian, maintenance worker, 30s)

Hannah's expectation of homophobia among some Christian groups led her to approach the issue of disclosure with particular caution; however, she had only been in the job a few weeks and was aware that her feelings may change once she got to know colleagues better. This highlights that it is not only the culture prevalent within the industry, but also the particular organizational culture and perceptions of it, that affect lesbian and gay workers' experience, and how confident they will feel about being open about their sexuality (Colgan *et al.*, 2006). While there was no significant difference in disclosure in my study between lesbians working in professional occupations and those in manual trades, it was notable that none of the three tradeswomen currently worked on construction sites, where particular hostility towards lesbians had been observed in US studies (Frank, 2001; Paap, 2006; Denissen and Saguy, 2010).

Workplace interactions

Interviewees all worked in highly gender imbalanced settings, often as the only woman in a team, department or even building site. These were often highly sexualized work environments, which women had to find ways to manage. Norma described one incident of dealing with a male co-worker's behaviour on site:

He fancied me, and because I didn't reciprocate his affection [...] he decided that he was gonna be horrible to me, but I didn't care because I could handle myself. [...] they try everything on, you know. (Norma, heterosexual, trainee electrician, 40s)

It seems that there is often an expectation among men themselves that they must 'try it on' with women, especially new arrivals. This has been seen as

one of the ways in which men establish relationships between each other and assert their masculinity using the 'coinage of women' (Cockburn, 1983, p. 185); women thus become a 'proving ground' (Paap, 2006, p. 142) for men to demonstrate their heterosexual masculinity. In this context, then, women adopt strategies to deal with unwanted attention, which can involve avoiding socializing for fear of friendliness being misinterpreted. Others drew firm lines in their relationships with male colleagues. Tanya, a senior surveyor, made it clear that she did not 'mix business with pleasure' in terms of sexual relationships, as she was fully aware of the possible consequences:

It would be so easy to have done all that work to get where you are, and then have it ruined so quickly, because as soon as someone heard that you'd done something at work, they'd probably all think they could have a go. (Tanya, heterosexual, quantity surveyor, construction, 30s)

Thus heterosexual women engage in identity management in considering how they present themselves in relation to their sexual availability, or lack of it, to men. As well as attention to appearance, as noted above, this involves careful consideration of social behaviour and interactions. A possible consequence of limiting social interactions is exclusion from workplace networks that may be useful for job and career prospects, perpetuating women's disadvantage in male-dominated work.

For lesbians, different considerations of identity management arise, as already discussed in relation to disclosure, therefore it is interesting to consider how they experience workplace relations with men in this context of overtly heterosexualized workplace interactions. Some have suggested that an openly lesbian worker may avoid some of the sexual attention that heterosexual women face (Schneider, 1984; Dunne, 1997); can find it easier to fit in with a masculine work culture such as the fire service than heterosexual women (Wright, 2008); and may find greater levels of comfort with male colleagues once the possibility of a sexual relationship has been removed (Frank, 2001). Some interviewees in this research supported the view that for lesbians the sexual tension in workplace relations could be reduced: Jo found that when male colleagues knew about her lesbian sexuality, she was freed from some pressures.

[I am] able to be one of the lads, not so much in my head, but it kind of removes a sexual tension that is there if there's a possibility [...] But once you're gay as well, [...] I think it makes you easier to deal with, because you're not trying to get into bed with them.

You are actually trying to get them to answer the question. (Jo, lesbian, consultant, construction, 30s)

However others found that male colleagues continued to relate to them through heterosexual norms and jokes, even knowing that the woman had no sexual interest in them. Other open lesbians felt themselves to be something of a curiosity among male colleagues.

It's like being in Kindergarten all the time, they're all quite harmless, but they're all quite fascinated about what I do, just generally. Because I don't behave as they do, so I sometimes have to manage that.

Interviewer: Fascinated because you're a woman?

I think so, and also that I am a gay woman and, I don't know, they just seem always to want to know, what's that. Men always want to, not control women, but want to monitor them, so I'm often being monitored about what I eat or where I am going. (Frances, lesbian, building surveyor, 40s)

Her comments about being 'monitored' by male colleagues are typical of the experience of minorities who face higher visibility than those in the dominant group and are subject to careful scrutiny, questioning and gossip (Kanter, 1977, p. 212), while LGBT employees may face particular scrutiny of their performance (Bilimoria and Stewart, 2009). Frances, however, did not have a reciprocal interest in her male colleagues:

Men are a bit alien to me as a gay woman, so I don't have a great interest in them. Maybe there is something worth discovering, but they're a bit of an alien species, they will sit there and ... I suppose I don't bother to find out too much.

Frances's feeling of difference (and indifference), based on both gender and sexuality, represents an important counter to the findings from other studies that lesbians may benefit from being accepted in male-dominated environments as 'one of the lads' (Wright, 2008, p. 107) or 'like one of the guys' based on assumed associations with masculinity, particularly for gender transgressive or 'butch-dyke' lesbians (Denissen and Saguy, 2010). Instead Frances highlights the lack of commonality stemming from an absence of both shared gender experience and shared heterosexuality, which commonly forms the basis of workplace interactions. The potential for exclusion from workplace interactions on the basis of minority sexuality (Colgan *et al.*, 2006) therefore exists alongside any potential benefits of avoiding unwanted sexual attention, noted by some interviewees.

Sexual and homophobic harassment

Despite the measures women took to manage the sexualized content of interactions with male co-workers through decisions about appearance and the extent of socializing with male colleagues, sexual power (Bradley, 1999) was commonly employed by men to exclude women: several interviewees described incidences of sexual harassment at some point during their careers in construction. In some cases this had occurred several years ago, when they were younger or perhaps before harassment at work had become such a matter of legal concern for employers. However there were also more recent examples. In workplaces infused with sexualized interactions, the boundary between conduct that is considered acceptable and unwanted sexual harassment is often blurred, fluid and contingent (Williams *et al.*, 1999). This was illustrated in a focus group discussion among women entering the construction trades.

Marina: You know when you bend down and they go 'ooh look your tits' and all that, is that sexual harassment? You know what I mean, it's such a thin line [...] you don't even know if it's like being harassed or ... I guess that's an individual thing, isn't it?

Sam: Yeh, one person can make the same comments to two women and one will say 'Jesus!' and the other woman would laugh her head off, you know, so.

Orla: But it would be a bit annoying if it was going on for three years and they were still doing it, you wouldn't want to be laughing at it all the time.

The variation in women's response to the same event is apparent here. Additionally Orla makes the point that duration is important, suggesting that regular, sustained harassment is not tolerable. Others recognized that conduct that would be considered unacceptable in other types of workplace was tolerated as part of the culture of the construction industry.

If I'm filling up the photocopier I know they'll be looking at my bum for instance, that is just men, there's nothing you can do about it, but if you were in another industry you'd say 'oh he's staring at me, he's doing something wrong', and I just think it's really not worth the hassle. (Tanya, heterosexual, quantity surveyor, construction, 30s)

In viewing this conduct as 'just men', Tanya reflects a high level of acceptance of what Hollway (1998) terms the 'male-sexual drive discourse', based on the

belief that male sexuality stems from a biological drive that is out of men's control. Furthermore the normality attributed to such behaviour supports a view that it is harmless, or at least not worthy of objection. However an inherent contradiction is displayed in Tanya's observation that this conduct would not be considered acceptable in other industries, which suggests that organizational norms and culture can and do constrain men's supposedly 'natural' behaviour.

Several interviewees, though, gave examples of sexual harassment on building sites, particularly when they were new. For carpenter Elaine this included sexual comments and name calling, as well as physical jostling, attempts to trip her up, giving her dangerous tools and 'sending me on things that are dangerous, unsafe platforms, things like that'. Although Elaine had learnt to stand up to male colleagues over time, she noted the recurrent nature of this treatment: 'I still get it to a certain degree, every time I go on a new site it starts back up again'.

Some black and minority ethnic tradeswomen highlighted the interaction of racism and sexism on building sites:

I was with all the white guys, I'm not white, I'm black, but yet they would be racist to the Indian, to the Polish, I know they're not racist to me to my face, they might be behind my back, but at the same time half of them wanted to shag me anyway, so I don't know ... (Cheryl, heterosexual, electrician, 30s)

Cheryl, who identified as Black Caribbean, says that white colleagues did not conceal their racism towards others from her, but did not direct overtly racist comments to her, apparently because of their sexual interest in her. Although she did not describe their behaviour as sexual or racial harassment, the men's views of her as an object of sexual interest and their comments to other non-white workers were overt. She also pointed out that male workers tended to stick with their ethnic group, but as a woman she mixed with them all. Her gender therefore set her apart from the racial and occupational hierarchies of the construction site, and sexual interest in her appeared to cut across boundaries of ethnicity or nationality maintained by men.

Evidence from interviews indicates that sexual harassment may be less prevalent and tolerated now in environments in which professional women work, although several had suffered incidents of harassment in the past: Fiona, now in her 50s and Tanya, in her 30s, described incidents of men touching them sexually on building sites when they were much younger, and Jasminder, now in her 40s, had suffered constant

comments about her 'tits' or whether she had 'got laid' while in her 20s from a colleague. These experiences reflect the common power relations of sexual harassment, in which younger or more junior women are harassed by men with greater positional power, and to which older or more senior women may be less susceptible. But in addition, there was a view among professional women that the culture of the construction industry had changed significantly, with employers no longer tolerating behaviour that had been witnessed in the past. Fiona, for example, was certain that the nude calendars she had complained about to managers 20 years ago would no longer be acceptable in the offices of construction firms. Sarah, in her 20s, believed that harassment would not be tolerated by her firm:

I think 10 years ago it would have been harder [...]. The culture has changed that much that if I have even the slightest inkling of disrespect because of my gender then they would be in lots of trouble very quickly [laughs]. (Sarah, heterosexual, civil engineer, construction, 20s)

Additionally, Sarah's experience reflects the occupational hierarchies within the construction industry in which as an engineer she is in charge of teams of labourers, indicating that professional women may not be subject to the same degree of harassment as those in non-professional jobs. This was the view of Fiona:

If you are on the professional side as opposed to the manual trades, there is still a certain deference from the contractors to you as the professional, so I probably won't get quite as much gyp [as tradeswomen]. (Fiona, heterosexual, associate director, construction, 50s)

A further factor differentiating the experience of women in professional roles and tradeswomen is the reach of corporate equality and harassment policies. The professional women workers interviewed tended to work for large construction firms with equality policies in place, whereas tradeswomen were more likely to work for smaller subcontractors or were trainees on placement (in addition some worked for a local authority that was positive about employing tradeswomen and therefore experienced fewer problems due to the organizational culture). Furthermore, while professionals may spend part of their time on site, they are often based in corporate headquarters or office locations, whereas for tradeswomen, the building site is their main place of work for the period of the job. Paap (2006, p. 52) has noted that harassment

is more likely to occur when the physical and social distance of the worksite from the corporate headquarters was greater, where it is easier to ignore formal policies. This supports the evidence of greater recent experience of harassment among interviewees from construction trades than from professional interviewees.

Following the discussion above concerning the capacity for open lesbians to sidestep some sexualized interactions in male-dominated workplaces, it is worthwhile to consider whether lesbians may be better able to resist men's exercise of sexual power and therefore experience lower levels of sexual harassment.

Kath had cultivated a deliberately 'tough', unfriendly image in order to deal with the male environment of her carpentry training course some years earlier, which she believed may have helped to avoid the harassment suffered by a heterosexual colleague at the hands of a tutor:

[She] had a really horrible time from the instructor who basically was sexually harassing her. And he obviously really fancied her, she was a very attractive woman and I think he just didn't quite know what to make of me because I was like trying to be very tough and would never smile. [...] I felt I got off a lot more lightly, but it could have gone the other way. [...] I'm sure it was because he couldn't cope with the fact that she was clearly, she was very womanly. (Kath, lesbian, furniture maker, 50s)

Kath believed that her consciously 'tough' presentation meant that she avoided, in this instance, the sexual harassment experienced by her more 'womanly' colleague. However she recognized that 'it could have gone the other way', indicating there was potential for harassment on the grounds of her unsmiling and untypically feminine image.

Indeed this was the case for another lesbian, Heather, who believed she faced worse treatment from male harassers than more 'conciliatory' females. She had experienced dangerous, as well as sexually intimidating, behaviour from fellow students on a carpentry course, which included throwing tools close to her head. In contrast to Kath's experience, Heather said that the 'straight women' on the course did not suffer the same treatment that she received.

The two other women on the course were young pretty girls, basically, and had that sort of very conciliatory way with men, and also, the standard of my work was quite high, and it was well, kind of better than most in the class, and I don't think they found that easy either. I think that [...] might have been something to do with it. (Heather, lesbian, caretaker/handyperson, 40s)

Thus absence of a 'conciliatory way with men', together, perhaps, with being older and more able, was felt to differentiate her from other women who were spared harassment by the young men on her course. Given her demonstration of abilities in a 'male' occupation, Heather's treatment here may be understood in terms of men seeking to put her back 'in her place' when she had stepped into a 'man's world' using harassing behaviour (Cockburn, 1991, p. 141; and see DiTomaso, 1989).

Thus lesbians who do not engage in heterosexualized interactions, or fail to display the expected submissive forms of femininity, can equally face harassment on grounds of their gender. Heather gave further evidence of harassment because she did not conform to conventional expectations of femininity, in this case from pupils in the secondary school where she worked as a caretaker/handyperson:

It was all about the way I present gender-wise, you know. The school have a homophobia policy, now my sexuality was never mentioned, but all the abuse was about, you know, they'd call me like 'he/she' or 'that man/woman thing'. It was all to do with gender and not appearing either one way or the other. [...] But the abuse I was getting, it wasn't people not being able to tell, it was people wanting me to know that they didn't like it, you know. Calling me like 'Mr Janitor Lady' and all that kind of thing, just constant. (Heather, lesbian, caretaker/handyperson, 40s)

The combination of Heather's gender atypical work role and her appearance that did not conform to traditional expectations of femininity resulted in constant harassment from pupils. But although she was not open about her sexuality to pupils at the school, and the harassment did not involve explicit reference to her lesbian sexuality, Heather was keen that the school dealt with the harassment under its homophobia policy. Despite the lack of overt homophobic language, she recognized the underlying heteronormative assumptions in the pupils' comments ostensibly about her gender. In one sense, then, heteronormative harassment may be a more accurate description of the particular comments directed at Heather's gender presentation; however, it is difficult to distinguish this from hostility towards minority sexuality, or homophobia. Thus McDermott (2006, p. 199) observed that workplace homophobia can occur when a woman transgresses 'the acceptable boundaries of what it is to be a woman', also noting that schools may be particular sites of homophobic harassment (Epstein, 1996).

A case of harassment and bullying by a manager in a local authority experienced by an interviewee more

than 10 years earlier further suggests that there may be differences in the *form* of harassment experienced by heterosexual women and lesbians, although not its severity or impact. Surveyor Anna described '18 months of absolute nightmare' at the hands of her bullying manager. The bullying took the form of being shouted at, ridiculed, called into the manager's office and made to wait until spoken to, given pointless tasks and questioned about her sexuality. It began when he learned she was a lesbian:

He knew pretty soon I was off limits, I was actually called in and he demanded to know why I hadn't told him I was a lesbian in the interview, because he found out. It's not a thing I mention in an interview because it's not applicable to my job. And he said 'no, it is, you shouldn't have kept that secret and I'm going to have to consider how I feel about this now'. [...] He didn't know what to make of it, because it upset his flirting nature. And he said 'I like to cuddle the ladies in the office'. And I said 'well don't cuddle me, treat me like a man'. He said 'yes, but you're a woman and I like to treat women in a certain way'. And I'd go 'but just treat me like a surveyor, I'm not here to be ...' He said 'well no, that's why I employ women, I like to have that around me.' (Anna, lesbian, building surveyor, 40s)

Anna experienced bullying and harassing behaviour because her lesbian sexuality was an affront to this manager's expectations of heterosexual, sexualized interactions with female colleagues. While Anna managed to avoid being touched by her manager, he was, however, caught sexually touching another female surveyor. At this point he was reported and the employer took action against him. Significantly, though, the employer case against the manager was on the grounds of a sexual harassment complaint only:

It took about six months to get rid of him. And it wasn't from my complaint, I actually didn't make a complaint against him. It was, they said that they didn't want too many complaints because it would muddy the water. So it was just the other female surveyor, but the things he wrote about me in his defence, I was a man-hating lesbian, I lied because I hated all men. And I said 'I work on building sites! If I hated men, I wouldn't be doing this job.'

For this manager, presumed heterosexual women were fair game for sexual harassment, while a lesbian faced bullying and harassment for challenging his heteronormative expectations of sexualized interactions. The employer, though, chose to deal with the manager on the basis of sexual harassment, resulting in his dismissal for gross misconduct. This suggests that

this course of action provided the most compelling legal case (it occurred over 10 years ago when there was no legal protection from harassment on grounds of sexual orientation) as well, perhaps, as a lesser familiarity with how to tackle a case of homophobic harassment that might 'muddy the water'.

Conclusions

This article has taken an intersectional approach to analysing women's work in the UK construction industry, revealing how gender and sexuality are intertwined, but seeking to unpack the effect of each on women's experience. The evidence presented here shows that while heterosexual women and lesbians may share experiences pertaining to their position as the minority sex in a male world, sexuality (or perceptions of it) also differentiates this experience. The highly sexualized environment of male-dominated work means that *all* women have to decide how to present themselves in relation to conceptions of femininity or masculinity and are likely to face questioning about their sexual availability and sexual orientation. Self-presentation through dress and appearance is a concern for women seeking to fit into a normative male environment, with some women opting for a more masculinized style of clothing in order to 'fit in'. Nevertheless, appearance remains a fraught issue, particularly for those wanting to adopt a more feminine style, while avoiding unwanted sexual attention. The article highlights, though, that for lesbians, dress and appearance have a significance that goes beyond considerations of masculinity and femininity, and form an important part of disclosure of sexuality to both the heterosexual majority and other sexual minorities. Therefore for lesbians in professional roles who reject a feminine style outside work, corporate dress codes requiring certain norms of presentation regarding hairstyle or footwear, for example, might obscure the usual signifiers of lesbian identity.

Self-presentation through appearance thus has an impact on disclosure of minority sexuality in the workplace, as well as treatment from others on the basis of gendered and heteronormative attitudes. We saw that Heather's non-feminine gender presentation was the focus for harassment, which challenged her gender identity. Although abuse was not directed explicitly at her lesbian sexuality, she was aware this was the underlying cause.

By examining the experiences of both heterosexual women and lesbians the article has shown how forms of gendered and sexualized interaction that would be unacceptable nowadays in other workplaces persist in

the construction industry. It has been argued that harassment is experienced both by women presumed to be heterosexual and by lesbians, although it can take different forms. For heterosexual women it includes sexual comments, unwanted sexual advances and touching. While open lesbians in this study mostly avoided sexual advances and touching, instead some faced bullying and abuse for failing to conform to expectations of heterosexual femininity or heterosexualized interactions.

Being open about lesbian sexuality can sometimes minimize the sexualized content of workplace interactions and avoid the unwanted attention encountered by some heterosexual interviewees. However, minority sexuality was shown also to be a further basis for difference from the male majority, in addition to minority gender. This provides a counter to the argument that gender transgressive lesbians may find it easier to fit in with male colleagues than heterosexual women (Wright, 2008; Denissen and Saguy, 2010). It is a reminder that non-heterosexual sexuality may be an additional basis for exclusion or hostility in construction (Paap, 2006).

Change in corporate culture in relation to sexual harassment was noted by heterosexual professional women. However the research revealed less change for tradeswomen, for whom sexual harassment is still common, particularly when new to a site; construction sites remain places that corporate equality policies find it hard to reach. While there may be increasing general awareness among employers of the need to eliminate sexual harassment, at least at corporate head office level, interviewees' experiences indicate that homophobic harassment is less well recognized as an issue. Until the industry begins openly to address the sexual diversity of its workforce, there is a danger that strategies for tackling homophobic harassment will remain underdeveloped.

The changes that have occurred in industry and organizational culture as women have begun to enter previously male domains are a consequence of legal interventions, as well as changing social attitudes. This suggests that, despite the prevalence of essentialist beliefs that naturalize men's sexualized behaviour, culture change is possible where the will exists to promote and implement it. This has implications for employers in addressing sexual orientation, which is an area that has seen rapid change in social attitudes in recent years, with evidence of increasingly positive public attitudes towards lesbians and gay men (Cowan, 2007). The growth in employers joining Stonewall's Diversity Champions programme (Stonewall, 2012) in order to improve practice in relation to LGBT staff illustrates the convergence between changing social attitudes to sexuality and

employer appreciation of business case rationales for taking account of employees' sexual diversity.

This article has focused on the intersections of gender, sexuality and occupational group in an attempt to better understand the heterogeneity of women's experience in construction. The analysis has additionally touched on ethnicity and age as further differentiators of women's experience, both of which could be explored further with a larger sample of interviewees. This could yield empirical data on how sexualized interactions in male-dominated work may be infused with racialized and age-related meanings. Furthermore, the intersectional approach could be broadened to include men's experience, which may reveal divergence between lesbians and gay men. Research on other male-dominated industries suggests that gay men may face higher levels of hostility and exclusion than lesbians (Burke, 1993; Ward and Winstanley, 2006; Wright, 2011b); it would therefore be interesting to compare these findings with empirical evidence from the construction industry.

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Notes

1. These Regulations have been incorporated into the Equality Act 2010.
2. Using the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) (Office for National Statistics, 2000) I defined 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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