Abstract for stream ‘Challenging Heteronormativity: Moving forward on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion?’ at the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion conference 2012

**Women's experience of construction and transport occupations: analysing the intersections of gender, sexuality and occupational class**

This paper considers the value of an intersectional approach to understanding the working lives of women in the male-dominated UK construction and transport sectors. It analyses how both heterosexual women and lesbians working in typically male occupations experience the prevailing heterosexual and gender normative cultures within these sectors.

Previous studies of women in male-dominated industries have mostly overlooked the experiences of lesbian workers, despite the presence of the ‘lesbian’ in discourses about female sexual availability when women enter male work. Additionally, there are suggestions that lesbians may be more likely than heterosexual women to reject pressures to pursue gender-traditional occupations and therefore enter male-dominated work. Furthermore, studies of women in construction roles have tended to focus on professional occupations such as engineering, surveying or project management, with fewer examinations of women in the manual trades. Women transport workers have received very little academic attention at all.

Therefore this paper focuses on how gender, sexuality and occupational class intersect in women’s experience of male-dominated work. Less attention has been paid to sexuality in intersectional analysis than other social divisions (Hines, 2011), with intersections of sexuality and class a particular absence (McDermott, 2011; Taylor, 2005). Moreover, while there has been much theorising over how to conceptualise intersectionality, there have been fewer empirical studies that seek to operationalise this complex concept in empirical research that aims to comprehend lived experience of work. The paper thus applies and develops existing frameworks to provide empirical data on previously neglected areas.

The paper employs McCall’s (2005) intercategorical approach to intersectionality. In contrast to intersectional approaches that either seek to deconstruct social categories such as gender or race, or focus on neglected points of intersection, such as the experiences of black women, the intercategorical approach takes the relationships of inequality among social groups as the centre of analysis and seeks to uncover the links between inequality and the categories themselves. This enables consideration of both advantage and disadvantage. Thus by making comparisons across groups (lesbian and heterosexual women, professionals and non-professionals), the empirical data provides evidence to question cumulative conceptions of intersectionality, which, for example, place lesbians at an automatic disadvantage in comparison to heterosexual women, and black and/or working-class lesbians at further disadvantage. The findings suggest that particular organisational contexts and the workplace interactions within them shape the experiences of women workers in more complex ways, with sexuality and class intertwining with gender to produce a variety of outcomes depending on the setting. The challenge to heteronormativity produced by an awareness of lesbian sexuality can facilitate gender atypical career choices for some lesbians, however the difficult process of coming to terms with lesbian sexuality resulted in delayed career choices for some lesbians now in their forties, which contrasts with the confidence of some younger lesbians to express their sexuality. This suggests that age is a further significant element in intersectional comparisons considering the changes that have taken place in social attitudes and legal rights in relation to minority sexuality.

As a framework for analysing intersecting forms of inequality within work organisations, the paper employs Acker’s (Acker, 2006: 445).components of inequality regimes, devised to understand the dynamics of gender, race and class in organisations. The paper extends this framework to include an analysis of sexuality to show that sexuality operates in some respects differently from gendered, racialised and class practices due to shifting processes of visibility and invisibility. The findings to some extent support Acker’s (2006: 452) assertion that minority sexuality is “almost always invisible to the heterosexual majority”, demonstrated by cases of homophobic harassment that were initially unrecognised or invisible to organisations (both employers and trade unions). However Acker’s view was questioned by examples from organisations which had actively taken steps to address sexual identity in the workplace, such as the establishment of LGBT network groups with high-level organisational support. This suggests a process of change taking place in the espoused cultures and priorities of some organisations, driven by a combination of legislative and business demands, supported by gradually shifting social attitudes.

However, by analysing the interacting processes of gender, class and sexuality, it is possible to observe that both heterosexual women and lesbians in non-professional positions were at greater risk of sexual and homophobic harassment than professionals. This suggests that organisational measures to tackle harassment were more effective in changing behaviour in environments where professionals or managers worked than in locations further from the centre such as building sites and bus garages. Application of Acker’s model thus helps reveal how sexuality and occupational class emerge as differentiating factors in women’s experience of harassment within organisations.

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Tessa is a Senior lecturer in Human Resource Management at the Centre for Research in Equality and Diversity, School of Business and Management,  
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