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Title Exploring heteronormativity and Bi and Trans exclusion on campus: Learning from the experiences of undergraduate students.
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SRHE Paper Abstract and outline.

Exploring heteronormativity and bi and trans exclusion on campus: Learning from the experiences of undergraduate students.

1. Setting the scene

Alongside changes in wider society which have seen the increased legal and social recognition of LGBTQ identities and relationships, universities have engaged with policy and practice which increasingly recognises and ensures the inclusion of a diverse population. Developments such as the equality act, and the Stonewall Champions programme ensure that university institutions engage with needs and take steps to challenge discrimination (Ellis 2009). Alongside this many universities locally engage with LGBTQ positive events such as pride and LGBTQ history month.

However, despite such developments research continues to show the presence of direct abuse, and implicit and explicit discrimination (Valentine, Ward and Plummer 2009; Bradbury et al 2016). Such experiences often go unreported. This paper argues that LGBTQ students willingness to pass and to leave discrimination or exclusion unchallenged reflects a continuing heteronormative culture in many universities which may be underlined rather than challenged by the sorts of policies and practices discussed above. Following the lead of Ueno and Gentile (2015) and Jagesser and Msibi (2015) this paper reflects upon how a prevailing heteronormative culture, alongside a compartmentalised vocalising of inclusion and diversity by institutions can lead to a sense of responsibility for difficulties, and a willingness to accept a perceived heteronormative status quo which lead to incidences of passing and nonresponse to moments of discrimination or exclusion.

2. Method discussion – understanding the focus on the everyday

This paper is based on an SRHE funded project which sought to take forward current research into LGBTQ student experience. The data emerged from photo-elicitation interviews with bi and trans (the focus due to a recognised lack of representation in current LGBT research) identifying undergraduates from English universities. This method aimed to access and reflect upon everyday experience, as the 'everyday' has been recognised in feminist research as a key site of inequality (Dyck 2005). This project asked bi and trans students to take up to 20 photographs using their smartphones. Students were asked to take pictures of anything which seemed relevant to the research – e.g. an event, an interaction, or a memory sparked by a symbolic place or thing. These photos then formed the basis of an otherwise unstructured interview which used photographs as a starting point rather than a focus. Where permission has been given relevant photographs will be shown as part of the presentation.

The paper illustrates continuing heteronormativity and the shortcomings of current inclusion practices by discussing (1) the continued everyday sense of difference some respondents discussed,

(2) examples of choices to 'let things go' and the reasons for that and (3) the recognition of effort, and the limitations of such efforts by universities,. The paper argues that such experiences illustrate a continuing heteronormative environment on many campuses which results in a variety of low-level but regular moments of challenge (micro-aggressions) which through continuing despite university efforts encourages silence as students take on responsibility as 'other' than the norm, and fear losing what specifically compartmentalised celebrations suggest has been achieved.

NOTE – This is a continuing project. As such the content of the data driven sections may change – however current data supports the current structure.

1. Illustrations of separation

Example 1 -Different from expected university community

Discussing plans for dissertation topic on student mentioned they had been told there might be reactions to their choice of LGBTQ-focussed topic. The statement regarding possible reaction both serves to 'other' and illustrate possible threat, but from a source which is difficult to challenge

Example 2 – Different from peers

The other way in which respondents discussed separation was in terms of peer reaction. Again at times there were openly hostile responses, but more often there were veiled low-level negative reactions. One student discussed being with friends who reacted negatively to people being 'too gay'.

2. Reasons for passing

Example 1 – Gendered unaccommodating toilets

This discussion emerged from a photograph of a space on campus. Here male toilets had only one cubicle alongside urinals. This student felt uncomfortable due to often entering but being unable to use the toilets. This was seen to draw attention to difference in a space which has been recognised as a flashpoint for trans discrimination.

Example 2- Exhaustion/ease

A number of discussions emerged here. Two discussions were illustrative of specific bi and trans experiences – the use of the wrong pronouns (trans), and being misidentified as lesbian/gay (bi). These occurrences require consistent correction (or a willingness to let it go).

3. Recognition of 'effort'

Example 1 – Rainbow and trans flags flying on the student union

Discussing a photograph this student commented that the flags reminded them to check the calendar to see what they were meant to be celebrating. This led to a discussion which underlined a sense that positive actions were generally compartmentalised – a tick box exercise rather than clear celebrations of the diversity of the student body

Example 2 - Rainbow laces

Stonewall's Rainbow Laces campaign was raised by a number of students in response to various photographs. Generally discussions of rainbow laces suggested it was nice people wore them but it

didn't really mean much. Students had experienced negative reactions amongst student societies which engaged with rainbow laces.

4. Final thoughts

Despite increased efforts within and across institutions Bi and Trans students continue to face moments of heteronormativity and discrimination in a variety of contexts and interactions. This paper has illustrated that though such efforts are recognised – they do not challenge behaviours at all levels. Casual, low-level discrimination and exclusion continues underlining a sense of difference for many students – and this difference is at times maintained rather than challenged by compartmentalised positive action due to students not wanting to be difficult or to increasingly problematize their day to day experiences. This paper illustrates the need for universities to act to create a change of climate and culture rather than finding spaces in the current culture for the diversity of the LGBTQ student community. It also underlines the need for continued research into issues of inclusion and diversity regarding LGBTQ students across disciplines.

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