

‘Some university lecturers wear gay pride t-shirts. Get over it!’: Denials of homophobia and the reproduction of heteronormativity in responses to a gay themed t-shirt

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Victoria Clarke

Abstract

This paper explores an incident involving a gay pride t-shirt, printed with the slogan ‘Some people are gay. Get over it!’, that I wore during a university lecture, and students’ predominantly negative responses to it. I use the lens of ‘modern’ prejudice research, particularly discursive psychological approaches to modern prejudice, to interpret the students’ responses to a qualitative survey about their views on the t-shirt. They related strong feelings of upset and anger, particularly because I had – in their view – implicitly accused them of being homophobic. They passionately refused this supposed accusation on the grounds that ‘everything’s equal now’ and ‘gay people are no different from us’. I argue that the ideological themes of cultural heterosexism and compulsory heterosexuality provide a productive framework for making sense of the students’ responses, as they sanction a rational neo-liberal subject who is both non-homophobic and inculcated into heteronormativity.

Key words: Compulsory heterosexuality; discourse analysis; heteronormativity; homosexuality; neoliberalism; neo-liberalism; modern prejudice; psychology students; qualitative surveys; thematic analysis

Introduction

In this paper, I seek to make sense of an incident centring on a gay themed t-shirt I wore during an undergraduate psychology lecture. The t-shirt was produced by the UK-based

LGBT organisation Stonewall and printed with the slogan ‘Some people are gay. Get over it!’¹ I wore the t-shirt in the first week of the academic year, in the first teaching session of a second-year research methods course (it was the first time I had taught this group of students). I wore the t-shirt without pedagogical or research intent, and assumed that most students would share my amused appreciation of the playful slogan or if they were offended by the t-shirt, because of social norms against the expression of overtly homophobic views (Jowett, 2017; Teal & Conover-Williams, 2016), they would remain silent out of fear of being perceived as homophobic. However, a few days after wearing the t-shirt one of my colleagues, an undergraduate tutor, informed me that the t-shirt was a major point of discussion in a meeting she had had with student representatives, and many reported that they felt upset and offended because I had in their view unwarrantedly accused them of being homophobic. They also questioned why it was necessary for me to declare my sexuality via a t-shirt when heterosexuals do not (feel the need to) make such declarations. Around the same time as wearing the Stonewall t-shirt, I wore a t-shirt with the slogan ‘Make tea, not war’. No students complained about me implicitly accusing them of war mongering. Presumably because this accusation was perceived as implausible, whereas an accusation of homophobia was evidently not. My assumptions about how the students would react to the t-shirt (admittedly not something I had given a great deal of thought) were mistaken. The social unacceptability of being seen to be homophobic meant the students were likely sensitive to a possible accusation of homophobia (Jowett, 2017). At the same time, the social dominance of heterosexuality would probably mean their responses were also saturated with heteronormative assumptions (de Oliveira, Costa & Nogueira, 2013). I was intrigued by the students’ reported reaction to the Stonewall t-shirt and sought ethical approval to survey their views directly.

This incident speaks to a number of themes in LGBT research, including scholarly debates about queer and trans academics coming out in the higher education classroom (Braun & Clarke, 2009; Clarke & Braun, 2009; Khayatt, 1997), and I have examined this incident through the lens of these debates elsewhere (Clarke, 2016). In this paper, I use this incident to examine the discursive and rhetorical practices that reproduce heteronormativity. This paper is informed by reflexive engagements in feminist and queer scholarship (Adams & Jones, 2011; Allen, 2011; Ettore, 2010; McDonald, 2013), and specifically aspects of autoethnography, in the sense that I seek to describe and systematically analyse an incident from my personal experience in order to understand wider socio-cultural themes (Ellis, Adams & Bocher, 2011). This paper is also broadly informed by the project of queer theory, a key aim of which is to explore the processes of privileging and othering that reproduce heterosexuality as “normative, expected and preferred” (Røthing, 2008: 254). My interpretation of the students’ responses to the t-shirt are framed both by social science research on the social and political meanings of gay themed t-shirts and on ‘modern’ prejudice, which I now discuss.

The Gay Pride T-Shirt in Social Science Research

T-shirts printed with gay themed slogans and symbols date from the 1970s, sometimes initially highly coded to protect wearers and sometimes more explicit, and represent a form of embodied political participation, or “body rhetoric” (DeLuca, 1999: 9). By the 1980s, there was a trend for slogans to refer to the bodies and identities of wearers (e.g. ‘We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it’); by the 1990s the popularity of ‘pridewear’ was firmly established and gay apparel companies like *Don’t Panic!* capitalised on queer desires for public visibility – famous *Don’t Panic!* slogans include ‘Nobody knows I’m Gay’ (Penny, 2015). The gay slogan t-shirt has been briefly discussed in a small number of papers in communication, consumer, education and social psychological research.

Penney (2015) provides the only analysis specifically focused on the meanings of gay and lesbian themed t-shirts. He found that his gay and lesbian participants understood t-shirt wearing as (outward and inward facing) communicative acts. T-shirts communicated a pro-gay and lesbian advocacy message and helped create gay and lesbian visibility in public spaces. In these ways t-shirts “potentially transform the social and political perceptions of onlookers” (p. 298). T-shirts were framed as less confrontational than other communication strategies, and as normalising gay and lesbian advocacy messages. Furthermore, the playful and humorous tone of some slogans is potentially disarming and humanising in the presence of hostility. T-shirt wearing was also understood by the participants as explicitly labelling their bodies as gay or lesbian and shoring up their sense of identity and belonging, and creating a sense of unity with other gay men and lesbians. Kates (2000) offered a somewhat different view of gay pride t-shirt wearing (perhaps reflecting the different period in which his research was conducted). One of his participants indicated that t-shirts communicate both pride in same-sex sexuality but also anger at homophobia, and thus are deliberately provocative and intended to trigger a response; such t-shirts are:

queer political battlegear, they're really in your face, and they're used to evoke a reaction, generally, from the straight community. You make a political statement every time you wear them because you're saying 'I'm gay, I'm proud of it, I'm in your face about it,' or in some cases, 'I'm gay, I'm angry, I'm angry at what you have done to my community...

In queer education research, wearing gay pride t-shirts (and badges) has been discussed as a way of coming out in the classroom and thus unsettling the social dominance of heterosexuality. Khayatt (1997) argued that wearing a gay pride t-shirt may not be interpreted as intended: She relates an anecdote about a post-graduate student – a warden in a hall of residence – who wore a t-shirt with the slogan ‘nobody knows I’m gay’ to announce

his sexual identity. Khayatt reports that this t-shirt was unsuccessful in communicating the post-graduate student's gayness: An undergraduate student stopped him and told him that "you really should be careful about what you wear because people are going to think you are gay" (p. 139). This suggests that because of the social dominance of heterosexuality the meaning of gay pride t-shirts is perhaps more ambiguous than Penney's (2013) participants indicated (especially in relation to communicating sexuality), certainly when worn in non-gay contexts.

Social psychologists have used gay pride t-shirts (Gray, Russell & Blockley, 1991; Hendren & Blank, 2009; Tsang, 1994), caps (Hebl, Foster, Mannix & Dovidio, 2002) and badges (Cuenot & Fugita, 1982) to examine the behavioural correlates of homophobic attitudes. Such research has used an experimental design in which a confederate dressed in a gay slogan t-shirt, cap or badge, and the same or another confederate dressed in a plain t-shirt (or one with a 'neutral' slogan such as 'Texan and proud', Hebl et al., 2002), has approached members of the public asking for help, such as requesting change for a parking metre. These studies consistently show that the confederate wearing a gay slogan t-shirt is less likely to be helped than the control confederate. Hegarty and Massey (2006: 58) argued that rather than simply assessing attitudes toward straight and lesbian/gay individuals, such experiments can also be understood as assessing different responses to lesbians/gay men who are 'out' or who 'pass' as heterosexual: "the experiments may be assessing differential reactions to ways of enacting minority sexual identities, rather than differential reactions to members of separate discrete social groups". Furthermore, as Gray et al. (1991: 176; emphasis added) noted in relation to their use of the slogan 'GAY still means HAPPY', some slogans "could also be seen as an espousal of the gay 'cause' by a person who is *not* a homosexual". Altogether, communication, consumer, education and social psychological scholarship suggests that wearing a gay slogan t-shirt is potentially a way to provoke or evoke a disobliging or hostile

response in others but not to unambiguously communicate a queer sexual identity (in a non-queer context).

Discoursing Cultural Heterosexism

My analysis of the students' responses is underpinned by research, particularly discursive research, on what has been dubbed *cultural* heterosexism. Influenced by research on "modern" or "subtle" racism and sexism (e.g., McConahay, 1986: 99; Swim & Cohen, 1997: 103), researchers have examined the operation and effects of "new" (Smith, 1994, 1997: 214) or "covert" homophobia (Teal & Conover-Williams, 2016: 12), "mundane" (Peel, 2001: 541), "cultural" (Brickell, 2005: 86; Herek, 2004) or "modern" heterosexism (Smith & Shin, 2014; Walls, 2008: 20) or homonegativity (Morrison & Morrison, 2011; Morrison, Morrison & Franklin, 2009), and "sexual orientation micro-aggressions" (Nadal, Rivera & Corpus, 2010: 217). The variety of terms used to demarcate this form of heterosexism or homonegativity often reflect different underlying conceptualisations of the phenomena under exploration. This body of research has examined both broader public discourse (e.g. Brickell, 2005; Teal & Conover-Williams, 2016) and more localised instances of discourse and rhetoric (e.g. Kitzinger, 2005a, 2005b; Land & Kitzinger, 2005; Peel, 2005; Jowett, 2017; Speer & Potter, 2000), underpinned by a variety of discursive conceptualisations of prejudice, as well as attitudes (e.g. Harbarth, 2015; Massey, 2009; Morrison & Morrison, 2002; Morrison et al., 2009; Walls, 2008), behaviour and practice (e.g. Nadal et al., 2010), underpinned by conventional social-cognitive conceptualisations of prejudice. What is now referred to as "old-fashioned" (Morrison et al., 2009: 523) or "ontological" homophobia (Brickell, 2005) was founded on the assumption that homosexuals are innately inferior, whereas cultural heterosexism focuses on the relationship between lesbians and gay men and the wider world, and particularly the political threat they pose to the social dominance of heterosexuality (Brickell, 2005). In this paper, following Brickell (2005), I use the terms

cultural heterosexism and ontological homophobia. The binary terms ‘old-fashioned’ and ‘modern’ homophobia or homonegativism can suggest that more overt articulations of prejudice are a relic of the past and have been largely supplanted by more subtle or complex manifestations of prejudice. The terms cultural heterosexism and ontological homophobia instead highlight the distinctive themes and conceptualisations underpinning these different articulations of prejudice.

Research examining the repertoires and rhetoric of cultural heterosexism suggests that contemporary discourse on same-sex sexuality has many thematic and rhetorical similarities with subtle or covert racism (Brickell, 2005; Jowett, 2017). This includes an orientation to social norms against prejudice and the explicit denial of prejudice (Burrige, 2004; Jowett, 2017; Korobov, 2004; O’Hara & Meyer, 2003; Speer & Potter, 2000), the construction of prejudice as perpetrated by others (Clarke, 2005; Jowett, 2017), the reversal of accusations of prejudice (Gough, 1998; Jowett, 2017), highlighting external constraints on the implementation of gay equality (Praat & Tuffin, 1996), and the complicity of libertarian and neo-liberal ideologies in the reproduction of heteronormativity (Brickell, 2001; Ellis, 2001; Jowett, 2017; Peel, 2001; Summers, 2007; Teal & Conover-Williams, 2016). It is important to note that there are also some significant thematic differences between subtle racist and cultural heterosexist discourse, such as the association between religion and homophobia (Jowett, 2017) and, although pro-gay discourse often seeks to frame homosexuality as an ontological state (homosexuals are ‘born that way’) (Teal & Conover-Williams, 2016), and through the use of terms such as ‘sexual minority’ construct lesbians and gay men as a quasi-ethnic group, the ontological status of homosexuality is contested.

I have presented this discursive – cultural heterosexism – analysis of the students’ responses at a number of seminars and more often than not a member of the audience has expressed discomfort about my apparent questioning of the students’ sincerity in positioning

themselves as not homophobic. It is important to clarify that I do not question the student's sincerity (see also Røthing, 2008). On the contrary, I am critical of the assumption in some social-cognitive-based modern heterosexism research that modern heterosexism is simply a 'mask' for old-fashioned homophobia (Eldridge & Johnson, 2011; see also Teal & Conover-Williams, 2016); that old-fashioned homophobes orient to social norms against overt expressions of prejudice and strategically avoid articulating their old-fashioned prejudices. When writing this paper, it was at times tempting to agree with one participant, whose survey responses diverged strongly from the majority, that the other participants were in 'denial' and masking their underlying homophobia ("If anyone had a problem with it [the t-shirt], I feel they're voicing objections to acknowledging existence of gays altogether", P69). However, one compelling insight four decades of discursive research on modern prejudice offers is that not only is there a social norm against overt expressions of prejudice, but overt prejudice is framed as irrational (e.g., Billig, 1988; Van Dijk, 1992a; Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Augoustinos & Every, 2007a). Billig (1988: 96) argued that "social norms cannot merely exist as constraints existing outside of individuals. For social norms to function as social pressures, they must be internalised, and thereby form part of the individual's cognitive beliefs". The 'ambivalent' expression of prejudice is not simply the result of a conflict between the individual and social norms, which would yield ontological homophobes concealing their *real* beliefs beneath more subtle expressions of heterosexism. It is a conflict '*within*' the individual, so people can be simultaneously sincere in their belief that they are not homophobic while – to paraphrase Augoustinos and Every (2010) in their discursive racism research – using the discursive resources of cultural heterosexism to justify negative evaluations of lesbians and gay men. Billig (1988) argued that the fact that subtle prejudice does not only occur when people are on public display provides evidence of the

internalisation of social pressures. He demonstrated that even members of fascist organisations, in their own publications, oriented to social norms around prejudice.

The Current Study

Because a discursive approach to cultural heterosexism does not require I question the sincerity of the students' stated belief that they are not homophobic (irrational), it requires instead an examination of the construction of prejudice, and specifically homophobia, underpinning this belief, something rarely the focus of cultural heterosexism research (Jowett, 2017), and of how the ideological themes of cultural heterosexism work to reinforce heterosexual privilege while simultaneously denying it. The students may not be ontological homophobes, but they are likely to be, as are most people (straight *and* gay; de Oliveira, Costa & Nogueira, 2013), inculcated into the discourses of cultural heterosexism. Thus, in this paper, I interrogate how the students oriented to a possible accusation of homophobia and, drawing on the discourses and rhetorical devices of cultural heterosexism, framed such an accusation as unwarranted and in so doing perpetuated the 'common-sense' conceptualisation of homophobia as located in irrational bigoted individuals who view lesbians and gay men as ontologically inferior (Brickell, 2005; Jowett, 2017).

Method

Surveying Students

To gain a "wide-angle picture" (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004: 89) of the students' responses, I employed the little-used technique of qualitative surveys (for a methodological discussion see Braun & Clarke, 2013; Terry & Braun, 2017). This technique enabled the collection of data from a large group of students in a way that offered greater anonymity than established techniques such as focus groups, and so minimised any potentially threat

associated with participation including pressure to produce socially desirable responses (Jowett & Peel, 2009). A qualitative researcher with expertise in the qualitative survey technique was asked to review the initial survey design and question wording, and some minor adjustments to question wording were made. The 'Views on Victoria's T-shirt' survey contained 6 main questions:

1. What was your initial reaction to Victoria's t-shirt?
2. Why do you think Victoria chose to wear the t-shirt?
3. What, if anything, did you think wearing a t-shirt with the slogan 'Some people are gay. Get over it!' said about Victoria's sexuality? *Please explain your answer.*
4. What else, if anything, did you think wearing the t-shirt said about Victoria? *Please explain your answer.*
5. What advice would you give to Victoria (or other lecturers) about wearing this (or a similar) t-shirt in the future?
6. If you have any other views or thoughts you'd like to share about the t-shirt, please write them down here:

These questions were followed by a mix of tick box and open-ended demographic questions. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of the West of England (UWE) Health and Life Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee. I decided to wear the t-shirt in another second-year research methods lecture just before advertising the study to prompt students' recollections. This proved to be unnecessary, as did including a graphic image of the t-shirt on the participant information sheet – for most of the students, their recollections were vivid; only a few reported that they had not noticed the slogan in the lecture(s). The colleague who alerted me to the students' responses to the t-shirt managed the bulk of the data collection to further minimise any perceived threat associated with participation (this involved little direct interaction with students, however, as the students

mostly collected hard copy surveys from a box outside her office and returned the completed surveys to a collection box). Participants were recruited through the UWE psychology participant pool and the study counted towards the research participation credits second year students were required to accrue. We emphasised that participation was voluntary and separate from any assessment on the research methods course, apart from the small amount of research participation credit.

The participants appeared to be highly motivated, all the initial slots created for survey participation were signed up to within a few days and many wrote detailed responses to the survey questions; some even provided illustrations. Indeed, more than half of the participants responded to the final optional question (Q6), which in my experience of the survey technique is not typical. A total of 99 students – about half of the cohort – completed a ‘paper and pen’ survey. The hand-written responses were typed up and collated by question, and not ‘corrected’ in any way, for the purposes of analysis. The participants were mostly female, white, middle class, heterosexual (3 identified as bisexual, 2 as gay, 1 as lesbian, 1 as other) and able-bodied, reflecting the general profile of psychology students at UWE.

The data were analysed using a social constructionist form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2014), sometimes referred to as thematic discourse analysis (TDA) (Clarke, 2006; Peel, 2001; Taylor & Ussher, 2001). Informed by post-structuralism and a broader understanding of discourse as capturing themes in socio-cultural sense-making, TDA focuses on the constitute role of language, and the repertoires and rhetorical devices underpinning themes, and their ideological effects. Its application here is closest to the discursive approach of Potter and Wetherell (1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Spelling and typographical errors in the data extracts presented below have been corrected to aid readability and comprehension.

Results and discussion

In reporting the results, I focus on the ways in which the t-shirt appeared to threaten the social dominance of heterosexuality in (and beyond) the classroom by challenging the assumptions that ‘everything’s equal now’ and ‘gay people are no different from us’. In particular, I examine how many of the participants framed their reactions to the t-shirt as reasoned and positioned me as irrational. The discursive formations discussed in the results represent the dominant pattern of sense-making in the survey responses and virtually all of the students’ responses drew on these formations to a greater or lesser extent.

‘Everything’s Equal Now’

A few participants did not frame the t-shirt as an accusation: “She appeared to be making a statement to people that I didn’t feel applied to me” (P98). However, echoing my colleague’s discussion with the student representatives, most did: “I felt like it was directly at me because it is so in-your-face” (P38). Unsurprisingly, many framed this (felt) accusation as unwarranted. The most common way of doing this was by claiming that ‘everything’s equal now’ (Brickell, 2001):

I thought it was unnecessary and quite in our faces as society is very accepting to homosexuals & lesbians (P68).

I just wondered why she was wearing it, I don’t think being gay is a big issue in today’s society and so I found it in my face and offensive (P41).

Denials of societal heterosexism work to close down accusations of homophobia and to frame them (or the ‘accuser’) as irrational (Nadal et al., 2010). Indeed, what is offensive here is not societal homophobia (because it does not exist) but Victoria’sⁱⁱ misplaced – and thus irrational – accusation of prejudice. The reference to ‘today’s society’ invokes the liberal

imperative of historical progress (Billig, 1988) and locates homophobia firmly elsewhere – in this instance, in the unenlightened past. As well as denials of societal homophobia, there were also denials of individual and group homophobia, and a defence, and positive presentation, of the ‘in-group’ (Van Dijk, 1992a, 1992b). Furthermore, reports of offense being taken were common:

Thought the t-shirt was insulting to myself due to ‘being over it’ + fully accepting homosexuality. (P99)

I thought the message was quite aggressive and insulting to the majority of us who have absolutely no problem with gay people, it was almost as if it were assumed that we would have a problem with gay people! (P11)

It annoyed me! ...I felt it was too much. I felt that I was almost being accused of being homophobic which annoyed me because I am not. (P50)

Similar to the discursive management of accusations of racism (Riggs & Due, 2010), the discursive management of accusations of homophobia here draws on discourses of rationality and equality to position those supposedly accused of homophobia as devoid of homophobic intent. Through such denials, the participants situated themselves, and their group, as constitutionally incapable of homophobia and as rational people who understand that homophobia is bad, and implicitly positioned Victoria as irrational for making such a misplaced accusation. These accounts framed anti-gay prejudice as the result of (individual) intentions (‘having a problem with gay people’); if someone is not homophobic on the inside, they are not capable of homophobic acts. Furthermore, constitutional homophobia is framed as an aberration or exception (‘the *majority* of us... have absolutely no problem’) and is understood in terms of a belief that ‘homosexuals’ are inferior; homophobia equals old-fashioned homophobia (Van Dijk, 1992a). Homophobia is seen as something exceptional

rather than a normative social practice that privileges heterosexuality and rewards conformity to the norms of compulsory heterosexuality. Just as the construction of racism as perpetrated by aberrant individuals elides the relationship between racial privilege and disadvantage (Riggs & Due, 2010), here, the framing of heterosexism as the product of individual homophobic intensions “erases the ways in which heterosexuality is privileged and obligatory” (Brickell, 2005: 91). Heterosexuality is seen as a space free of power relations (Brickell, 2005) – hence only challenges to this dominant position, and not heterosexuality itself, are viewed as politicised. In line with existing research on university students’ subtle heterosexism (Clarke, 2006; Ellis, 2001), many participants positioned themselves – and psychology students and/or their generation in general – as not only free from prejudice, but also as ‘liberal’ and pro-equality (i.e. as belonging to groups not typically associated with homophobia, Jowett, 2017):

I found the t-shirt offensive and insulting mainly because it was presented to the ‘least likely to be biased about sexuality’ psychology cohort. (P90)

It felt a little like we were expected to have a problem with people who are gay, which annoyed me a little as I feel this generation particularly doesn’t assume it to be a problem (with, of course, some exceptions – but none that I know). (P96)

The statement was unnecessary for this day + age. The majority of students in the lecture hall were female + of the younger generation and ‘are over it’ so the statement went without saying. (P99)

Here again homophobia is located elsewhere – outside of the ‘lecture hall’, in the past (rather than ‘this day + age’), with older generations, with non-psychology students and with men. There is an implicit contrast between the participant, and their group, and the homophobic other (Clarke, 2005). P96 concedes that there may be ‘some exceptions’ to the

rule that the younger generation is not homophobic, but these are so rare that she does not know of any. This formulation emphasises the notion that homophobia – in the younger generation at least – is an aberration. Furthermore, P90 situates their group as not only ‘unbiased’, but “the least likely to be biased”. This extremised framing (Pomerantz, 1986) serves to implicitly underscore the irrationality of Victoria’s misplaced accusation.

Furthermore, a number of these extracts invoke a “presumed and collective heterosexuality” (Røthing, 2008: 260), and “gay people” (P11) are positioned as other (e.g. “the majority of us who have absolutely no problem with gay people” [P11], “we were expected to have a problem with people who are gay” [P90]). These participants spoke as one united heterosexual ‘we’ and implicitly conceptualised ‘gay people’ as somewhere else, outside of the ‘lecture hall’, as well as different from ‘us’. Such rhetoric produces and maintains the otherness of gays people and the normativity and social dominance of heterosexuality. Heterosexuality is normalised by being constituted as the centre (Fuss, 1991a), while same-sex sexuality is marginalised by being placed outside and somewhere else.

These accounts also suggest that unwarranted accusations of homophobia are offensive. Indeed, making an unwarranted accusation of prejudice could be interpreted as a prejudicial act – the unjustified attribution of negative characteristics to a group of individuals – or at the very least as intolerant and divisive (Van Dijk, 1992a). It appears that just as there is a social taboo against making accusations of racism (Augoustinos & Every, 2007a; Van Dijk, 1992a), there is a social taboo against making accusations of homophobia – certainly in some contexts (Jowett, 2017), such as in the supposedly ‘liberal’ environment of the university classroomⁱⁱⁱ. Furthermore, just as accusations of racism are met with vigorous denials, expressions of moral outrage and “often treated as more extreme than racism itself”

(Augoustinos & Every, 2010: 251), accusations of homophobia are met with a similar response.

Reverse accusations are a common feature of racist discourse (Billig, 1988; Van Dijk, 1992b). Numerous studies have documented negative characterisations of anti-racists and counter-accusations of intolerance and racism against whites, and the concomitant silencing and dismissal of attempts to identify and make accountable racist practices in contemporary race discourse (Augoustinos & Every, 2010). Because racism and sexism do not explicitly assign their objects it is possible for white people and men to respectively claim they are victims of racism and sexism – any prejudice on the basis of race or sex could be seen as racist or sexist; however, heterosexuals cannot claim to be victims of homophobia (Wickberg, 2000), there is little scope for the claim of ‘reverse homophobia’. Terms such as ‘heterophobia’ or “heteronegativism” are rarely used in the academic literature (for an exception, see White & Franzini, 1999: 65), let alone in the wider culture. It is unsurprising then that the participants struggled to name ‘prejudice against the heterosexual’ (Peel, 2001), but nonetheless in denying the accusation of prejudice, a few did make counter-accusations of prejudice.

The t-shirt was constructed by a few as so extreme it was an attack on heterosexuality: “unnecessarily directing this statement at us (I don’t know anyone in our lectures who is homophobic). It seems an opposite extreme to homophobia” (P87). Within this, Victoria was positioned as intolerant, illiberal, narrow-minded, a threat to the participant’s individualism (Brickell, 2000; Jowett, 2017):

Closed minded, someone set in her ways that wouldn’t take into account someone else’s view. (P45)

Quite a narrow minded person, trying to get everyone to think in a certain way & that we should all share the same views. (P167)

This reversal “epitomizes the inversion that lies at the heart of cultural heterosexist discourse: the marginal has become the tyrannical oppressor” (Brickell, 2005: 95). By wearing the t-shirt, and making an unfounded accusation of homophobia, Victoria persecuted an innocent group. This counter-accusation of intolerance relies on a repudiation of the specific ways in which lesbians and gay men remain socially marginalised, and reinforces heterosexual privilege while simultaneously denying it (Clarke, 2005; Riggs & Due, 2010).

Another common theme in the students’ responses was that the t-shirt was ineffective in reducing prejudice; instead, it was framed as “aggressive” (P36) and counterproductive, “divisive rather than persuasive” (P95). The most likely effect of the t-shirt was in fact provoking and increasing homophobia, rather than challenging and reducing it:

It was as though she had an issue with it and wanted to create a situation/issue. (P31)

She could also have been wearing it to create an argument, as I felt like saying, yes they are – you get over it! And stop making a big deal about it. (P45)

She is almost asking for someone to make a big deal of it. (P26)

These accounts locate heterosexism in Victoria’s mind, as almost a figment of the Victoria’s imagination, something more imagined than real (Augoustinos & Every, 2007b). The problem here is not heterosexism, but Victoria’s ‘attitude’ and her psychological need to *create* a problem when none existed (Van Dijk, 1992a). Indeed, some participants indicated that the t-shirt had been divisive creating ‘negative thoughts’ and a ‘hostile response’ in the student group:

I found it caused more negative thoughts than would have been there. (P44)

As by wearing this t-shirt she obviously doesn't think people are over it, when in fact the audience she presented it to were all probably over it. Therefore over exaggerating a non-existent problem. No doubt resulting in a hostile response from students as it did myself. (P99)

These accounts, again, position Victoria as irrational, and as an extremist, distorting issues of equality (Riley, 2001). Although some participants described Victoria as 'open-minded', more often she was presented as nursing a grievance:

I think people who would wear something like that have a chip on their shoulder... If the aim of the t-shirt was to reduce discrimination I don't think it would work as it only separates homosexuals from the crowd. (P45)

It just gave the impression that she had a really bad chip on her shoulder and quite an aggressive attitude. (P26)

An 'all the worlds against me' approach. (P61)

The implication that Victoria is overly sensitive, she has "a chip on her shoulder" (and not only this but an extreme case formulated "really bad chip on her shoulder", Pomerantz, 1986) has strong echoes of modern racist discourse, a common theme of which is to present non-white people as being overly sensitive or making unreasonable demands. As Van Dijk (1997: 52) argued: "Blaming minorities for imagining or exaggerating racist events is part of a well-known strategy of marginalizing dissidence and problematizing minorities".

'Gay People Are No Different From Us'

A common device in modern prejudice discourse is 'splitting' (Nairn & McCreanor, 1991), constructing a distinction and contrast between good and bad members of socially marginalised groups (Augoustinos & Every, 2007b; Lynn & Lea, 2003). The 'good' are those

who assimilate to dominant norms, the bad those who do not (Riley, 2001). This ‘divide and rule’ strategy (Smith, 1997) precludes any examination of the practices and norms of the dominant group and allows the speaker to fend off accusations of prejudice. There is similarly a ‘good homosexual/dangerous queer’ binary in cultural heterosexism discourse (de Oliveira et al., 2013; Smith, 1994; Teal & Conover-Williams, 2016). The good gay is ‘just like everyone else’ (they are ‘part of the crowd’ [P45]) and adheres to the social privileging of heterosexuality and imperatives of liberal individualism (Marzullo, 2011) within heteronormative discourses. The good gay has integrated their sexuality into their identity such that it forms a ‘trivial’ difference; moreover, they keep their sexuality private. Dangerous queers are those who “flaunt” (P22) or are “militant” (P47) about their identity and are threatening to heteronorms (de Oliveira et al., 2013; Hicks, 2000). In many of the students’ accounts, an implicit contrast between acceptable and unacceptable forms of same-sex sexuality was invoked, and Victoria was often positioned as a ‘bad gay’. It appeared that in wearing the t-shirt, she had allowed her sexuality to become her ‘master status’ identity (Becker, 1963), eclipsing all other aspects of her identity, and marking her out as different from ‘everyone else’. In response to the question ‘what advice would you offer to Victoria about wearing this t-shirt in the future?’, P98 counselled:

you shouldn’t let your sexuality define you, i.e. Wearing clothes that send the message that you are one thing i.e. ‘Gay’ as there are more aspects to your personality than sexuality, i.e. I don’t feel the need to tell people that who I am as a straight person.

Here calling attention to the existence of same-sex sexuality is equated with affording it a master status. This account overlooks the ways in which a heteronormative social context privileges heterosexuality and others same-sex sexuality (thus the simple act of naming same-sex sexuality becomes a potential threat to heterosexual privilege); heterosexuality does not

need to be ‘told’ because it is everywhere and assumed (Røthing, 2008). Other participants similarly noted the ‘emphasis’ Victoria appeared to place on (her presumed) same-sex sexuality:

That being gay is a big part of who she is. In a way it seemed like she wanted to identify herself as being gay to everyone they met. (P98)

Probably a bitter, defensive lesbian, or close to/sympathetic to gays. A little bit obsessive about this topic. (P84)

As Hegarty and Massey (2006) suggested, wearing a gay slogan t-shirt equated to an ‘open display of homosexuality’, and removed same-sex sexuality from where it belongs in liberal discourse – the private sphere (Brickell, 2000). Moreover, acknowledging the existence of same-sex sexuality is positioned as tantamount to an obsession with it. The extremitised framing of P98’s response – “*big part of who she is*” and “*identify herself as being gay to everyone*” – positions Victoria as overly investment in her (presumed) same-sex sexuality. Such accounts invert the assumed accusation of homophobia into the problem of Victoria’s attitude. Her ‘obsession’ becomes the source of trouble rather than homophobia because it does not exist. This inversion has echoes of the construction of anti-racists as ‘out of touch’ with reality and very nearly ‘crazy’ (the ‘loony left’ of the British tabloids) (Augoustinos & Every, 2007b). A few heterosexual participants invoked their experiential authority (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1997) or ally status (Teal & Conover-Williams, 2016), and ventriloquised the views of their gay friends and family members (Jowett, 2017), to position Victoria as atypical in this regard and distinct from ‘normal gay folk’:

I actually know from personal experience that they [gay people] do not like/want to promote it. (P24)

I don't go around wearing a t-shirt saying 'some people are straight – get over it.' My sister is a lesbian, but does not feel the need to make a song a dance about it! (P25)

Such ventriloquising works to further frame the felt accusation of homophobia as unwarranted (common sense dictates that those who know gay people, and know them well enough to understand what they like, want and feel, cannot be homophobes, Jowett, 2017), and has echoes of the classic disclaimer against accusations of racial prejudice – 'Some of my best friends are black' – identified in research on modern racism (e.g. Billig et al., 1988). Furthermore, whereas bad gays like Victoria 'promote' and 'make a song and dance' about her same-sex sexuality, other gay people are appropriately quiet about their sexual difference and keep their sexuality where it belongs (Brickell, 2000). The implication is that a (public) gay identity, and identity politics, political positions founded on social group membership, more broadly (Riley, 2001), are divisive –they are threatening to the status quo (Augoustinos & Every, 2001a), which is implicitly framed as liberal and tolerant. One gay male participant explicitly drew a distinction between 'promosexuals', like Victoria, who flaunt their sexuality and 'normal' gay folk:

Being homosexual myself I feel that 'promosexuals' give the more 'normal' of us a bad name. The Gay Pride movement and Stonewall has done some marvellous work in promoting equality. It is very rare that I experience any negativity about my sexuality. It is this stereotypical image of gay men being 'queens' and 'butch' lesbians that needs to be eradicated. If more people realised that not all of us gay folk are flaunting our sexuality then the acceptability could be more widespread... I just think that overt statements made during gay pride, and Stonewall logos, don't help. (P47)

This gay male participant^{iv}, like the heterosexual participants, frames homophobia ("negativity") as 'very rare'. This claim has extra rhetorical weight as he 'speaks as a

homosexual’, the target of homophobia, and explicitly evokes his experiential authority (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1997). The barrier to acceptance for ‘gay folk’ is not homophobia but ‘promosexuals’ who insist on flaunting their same-sex sexuality (difference), deviating from gender norms, and needlessly antagonising heterosexuals (Nardi, 2000). This account has echoes of research on perceptions of homosexual appearance conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, which examined ‘why gay men and lesbians are disliked’ (e.g., Laner & Laner, 1979, 1980); lesbians and gay men with a conventionally gendered (heterosexual) appearance were less disliked than gay ‘queens’ and ‘butch’ lesbians. Like P47, Laner and Laner (1980) concluded that gay men and lesbians should (strategically) adopt a gender-conforming and conventional appearance to achieve public acceptance of homosexuality.

By praising the gay pride movement and Stonewall P47 mitigates his criticism of their use of provocative ‘overt statements’. Some psychologists would probably label this participant as suffering from ‘internalised homophobia’ – “the homosexual internalises the social phobia and hatred projected by the heterosexual world and comes to loathe himself” (Wickberg, 2000: 56) – or ‘sissyphobia’, a specific subtype of internalised homophobia, centring on negativity towards feminine gay men or ‘queens’ (Bergling, 2001). Such attitudinal constructs overlook the social privileging of heterosexuality and the implications this has for both heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals (de Oliveira et al., 2013). Same-sex sexuality does not insulate people from being inculcated into discourses of heteronormativity; both straight *and* gay people negotiate their identities in public contexts which encourage conformity to compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980). For example, de Oliveira et al. (2013) examined how LGBT people in Portugal, drew on notions of good gays and dangerous queers to frame public displays of affection between same-sex partners as at times ‘excessive’ and representing a demand for something surpassing equality. Furthermore, they indicated that gay people should potentially constrain their displays of affection if it makes

(heterosexual) others uncomfortable. De Oliveira et al. (2013) argue that heteronormativity, and conformity to compulsory heterosexuality, works through Foucault's (1977) notion of the *panopticon*, where individuals regulate and control their own practices.

The notion that the problem is gay people who *refuse* to be 'normal', reinforces heteronormativity, while simultaneously denying its existence. Victoria's calling attention to her (presumed) group membership (by making 'overt statements'), or the notion that we're not all the same, is framed as negative and not something that normal (gay) people do (Riley, 2001). Identity politics are here presented as illegitimate – equality is constructed in opposition to difference; equality means fitting into 'normal' society, and assimilating to the heterosexual norm, not being queens and butches. Gay people's insistence on seeing themselves as different was presented as incomprehensible by the egalitarian minded participant:

I don't see people who are gay as different so I don't understand why they do.

Wearing the t-shirt made me think that Victoria was trying to make an issue out of sexuality and she was the one with the issue and they needed to get over it. (P31)

Underpinned by liberal principles of sameness (the 'one people' theme, McCreanor, 1993), this account conceals the impact of social categories and positions Victoria as an illegitimate 'politics of difference' advocate (Riley, 2001), 'making an issue out of sexuality' where none exists. The notion that 'minority' groups seek "an authoritarian imposition of 'special rights' into an otherwise 'egalitarian' society" (Smith, 1997: 230) is a common feature of modern prejudice discourse. Victoria's declaring and flaunting of her (presumed) sexuality was also presented as incomprehensible and an act of 'difference':

I'm proud of my sexuality but I don't find it necessary to tell everyone that I fancy boys. Because frankly, no one else would care. (P26)

I don't wear a t-shirt saying: 'I'm not gay. Get over it!' so I don't think it's necessary to wear t-shirts saying something about gays. (P161)

I also felt that people don't flaunt on t-shirts that they're straight so what is the need? (P22)

These accounts ignore the ways in which the heterosexual assumption renders coming out unnecessary for straights as it is normatively assumed: 'heterosexuality is invisibly visible. Heterosexuality is visible in that it is (often) all there is, yet it is also invisible in that it is not recognised *as* heterosexuality... heterosexuality is unmarked within the social and spatial order, whereas homosexuality is marked' (Brickell, 2000: 166).

Furthermore, heterosexual coming out and 'flauntings' of sexuality remain unnoticed, unmarked as declarations of sexuality. Related to the characterisations of Victoria as 'heterophobic' and intolerant, they were often positioned as a 'mind Nazi' (or "gay Nazi" [P34]), seeking to police the thoughts of heterosexuals (Brickell, 2005; Jowett, 2017). Here we see another inversion – the gay subject becomes powerful and tyrannical and the heterosexual is coerced and oppressed (Brickell, 2000). The students effectively positioned themselves as ordinary (tolerant) individuals who required protection from the gay tyrant (Victoria) who sought to police their thoughts (Brickell, 2005). Such claims have strong echoes of accounts of anti-racists visiting fascism on ordinary British citizens (Van Dijk, 1992a). The fact that Victoria occupied a position of power in relation to the students only served to increase the oppressive power of her 'thought policing' – indeed, some portrayed wearing the t-shirt as Victoria taking advantage of her position as lecturer and over-stepping the boundaries of what is appropriate conduct for a lecturer:

I feel this method is too insulting... students in the lecture were given no option. (P25)

I am interested in the work Victoria has done in the subject but did not feel it gave her the right to tell me what to think through her t-shirt. (P50)

This echoes Brickell's (2005: 95-96) claim that heterosexual norms and "the minds of those upholding it are at risk from the totalitarian impulses of 'politicized' lesbians and gay men". Victoria had "shoved" (P61), "pushed" (P75) and "impose[d]" (P44) her views on the students. Such accounts are underpinned by a discourse of invasion (Brickell, 2001) – Victoria is forcing a politicisation of the private (homotolerant and liberal) heterosexual mind. Furthermore, in wearing the t-shirt in a classroom, Victoria had disrupted the supposedly 'neutral' space of the classroom:

For a lecturer (a 'public person') this is not appropriate. It's like we don't have any religious symbols in the lecture rooms. No-one should be prioritised. (P161)

A t-shirt stating strong 'BNP' political views may be inappropriate if giving a lecture. (P37)

I didn't think it was very professional as Victoria is a teacher & so wearing something like that isn't very neutral. (P167)

Such accounts implicitly elide the 'neutral' with the heteronormative, and overlook the silent prioritising of heterosexuality within the public sphere, and in higher education in particular (Epstein, O'Flynn & Telford, 2003). This alignment of heterosexuality with the 'neutral', rationale and objective and same-sex sexuality with the political and subjective is one of the ways in which heterosexual privilege is rearticulated and cemented. Furthermore, P37 implicitly positions the slogan 'Some people are gay. Get over it!' as extreme and on a par with the views and slogans of the British National Party.

Conclusions

The students' responses to the survey are a compelling illustration of Swim, Scott, Sechrist, Campbell and Stangor's (2003: 944) argument that:

Accusing someone of being prejudiced or implying that someone's behavior reflects prejudice are judgments that are likely to evoke strong emotional reactions on the part of the person being accused... [there is] a cultural perception that prejudice is evil, and this perception makes it offensive to have oneself or one's behaviors labeled as prejudiced.

This analysis shows the stake that both dominant and (some) marginalised group members have in maintaining the status quo – in this instance, the social privileging of heterosexuality (de Oliveira et al., 2013; Riggs & Due, 2010) – and the subtle and complex ways they enact this. The construction of prejudice as always somewhere else (Van Dijk, 1992a), and a framing of prejudice in terms of individual intentions and beliefs in ontological inferiority, overlook the institutional and everyday manifestations of heterosexism (Riggs & Due, 2010). This is one of the fundamental ways in which heterosexual privilege becomes invisible.

Psychological research on cultural heterosexism or 'modern homonegativity' is dominated by a socio-cognitive approaches and attempts to develop valid and reliable measures of heterosexuals' attitudes toward gay men and lesbians (e.g. Harbarth, 2015; Massey, 2009; Morrison & Morrison, 2003; Walls, 2008). The assumption being that older measures cannot meaningfully assess the more complex and 'ambivalent' manifestations of contemporary prejudice against gay men and lesbians (Massey, 2009). Although some social-cognitive researchers present old-fashioned homophobia and modern homonegativism as distinct phenomena (Morrison & Morrison, 2002), modern homonegativism is often explicitly and *implicitly* viewed as merely masking old-fashioned homophobia; the

expression of prejudice has changed but not the underlying belief in the inferiority of homosexuals (Eldridge & Johnson, 2011; Walls, 2008). Heterosexuals have learnt to conceal their prejudices and express them in more subtle and indirect ways. For example, Morrison and Morrison (2002) found that participants who were high in modern homonegativity were less likely to sit next to a confederate wearing a gay slogan t-shirt when they could justify this choice on non-prejudiced grounds. Thus, they argued that their Modern Homonegativity Scale provides a more accurate attitudinal measure of homophobia, particularly in contexts and groups in which social desirability is a concern (see also Massey, 2009; Walls, 2008).

Because *discursive* cultural heterosexism research shifts the focus from cognition to discourse, the analytic interest is in the various themes and tropes that constitute different discursive formations of prejudice (Potter & Wetherell, 1987); a distinction between underlying cognition and the expression and articulation of prejudice is not meaningful within a discursive approach. From a social-cognitive perspective, it is possible to question the students' sincerity in positioning themselves as not homophobic; from a discursive perspective, there is no reason to question this because the analytic interest is elsewhere. Furthermore, whereas in social-cognitive research, typically gay men and lesbians are viewed as the *targets* of modern homonegativism and heterosexuals the *perpetrators*, a discursive approach allows for both heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals' enmeshment in heteronormative discourses. Thus, I hope this paper, alongside other discursive cultural heterosexism research, demonstrates the value of a discursive approach to the on-going examination of cultural heterosexism.

Challenging heteronormativity?

The analysis in this paper supports existing findings from both social-cognitive and discursive research that although public discourse around same-sex sexuality has in many

contexts shifted from overtly homophobic to homotolerant (Røthing, 2008), the heteronormative privileging of heterosexuality and the othering of same-sex sexuality remains intact. How do we challenge this? Jowett (2017) offers a rather pessimistic assessment of attempting to shift public discourse away from individualised notions of the homophobe and toward more nuanced conceptualisations of homophobia; he argues that rebuttals to (presumed) accusations and counter-accusations would still be offered.

To answer the question of how we challenge the reproduction of heteronormativity, I end this paper with some brief reflections on how this incident has shaped my own teaching practice. I was somewhat chastened by this incident and the intimate acquaintance with the extent of students' inculcation in heteronormativity it entailed. As I have discussed elsewhere (Clarke, 2016), the students complained via their student representatives and on the course evaluation about my use of [too many] LGBT examples in my teaching on the course and provided some rather negative personal assessments of me in the end-of-year course evaluation (I was described as, among other things, “‘despicable’, ‘biased’, ‘sexist’, ‘offensive’ and ‘selfish’”, Clarke, 2016: 4); I have certainly not worn the t-shirt since. However, I have drawn on the incident, and some of the data presented here, in teaching students about the workings of modern prejudice. More generally, when teaching about gender, sexuality, social justice and difference, I talk about my own experiences of social privilege and complicity in reproduction of norms of, for example, whiteness and middle classness, and invite them to reflect on the ways which they too are complicit. I attempt to shift the discussion away from individual intentionality to social systems and processes in which we are all enmeshed. I also focus more on the social privileging of heterosexuality and less on homophobia and heterosexism. As such my teaching practice has become more informed by insights from queer theory (e.g. Butler, 1990; Fuss, 1991b; Sedgwick, 1990; Warner, 1993). When seen through this lens, and based on what they are willing to articulate

in class, the students I teach seem to find the data rather shocking, but also struggle to see it as anything other than a mask for underlying homophobia. This suggests that Billig's (1988) argument about the internalisation of social norms, and the need to see oneself as a 'good' and rational person, remains as salient as ever. The 'bogey' figure of the ontological homophobe is a necessary component of the discursive negotiation of a non-prejudiced identity. This means, I share some of Jowett's pessimism. Furthermore, this incident seems to support the argument of queer theorists that naming homosexuality shores up heteronormativity (Fuss, 1991a). In the immediate aftermath of the incident, I discussed with my colleague who first alerted me to the students' responses to the t-shirt, many other potential t-shirt 'wearings' (e.g. how would they respond to a male lecturer they know to be straight wearing the t-shirt?). The one possibility we did not discuss, and based on this experience the one that has perhaps the most potential to at least interrupt heteronormativity, is a t-shirt identifying the wearing as heterosexual (Allen, 2011). The perceptive reader may have noticed that I have not named my sexuality in this paper; however, the reviewers of this paper almost all assumed I *am* queer/gay/lesbian. I invite readers of *The Journal of Homosexuality* to reflect on what assumptions they made about my sexuality when reading this paper, and what this reveals about social formations of sexuality.

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ⁱ The t-shirt was produced by the UK lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans charity Stonewall and printed with the now familiar in the UK slogan 'Some people are gay. Get over it!' It was initially used to promote Stonewall's 'education for all' campaign focused on preventing and challenging homophobic bullying in schools but was subsequently more widely adopted, including in the campaign for marriage equality.

ⁱⁱ I refer to myself in the third person in the results not to conform to a 'objective' style of writing but to mark a distinction between Victoria-the-discursive-object of the students' survey responses and Victoria-the-scholar and author of this paper.

ⁱⁱⁱ Although the reaction to the charity Stonewall's 'bigot of the year' award (including in the Stonewall annual awards ceremony from 2007-2013) suggests that even vocal opponents of gay rights such as conservative Christians and right-wing politicians do not welcome accusations of homophobia (see Jowett, 2017; Teal & Conover-Williams, 2016).

^{iv} Overall, there were no pronounced differences in the responses of the heterosexual-identified and LGB-identified students.