

Observation & Commentary

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Wearing a gay slogan t-shirt in the higher education classroom: A cautionary tale

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Abstract

Evidence from numerous studies suggests that homophobia and heterosexism remain common on university campuses. Since the 1970s LGBT academics have been encouraged to 'put themselves on the line' and 'come out' in the classroom, and in so doing empower LGBT students and provide them with positive role models. Wearing gay pride badges and t-shirts has been discussed as one way in which gay lecturers can 'come out' and challenge homophobia. This paper explores psychology students' reactions to a gay slogan t-shirt I wore in an undergraduate lecture, and considers whether wearing such t-shirts is an effective and productive way of challenging heterosexism and coming out in the classroom.

Key words: Coming out; compulsory heterosexuality; heteronormativity; heterosexism; homophobia; psychology students; qualitative surveys; thematic analysis

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Out of the Closet and into the Classroom

Education researchers have noted a pervasive 'hidden curriculum of heteronormativity' within higher education (Epstein, O'Flynn & Telford, 2003). Research has documented a 'chilly climate' for both LGBT students and staff on many university campuses (e.g., Ellis,

2009; Taulke-Johnson, 2010). Since the 1970s, there has been much reflection and research on the personal, political and pedagogical benefits of LGBT-identified academics 'coming out' in educational contexts, including the higher education classroom (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2009; Clarke & Braun, 2009; Khayatt, 1999; Silin, 1999; Waldo & Kemp, 1997). Coming out is argued to be 'empowering' for the educator and facilitates authenticity in the classroom (e.g., Gates, 2011; Orlov & Allen, 2014; Sapp, 2001; Smith & Yost, 2009). It also provides LGBT students with a much needed positive role model, and challenges the heterosexual assumption and thus reduces homophobic prejudice (see Johnson, 2009; Khayatt, 1997; Liddle, 2009). Furthermore, a number of educators have commented on the pedagogical benefits of coming out, including opportunities for building relationships with students and thus creating effective learning environments, and facilitating critical thinking (e.g., Cress, 2009; Gates, 2011; Johnson, 2009). *How to come out* – from declarative statements to the wearing of gay pride badges and t-shirts – has also been a focus of discussion, particularly for those who do not conform to any obvious queer visual norms (Williams, 2009).

Declarative statements (e.g., 'I am a lesbian'), in particular, have been framed as the only coming out strategy that really counts (Khayatt, 1997).

Khayatt (1997) has both critiqued the notion that 'only a declarative coming out counts' for ignoring the instabilities and ambivalences of sexual identities and questioned whether indirect 'comings out' such as wearing a gay slogan t-shirt will be interpreted as the wearer intended. She related an anecdote about a postgraduate student – a warden in a hall of residence - who wore a t-shirt with the slogan 'nobody knows I'm gay' to announce his queer sexuality. This coming out was unsuccessful: an undergraduate student in his hall of residence stopped him and told him that 'you really should be careful about what you wear because people are going to think you are gay' (1997: 139). Despite such reservations about

the effectiveness of some coming out strategies, coming out in educational settings, including universities, is more often than not optimistically framed. Indeed, Rasmussen (2004) argued that such is the emphasis on coming out as a political and pedagogical tool in educational contexts that there is now a coming out imperative; not coming out is viewed as an abdication of responsibility on the part of the LGBT educator. Ramussen, like Khayatt (1997), questioned the privileging of discourses of coming out and the ways in which this ignores the complexities of coming out for some and the fluidity of sexual identities.

In this paper, I consider one of the complexities of coming out by exploring the ways in which straight *and* queer students are complicit in, and promote, compulsory heterosexuality in higher education. I do so by examining an incident in which I interrupted the heteronormative space of the classroom by wearing a gay slogan t-shirt in a second year psychology research methods lecture. Although some of the students suspected I wore the t-shirt for an experiment, I wore it without pedagogical or research intent – it was ‘just’ a clothing choice. This paper provides a reflection on and brief empirical examination of students’ responses to the t-shirt. The t-shirt, and my use of LGBT examples in research methods teaching, provoked a wave of complaints and hostility from students, which culminated in some negative and personalised end-of year teaching evaluations: I was described as, among other things, ‘despicable’, ‘biased’, ‘sexist’, ‘offensive’ and ‘selfish’.

The t-shirt was produced by the lesbian, gay and bisexual charity Stonewall and printed with the (now familiar) slogan ‘Some people are gay. Get over it!’ I have experienced both overt homophobia from students and resistance to the inclusion of LGBT concerns and critical discussions of heterosexuality in psychology teaching. However, I assumed that most 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 (Clarke, 2005), they would remain silent. I did not wear the t-shirt with the intent of communicating my sexuality to students, but was aware that some might assume I was queer. I do not typically come out in a declarative way in teaching, in part because I share Khayatt's (1997) and Rasmussen's (2004) concerns about the ways in which discourses of coming out elide the fluidity of sexuality. It is very easy for the curious student to establish whether or not I am queer by reading one of my publications as I 'out' myself as non-heterosexual in most of these. I have also been told that my research and teaching interests lead students to speculate about my sexuality. In teaching qualitative research I often discuss my sexuality as something that informs my standpoint as a researcher – for example, as a lens that shapes my interpretation of data. When I talk about this, I do so as if I am 'already out'; I do not frame this as 'news' (Williams, 2009). A few days after I wore the t-shirt one of my colleagues, the second year undergraduate tutor, informed me that it was a major point of discussion in a meeting she had had with the second year student representatives. Many of them reported feeling upset and offended by the t-shirt, and my decision to wear it, and thought that I had accused them of being homophobic.

In collecting data from the students, I aimed to explore whether the t-shirt was perceived as unambiguously communicating my queer sexuality. I also wanted to investigate whether wearing the t-shirt was a productive way to challenge heterosexism in the classroom, and in so doing, examine some of the complexities of coming out in the classroom.

Surveying Students

A short qualitative survey (with six main questions) provided an accessible and economical way of delivering a 'wide-angle lens' on the views of the students (Toerien & Wilkinson,

2004). The survey also maximised anonymity and thus reduced pressures to produce socially desirable responses. The questions focused on the participants' reactions to the t-shirt and what they thought it communicated about me (including my sexuality). After receiving ethical approval for the impromptu study, I wore the t-shirt again to prompt the students' recollections, which proved to be unnecessary; the students' recollections were vivid. Students who had attended one of the lectures in which I wore the t-shirt were recruited through the UWE psychology participant pool and 99 (about a third of the cohort) completed the survey. The students who completed the survey were – reflecting the general profile of UWE psychology students – mostly female, white, middle class, able-bodied and heterosexual. Only 7 reported an LGB or 'other' identification (3 bisexual, 2 gay, 1 lesbian, 1 other).

Reactions to the t-shirt were mixed: a few participants recognised the slogan; some thought it was 'funny' (P7) and had the amused reaction I had anticipated ('it made me smile', P56); others thought it was 'aggressive' (P95) and 'in your face' (P104). Many reported feeling 'surprised' (P7) or even 'shocked' (P43) to see a lecturer wearing such a t-shirt. In general the t-shirt was viewed as 'bold' (P38), and some participants reported that it had been a talking point among the second year psychology students:

I was surprised how much the t-shirt had an impact on everyone in the lecture, I heard lots of people talking about it. This just shows what a sensitive message was portrayed on the t-shirt. (P38)

Some assumed or speculated that the t-shirt was part of a 'one big experiment' (P51). I debriefed the participants about the study and clarified that I did not originally wear the t-shirt as part of a research project. The fact that I did not mention the t-shirt was reported to

be a source of confusion: 'I was so confused by the message... more so because Victoria did not mention it the whole lecture' (P168).

The data suggest that wearing a gay slogan t-shirt is an effective way to make homosexuality visible in the classroom and invite students to question or contemplate a lecturer's sexuality, particularly if the lecturer does not conform to any obvious queer appearance norms:

It did prompt thought on & discussion about her sexuality which probably wouldn't have otherwise been there. (P9)

If she hadn't worn the t-shirt I wouldn't have speculated if she was gay or not. (P44)

However, as existing scholarship suggests, wearing a gay slogan t-shirt is not an effective way to definitively communicate a queer identity. Only some were confident that I was queer: 'Why is this woman being so explicit about the fact that she is gay?' (P51).

Furthermore, just a few thought I had worn the t-shirt as a way of coming out (indirectly): 'to show everyone she's gay and there for 'get over it' with no gossip' (P22). Interestingly, only a minority (10) of participants mentioned the possibility of me being bisexual, including two of the three bisexual participants, reflecting the socio-cultural invisibility of bisexuality and the dominance of a binary hetero/homo model of sexuality (Hayfield, Clarke & Halliwell, 2014). A few clearly sought other 'data' and mentioned my water bottle (which featured the logo for the New York-based 'Big Gay Ice Cream' company) – 'that t-shirt and her flask (gay charity)' (P33) – or the fact that I 'repeatedly' (P28) wore the t-shirt as evidence that I am 'clearly gay' (P33). Wearing the t-shirt twice was framed as wearing it 'a lot' (P28). Thus the threshold for wearing a gay-slogan t-shirt 'repeatedly' or 'a lot' is relatively low (more than once). The assumption here seems to be that whereas a heterosexual might wear a gay

slogan t-shirt (once) *or* use a gay water bottle, only a gay person would do both, and do so ‘a lot’.

Some thought that ‘only a gay person would wear a t-shirt like that’ (P45); however some pointed out that the wording of the slogan only communicated that ‘some people’ are gay not that I am. Some thought I was heterosexual and ‘just sticking up for what she believed in’ (P12). Many thought that I was ‘probably a lesbian’ (P31), and had personal experience of homophobia, as such the t-shirt was conceived of as ‘talking back’ to specific incidents of prejudice, rather than to an ever present heterosexual assumption. Or that I ‘had a close friend or family member that was’ (P80), or simply had ‘strong views’ (P74) about gay equality. Interestingly the fact that I do research on LGBT concerns was on the whole treated as a reason for wearing the t-shirt not as evidence that I am lesbian. This is perhaps a reflection of the fact that psychology students are immersed in a scientific model of psychology, which positions the ideal researcher as dispassionate. It may also be a reflection of my lack of conformity to lesbian visual norms such as having short hair (Clarke & Spence, 2013).

Stage models of homosexual identity development frame ‘identity pride’ – an expression of which could be wearing a gay-slogan t-shirt - as a step on the path to a fully-developed and integrated identity (Cass, 1979), during which homosexuality temporarily becomes a ‘master status’ (Becker, 1963); the most salient aspect of identity. For some of the students who assumed I was gay, wearing the t-shirt was framed as evidence that I was ‘struggling to accept’ (P21) and ‘crying for help coming to terms with’ (P 21) my sexuality. Wearing the t-shirt was also treated as a sign of my immature or not fully realised sexuality – only people with an unsettled inner sexual identity require the scaffolding provided by such public

declarations of sexuality – or my ‘crass and immature’ (P61) personality. Others framed me as ‘obsessed’ (P153) with my sexuality, seeking ‘to stand out’ (P25) and draw attention to myself. By contrast, some thought that wearing the t-shirt communicated that I am ‘comfortable with’ (P43) my sexuality.

Echoing Kate’s (2000) argument that gay pride t-shirts perform ego-defensive functions and communicate both gay pride and rage, my t-shirt was interpreted as communicating both anger at prejudice and ‘pride’ (P93) in my sexuality. Social psychologists have found that confederates wearing gay pride badges, caps and t-shirts are responded to less positively than those wearing ‘neutral’ t-shirts (e.g., Hendren & Blank, 2009). Hegarty and Massey (2006) have argued that this might be because gay slogan t-shirts don’t just enact gay identities, but particular performances of gay identities - ‘out there – open’ (P159).

Correspondingly, some accounts positioned me as a ‘bad gay’ (Smith, 1994), in the words of one gay participant, a “‘promosexual’ who gives ‘the more ‘normal’ of us a bad name’ (P47).

Supporting the findings of social psychological experiments using gay slogan t-shirts, if a lecturer wanted to be liked by students or receive positive student evaluations, the data suggest that they should avoid wearing such t-shirts. As P91 said: ‘If you want people to react favourably to you or attend your lectures [...] don’t wear a t-shirt of this nature.’

Indeed, as one student noted: ‘The t-shirt sparked a lot of comments from people who seemed to take an immediate dislike towards Victoria.’ (P47)

Conclusion

In summary, these data suggest that wearing a gay-slogan t-shirt is not an effective strategy for definitively communicating a queer identity. However it is for inviting students to contemplate a lecturer’s sexuality and making homosexuality visible in the classroom, but

not necessarily for the lecturer to be liked or for heterosexism to be reduced. It is important to note however that the students' reactions could have been different if I had fostered a conversation about the t-shirt (or worn a t-shirt with a different slogan); I did not do so because it was worn without pedagogical intent. One perhaps obvious conclusion is that if the intention is to reduce anti-gay prejudice, wearing such a t-shirt (certainly without topicalising and contextualising it within the lesson), and in so doing taking up the position of a 'bad gay' (Smith, 1994), could be counter-productive. However, it is not my intention to argue that queer academics should conform to the rules of compulsory heterosexuality, and thus take responsibility for managing heterosexism, to avoid provoking hostility from students. Rather, I argue that these data evidence the extent to which the higher education classroom remains a *heteronormative* space (Warner, 1993). Scholarship underpinned by the concept of homophobia, which focuses on individual prejudice, and divides the world into homophobes and non-homophobes, frames coming out as a tool for challenging prejudice and for promoting resilience in LGBT students. By contrast, the concept of heteronormativity draws attention to the social privileging of heterosexuality, and the complicity of both straights and queers in policing the 'rules' of compulsory heterosexuality. From this perspective, coming out becomes an attack on the status quo. The small number of LGB students in the sample did not report feeling empowered or viewing me as a positive role model. Quite the opposite! Indeed, the students' responses strongly evidenced discourses of 'modern heterosexism', in which some performances of homosexuality are framed as an attack on heterosexuality (Brickell, 2000). Debates about coming out should take account of the discursive frame through which such declarations will be interpreted. The data presented here clearly trouble the notion that 'coming outs', or particular enactments of coming out, are inherently liberating for the LGBT educator and their

students. This is not to say that LGBT educators should abandon coming out as a pedagogical and political tool, but that the meanings and effects of coming out are more complex than is often supposed.

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