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Shared workplace experiences of lesbian and gay police officers in the United Kingdom

Lesbian and
gay police
officers

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the contemporary workplace experiences of lesbian and gay officers who serve across the UK.

Design/methodology/approach – Using an online survey, the research asked lesbian and gay officers to share their experiences in law enforcement environments. Acknowledging the changing climate in many law enforcement environments, this respondents here were asked to focus on both positive and negative experiences in the workplace.

Findings – The responses of 243 police officers revealed that lesbian and gay officers face barriers to equal employment opportunities similar to those faced by women and other minorities in law enforcement, but lesbian officers appear to experience and witness lower levels of discrimination than gay male police officers. Attitudinal bias against lesbian and gay officers remains a significant problem in the force. Lesbian officers report feelings of tokenism at higher levels than gay male police officers.

Research limitations/implications – Future research endeavors should analyze any differences between the experiences of different lesbians and gay men at different levels of visibility within law enforcement, including “out” and “closeted” officers. Research about when officers come out as lesbian or gay – during training, on the force, after they retire – would be insightful in understanding officers’ perceptions.

Practical implications – The research suggests that police departments in the UK have made good strides in opening the law enforcement workforce, but continue to face on-going challenges in creating fair, diverse, and representative work environments for lesbian and gay officers. Specifically, agencies should review policies where supervisor have discretion over the employment-related actions. By not meeting the challenges of a more diverse workplace, agencies risk lower job satisfaction, and decreased police effectiveness, especially on community policing environments.

Originality/value – This research joins a small, but growing body of research that offers specific barriers and opportunities – as perceived by the officers. As other agencies engage in efforts to recruit and retain diversity police forces, the results of this research can enhance policies and practices, with regards to lesbian and gay officers.

Keywords Gender, Training, Police, Police culture, Discrimination, Quality of policing

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

While a number of scholars have examined sex and race integration into law enforcement, few have studied the integration of lesbians and gay men into the rank and file of police agencies, or the effects of having these officers on the force (Hassell and Brandl, 2009; Jones and Williams, 2013; Rumens and Broomfield, 2012). With the passage of the Employment Equality Regulations law (2003), the UK Equality Act (2010), the police reforms derived from the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, and evolving

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social norms, an increase in the delivery of public goods and services by openly gay men and lesbians was to be expected. The laws – by discouraging discrimination and promoting equal opportunity – have provided for fuller participation in the labor market by men and women who are open about their sexual orientation. With more lesbians and gay men delivering public goods and services, their experiences and shared perceptions – like those of other minority groups – become more important, as their collective perceptions can have an impact on an organization's ability to meet its mission. To that end, this exploratory research attempts to better understand the shared professional experiences of lesbian and gay police officers.

The struggles that women and people of color have faced (and continue to encounter) as they have integrated and diversified the law enforcement environment offers insights into some of the potential barriers and opportunities that lesbians and gay men may face in the profession. However, unlike with other minority groups, the integration of lesbians and gay men presents unique challenges to law enforcement. As a profession, it is particularly susceptible to discriminating against sexual minorities (Thompson and Nored, 2002). This susceptibility is attributable to the historical enforcement of anti-homosexual-related laws by police, its paramilitary structure and culture, and its overwhelming male majorities (Bernstein and Kostelac, 2002; Colvin, 2012; Thompson and Nored, 2002). That is to say, law enforcement's history, structure, and culture encourage a certain homogeneity and may reinforce norms that can be hostile to homosexuals, including gay and lesbian police officers.

Studying lesbian and gay police officers offers us a proxy for assessing the workplace climate and the degree to which law enforcement agencies are diversifying in general. More importantly, the shared experiences of lesbian and gay police officers will help to expand our understanding of the complexities and challenges of transforming a working environment that has often been described as closed, macho, paramilitary, and fraternal (Belkin and McNichol, 2002; Leinen, 1993; Miller *et al.*, 2003).

To that end, this exploratory research examines reasons why homosexuals choose law enforcement careers, the employment-related barriers and opportunities they experience as lesbians and gay men in law enforcement, and their experiences with attitudinal bias from other police officers.

Literature review

Discrimination based on sexual orientation

Research on employment discrimination suggests that actual or perceived discrimination based on sexual orientation may be a factor negatively affecting hiring, firing, and promotion. This discrimination could be affecting a significant percentage of lesbian and gay job applicants and employees. Research in the area reports wide variations in the experiences of lesbian and gay people and in the levels of discrimination encountered (Badgett, 2007). The most commonly cited research suggests that between 25 and 66 percent of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals report experiencing employment discrimination in their work careers (Alderson, 2003). Reports of witnessed discrimination are much higher than experienced discrimination based on the personal/group discrimination discrepancy (Taylor *et al.*, 1990). This discrepancy occurs when several people witness a single act of discrimination and report the same act. This is in contrast to the act of discrimination experienced (but not witnessed) and reported by one person. Witnessed discrimination is subject to a multiplier effect. At a minimum, the literature suggests that lesbian and gay workers face measurable barriers to entry and opportunities based on sexual orientation (Tilcsik, 2011).

Current legal framework

The most recent effort to ensure equal protection under law was the Equality Act of 2010. This Act brought together over 116 separate pieces of legislation, including the Employment Equality Regulations of 2003 and the Equality Act Regulations of 2007, which both addressed discrimination based on sexual orientation. The Act is a broader effort to deter and prevent direct discrimination based on age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation (Jones and Williams, 2013). Anti-discrimination efforts in the workplace attempt to deter and prevent actions related to hiring, firing, and promotion as well as benefits and training. The Act also allows for positive discrimination when recruiting a qualified person with a “protected characteristic” when the characteristic is under-represented in the workforce (Colgan and Wright, 2011). This, of course, could have direct implications for police agencies as well as lesbians and gay men interested in law enforcement.

As mentioned previously, the most prominent and known efforts to reform the UK police emerged in response to the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report (Home Office, 1999). These reform efforts were primarily race-related, but provided the foundation for other diversity efforts as well. One of the most recent efforts is the National Police Learning Requirement for Race and Diversity Training (Clements, 2008). This training initiative, established by the Home Office but delivered by local forces, has three main aims for those in policing, including: raising awareness about individual officers’ responsibility for inclusive behavior; making participants aware of the diversity of twenty-first century Britain with respect to race (primary focus), gender, disability, age, sexual orientation, religion, and beliefs; and providing necessary skills and information to enable officers to adopt inclusive practices within the workplace and when working with the community (Clements, 2008).

With regard to employment and sexual orientation, the guiding effort has been legislation. The Employment Equality Regulations came into force in 2003, and the Equality Act in 2010. The scope of the regulations covers discrimination, harassment, and victimization in the workplace and in vocational training settings. This includes equal access to opportunities such as promotion and training. There is no known literature that examines lesbians’ and gay men’s existing perceptions about barriers or special access to employment opportunities.

Managing disclosure

Research on sexual orientation raises important issues not found among other often-studied groups. These issues make homosexuals an important and unique group to examine within law enforcement. For example, unlike sex and race, sexual orientation is not always readily apparent; lesbian and gay officers may therefore engage in selective disclosure and management of personal identity (Croteau *et al.*, 2008). The decision about whether to come out to colleagues may, in turn, affect job motivation and satisfaction (in a positive or negative fashion), personal health and wellbeing, as well as interpersonal relationships on the force (Rumens and Broomfield, 2012). Limited research indicates that openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual officers face differential treatment on the job (Bernstein and Kostelac, 2002; Burke, 1994, 1996; Colvin, 2009; Hassell and Brandl, 2009; Leinen, 1993; Miller *et al.*, 2003). As Gedro (2009) suggests, workplace decisions for lesbian and gay people is often influenced by internalized beliefs about gender roles and heterosexuality. Furthermore, police officers who choose not to disclose their sexual orientation often do so due to fear of reprisal,

fear of rejection, offensive jokes, pranks, and overt harassment and discrimination (Hassell and Brandl, 2009). As lesbian and gay men develop and maintain their careers, they face the greatest amount of challenge due to the decisions about identity management that they continually face (Button, 2004).

Motivation to become a police officer

In light of the challenges that minorities and women face in law enforcement, the factors that motivate people to become police officers has been a focus of attention for many years. Research in this area began in the 1960s, when very few visible minorities and women were police officers. Findings from this early research highlighted several consistent themes related to motivation, in particular the attraction of individuals with authoritarian personalities – seeking power, authority, and control – to the profession (Lester, 1983; McNamara, 1967; Niederhoffer, 1967). Job security was also often cited as an important motivator. One study found that 35 percent of police officers cited job security as the number one reason for joining the force (White *et al.*, 2010). The opportunity to help people and the desire to enforce the law were also commonly cited reasons for becoming a police officer (White *et al.*, 2010).

Women, like men, identified job security and the opportunity to help others as the most important reasons for entering the profession (Bridges, 1989; Ermer, 1978; Kimmel and Tartaro, 1999). More recently, Ridgeway *et al.* (2008) found that applicants (men and women) to the San Diego Police Department reported a desire to help others and/or the community (72 percent), followed by stable employment (53 percent), job status (46 percent), and salary and benefits (46 percent).

Like the research that examined differences between men and women, early research did not uncover many differences in motivation to become an officer based on race (Alex, 1969; White *et al.*, 2010). However, Foley *et al.* (2008) found that minority recruits placed greater importance on the opportunities for advancement and the ability to work on one's own.

Raganella and White (2004) studied motivations to become a police officer within the context of race and sex. They found that motivations for entering police work were consistent, regardless of sex or race. Overall, recruits indicated that the opportunity to help others, job security, and benefits were the most important reasons for becoming a police officer. Recruits also consistently identified the least influential motivating items, regardless of officer race or sex, including salary, a lack of other career alternatives, military structure, and the power and authority of the job (Raganella and White, 2004). This more recent – and representative – literature on officers' motivations parallels the shift from traditional policing to problems based and community policing.

To date, there are no known studies that attempt to determine the motivation of lesbian and gay male police officers.

Lesbians and gay men in policing

During the past two decades, researchers have approached the topic of gay men and lesbians in law enforcement from a number of different angles. Earlier research focussed on the idea that being homosexual and being a police officer represented dual – often conflicting – identities. Scholars attempted to understand how officers reconciled a “deviant” behavior with their role in law enforcement as regulators of deviance (Burke, 1994; Leinen, 1993). These efforts – the product of interviews – spawned interesting research among scholars and researchers on mental health, productivity, coping, and self-acceptance (Herek, 2003).

Disclosure of sexual orientation in the workplace is related to the idea of dual identity, and a number of studies have considered the factors that affect when – or if – police officers come out on the job (Burke, 1993; Leinen, 1993; Miller *et al.*, 2003). The general consensus is that lesbians and gay men in law enforcement are under tremendous pressure to conform to prevailing gender stereotypes, and that each must determine the costs and benefits of coming out at work. An individual's decision may include personal considerations such as physical safety, organizational considerations like social isolation, or institutional considerations such as evaluation, promotion, and assignments. When the benefits exceed the costs, lesbians, and gay men are more likely to disclose their sexual orientation.

In addition to disclosure, valuable research has been conducted that considers the effects of lesbian and gay inclusion in the law enforcement environment (Belkin and McNichol, 2002; Miller *et al.*, 2003). Research on the attitudes and beliefs of straight officers about their lesbian and gay counterparts continues to develop as well as shared perceptions among lesbian and gay officers in the workplace (Bernstein and Kostelac, 2002; Colvin, 2009, 2012; Lyons *et al.*, 2008). Some of the most comprehensive research on inclusion and familiarity has been conducted in the context of integrating lesbians and gay men into the military. Although not a perfect analogy, the armed forces – also a highly cohesive, formerly segregated, and single-sex organization – does offer a good perspective on the potential challenges inherent in developing more inclusive police forces (Belkin and McNichol, 2002; Koegel, 1996).

Shared perceptions in the workplace

Sklansky (2006) noted that police agencies have made great strides in diversifying their forces to include women and people of color, however, relatively little data exists about efforts to diversify in terms of sexual orientation. Furthermore, few studies have focussed on the shared perceptions of lesbians and gay people in law enforcement. Given the unique culture of law enforcement agencies, their history of exclusion, and our evolving societal values about sexual orientation and societal norms, it is appropriate to consider the integration and shared perceptions of contemporary lesbian and gay police officers.

Recent research has focussed on the shared perceptions of target populations in the workplace. The idea of shared perceptions builds on the notion that individual perceptions are often communicated to other people both inside and outside of the organization. The individual's perceptions and experiences are also shaped and influenced by his or her membership in specific groups (Bolton, 2003). Such experiences and perceptions of the law enforcement workplace have been considered for a number of specific groups, including black officers (Alex, 1969; Bolton, 2003; Essed, 1991; Holdaway and O'Neill, 2004; Leinen, 1993), black and Asian female officers (Holder *et al.*, 1999), Latino officers (McCluskey, 2004), and the inter-section of various identities (Hassell and Brandl, 2009).

Perceptions about a workplace can have important implications for an organization. These perceptions can be become barriers or access points, creating negative or positive disparities among employees (Bolton, 2003). Perceptions, if shared, can have a dramatic effect on the culture, mission, operations, and productivity of the organization. For example, if there is a shared perception that men are promoted at a faster rate than equally qualified women, then women in the organization may be less motivated to perform at their highest level. In such a scenario, the inability to retain qualified women may also become a residual effect of this shared perception. Conversely, we may consider the role of positive perceptions in an organization as well.

For example, if an organization has a reputation – and the employees share perceptions – that it is open to women and promotes them on merit, women in the organization may be more motivated to perform at their highest level. In such a scenario, the organization may develop a reputation as fairer to women and – as such – increase its workforce with more qualified women.

In summary, the literature indicates that employment discrimination against lesbian and gay people is real. Because of this discrimination, as well as the historical social stigma of homosexuality, lesbian, and gay men in the workforce manage their identity in ways that are different from visible minorities. Lesbian and gay police officers have been particularly susceptible to discrimination, social stigma, and identity management. Police-related research about lesbian and gay officers has focussed on this discrimination, social stigma, and management identity. As social acceptance of homosexuality has increased and the legal environment has become more conducive to employment equity, openly homosexual employees become more common. More recent research has focussed on better understanding openly lesbian and gay officers and the evolution of police agencies to a more contemporary policing context.

Methodology

In order to better understand the work environment in which lesbian and gay men in UK law enforcement operate, an online survey was administered. The instrument design was based on previous studies that focussed on the shared perceptions of other minority groups in law enforcement – blacks and women (Bolton, 2003). The instrument was pretested with the help of the Gay Police Association (GPA), which is a professional support organization for lesbians and gay men in law enforcement in the UK.

The online survey was conducted over an eight-week period in August and September of 2009. The survey pool was drawn from the list-serve of the GPA. According to the Association, the list reaches more than 5,000 lesbian and gay police officers, community support officers, and staff (GPA, personal communication, 2009). It is estimated that the survey instrument reached 2,500 members of the list[1]. After the initial message was sent to the membership list, reminder e-mail messages were sent on a two-week interval over the eight-week period.

The online survey covered two major components. The first component captured social-demographic and professional police service data about the officers and their status in law enforcement. The second component covered their perceptions about their workplace environment as lesbian and gay officers. Within the two broad areas, several specific areas of inquiry are pursued. Namely, questions that cover; reasons for choosing a career in policing, barrier and opportunities as lesbian and gay officers, and treatment and experiences in law enforcements. Officers were asked about barriers or discrimination, as well as access points or openings to equal employment opportunities that they perceived as lesbian and gay people in law enforcement – for example, whether or not they had equal access to training opportunities or perceived discrimination in training decisions (see the list below).

Demographic and background questions about police service:

- (1) Demographic and background questions:
 - What is your sexual orientation?
 - What is your current age?
 - What is your sex?

- Are you Asian, black, Chinese, of a mixed background, white or of another ethnic group?
 - Do you have children?
 - What is your highest educational level or qualification?
 - What is your relationship status?
 - As a lesbian or gay person, please indicate your level of “outness” in your community.
 - As a lesbian or gay person, please indicate your level of “outness” at work?
 - How long have you been in the police service?
 - What is your role in police service? What is your current rank/title/grade?
 - What Home Office Recognized Police Service do you serve?
 - In what non-Home Office Recognized Police Service do you serve?
- (2) Reason for choosing a career in law enforcement:
- Why did you choose a career in the police service?
- (3) Experiencing and witnessing employment-related benefits and burdens:
- Have you faced discrimination in any of the following areas because you are a gay/lesbian police officer?
 - Have you benefited in any of the following areas because you are gay/lesbian police officer?
 - Have you known of other people who faced discrimination in any of the following areas because they were gay/lesbian police officers?
 - Have you known of other people who have benefited in any of the following areas because they were gay/lesbian police officers?
- (4) Differential treatment in policing:
- Have you or other gay/lesbian officers or staff experienced any of the following?

These questions created the opportunity for participants to discuss their rationale for entering into an environment traditionally hostile to homosexuals (Belkin and McNichol, 2002), how unique access and/or barriers had affected their careers, and any resulting manifestations from the access points and/or barriers. It is hypothesized that the results will show a more complex and detailed policing environment as well as differences and similarities in the rationales for joining the force.

Results

Table I shows the demographic information of the 243 officers out of 2,500 who completed the survey. This is a response rate of 9.7 percent.

The demographic information of the respondents does differ in several important ways. First, a greater number of the respondents were white than is representative of the general population of the UK, or the police forces of the country. However, the number of

	Number of officers	Percentage of officers
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	139	57.2
Female	94	38.7
<i>Race</i>		
Black or black British-African	1	0.4
Mixed – white and black Caribbean	1	0.4
Mixed – white and Asian	2	0.8
Any other mixed background	2	0.8
White – British	205	84.4
White – Irish	9	3.7
Any other white background	12	4.9
Prefer not to say	1	0.4
<i>Level of education completed</i>		
Diploma, Certificate, A level	92	37.9
O level	13	5.3
Degree (other)	40	16.5
Foundation degree	6	2.5
First degree (bachelor's)	38	15.6
Master's degree	22	9.1
Doctoral degree	1	0.4
Other	12	4.9
<i>Rank</i>		
Police constable	80	32.9
Detective constable	10	4.1
Sergeant	29	11.9
Detective sergeant	5	2.1
Inspector	15	6.2
Chief inspector	4	1.6
Police support	28	11.5
Administration	21	8.6
Other	27	11.1

Table I.
Survey respondents'
demographic data

Notes: $n = 243$. Percentages and totals may not equal 100 due to rounding and non-responses

women responding to the survey (38.7 percent) is higher than the percentage of women serving nationally in the UK, where women are approximately 22 percent of the entire force (Home Office, 2010). The educational level of responding officers was higher than the general educational levels among police officers. In the general police population, about 20 percent of officers have university degrees or higher (Home Office, 2010). Finally, we see a broader cross-section of police ranks represented in the survey than actual forces in the UK, with the majority (32.9 percent) serving as front-line police constables.

Table II, like Table I, provides demographic information about the officers who completed the survey, but highlights the sexual orientation-related demographic information. Not surprisingly, the majority of officers identified as lesbian or gay, and 81.5 percent considered themselves out to everyone in their lives – friends, family, and co-workers. At work, 70.8 percent of officers reported being out to everyone – superiors, subordinates, and co-workers. Over 65 percent of respondents reported being in a relationship (including formal state and informal non-state relationships). In total, 24 percent of those reported being in legal (state-sanctioned) partnerships.

	Number of officers	Percentage of officers
<i>Sexual orientation</i>		
Homosexual (lesbian or gay)	226	93
Bisexual	11	4.5
Other	3	1.2
<i>Relationship status</i>		
Single	67	27.6
Divorced	4	1.6
Legal partnership	59	24.2
In a relationship	101	41.6
Other	2	0.8
<i>Level of disclosure in community</i>		
Out to everyone	198	81.5
Out only to friends	15	6.2
Out only to a select few	12	4.9
Not out	8	3.3
<i>Level of disclosure at work</i>		
Everyone at work	172	70.8
Some people at work	19	7.8
At least one person at work	1	0.4
Other	6	2.5
Notes: $n = 243$. Percentages and totals may not equal 100 due to rounding and non-responses		

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Table II.
Survey respondents'
sexual
orientation-related
data

Reasons for choosing law enforcement

Figure 1 shows the reasons respondents chose law enforcement as a career. The figure shows reasons for both men and women[2]. In total, 36 percent of lesbians and 31 percent of gay men reported career opportunities as one of the main reasons for entering law enforcement. While civic duty was the second most popular option for women, men chose job security as their second reason. The three lowest reasons for entering law enforcement for both men and women were: family tradition, compensation, and adventure. Finally, 14 percent of women and 11 percent of men reported other reasons for entering this field.

Barriers and access related to equal employment opportunities

Table III explains the current employment barriers that lesbians and gay men in law enforcement perceive in the workplace in the UK. For gay men, when joining or transferring to the force, 15.1 percent of respondents reported experiencing barriers to equal employment. This was the most commonly identified barrier. Beyond initial entry, gay male officers reported discrimination or barriers in work schedules (12.2 percent), promotion (12.2 percent), and postings (10.8 percent). The lowest barriers were reported in evaluation (3.6 percent), benefits/salary (2.2 percent), and mentoring (2.9 percent).

Overall, lesbian officers reported lower levels of employment-related barriers or discrimination. Similar to gay male officers, the highest level was reported for joining or transferring to the force at 10.6 percent. This was followed by posting (8.5 percent), training (8.5 percent), and discipline (7.4 percent). The lowest barriers for lesbian officers were reported in mentoring (4.3 percent), finding a patrol partner (1.1 percent), and firing (1.1 percent).

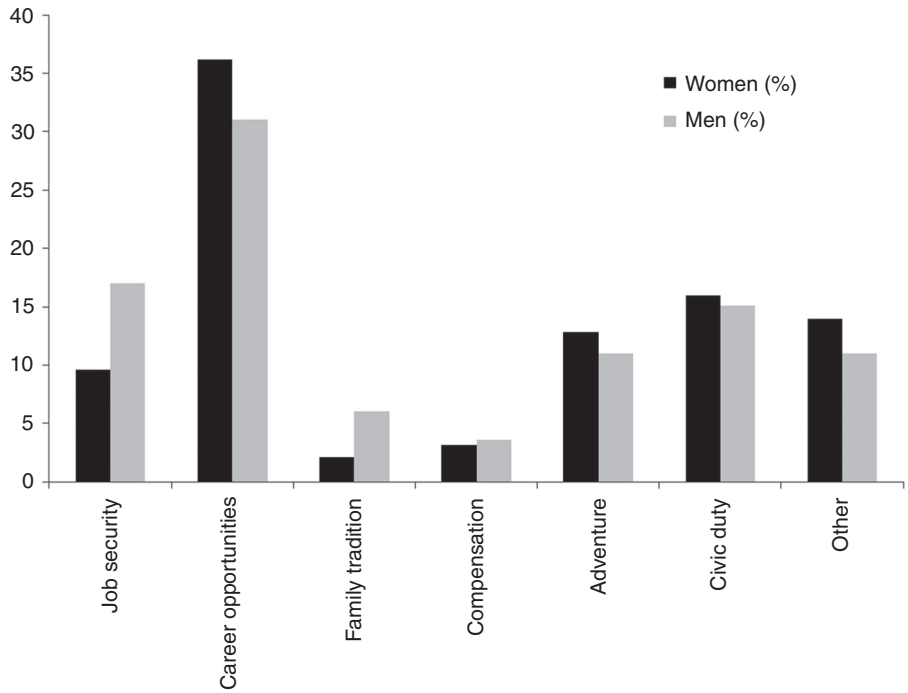


Figure 1.
Reasons for choosing
law enforcement

	Experienced burdens		Witnessed burdens		Experienced benefits		Witnessed benefits	
	Men (%)	Women (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)
Initial joining or transfer	15.1	10.6	20.9	11.7	1.4	1.1	5	2.1
Promotion	12.2	6.4	16.5	14.9	1.4	0	10.8	6.4
Benefits/salary	2.2	6.4	4.3	4.3	1.4	0	1.4	1.1
Work schedule	12.2	7.4	16.5	10.6	0.7	1.1	6.5	4.3
Firing	5.8	1.1	5	3.2	5.8	0	5.8	0
Discipline	7.9	7.4	26.6	18.1	0.7	2.1	3.6	2.1
Postings	10.8	8.5	23	11.7	2.2	3.2	7.9	7.4
Training	9.4	8.5	15.1	9.6	11.5	5.3	9.4	10.6
Evaluation	3.6	5.3	6.5	7.4	2.2	0	3.6	0
Mentoring	2.9	4.3	9.4	4.3	7.2	4.3	5	11.7
Getting a patrol partner	4.3	1.1	7.2	4.3	1.4	4.3	2.2	1.1

Table III.
Barriers and benefits
in equal employment
opportunities

In witnessing barriers in employment-related activities, both men and women report observing higher levels of discrimination, although at generally lower levels for women. Officers reported observing discrimination against gay men in discipline (26.6 percent), postings (23 percent), and joining or transferring to the force (20.9 percent). They observed barriers for lesbians in discipline (18.1 percent), promotion (14.9 percent), and joining or transferring to the force and postings both at 11.7 percent.

Although lesbian officers reported lower levels of the employment-related discrimination (both experienced and witnessed) in every category, none of the variation by sex was found to be statistically significant.

Table III also identifies unique access or benefits that lesbian and gay officers experienced in the workplace as homosexual officers. Like the barriers, individual experiences vary greatly. Undoubtedly, far fewer officers reported benefits or access as a lesbian or gay police officer. In terms of gay male officers, 11.5 percent of the respondents reported benefits in training, 7.2 percent in mentoring, and 5.4 percent in firings. The fewest opportunities for gay male officers were reported in getting a patrol partner (1.4 percent), discipline (0.7 percent), and work schedules (0.7 percent). For lesbian officers, no benefits were reported for promotion, salaries/benefits, firing, and evaluation. However, they did experience some benefits in training (5.3 percent), mentoring (4.3 percent), and finding a patrol partner (4.3 percent).

As with barriers, witnessed benefits exceed experienced benefits in employment-related activities. For gay male officers, advantages or benefits were witnessed in promotion (10.8 percent), training (9.4 percent), and postings (7.9 percent). The fewest benefits were reported in evaluations (3.6 percent), finding a patrol partner (2.2 percent), and salaries/benefits (1.4 percent). For lesbian police officers, the highest advantages or benefits were reported in mentoring (11.7 percent), training (10.6 percent), and postings (7.4 percent). The lowest levels were reported in finding a patrol partner, and salaries/benefits (both 1.1 percent). No benefits were observed in firing, and evaluation.

In terms of employment-related activities, lesbian police officers (both experienced and witnessed) reported higher levels of access or benefit than gay male officers, and gay male officers reported higher levels of discrimination and more barriers to equal employment than lesbians. Despite these many variations in experiences and observations, none of the variations by sex were found to be statistically significant (Figure 2).

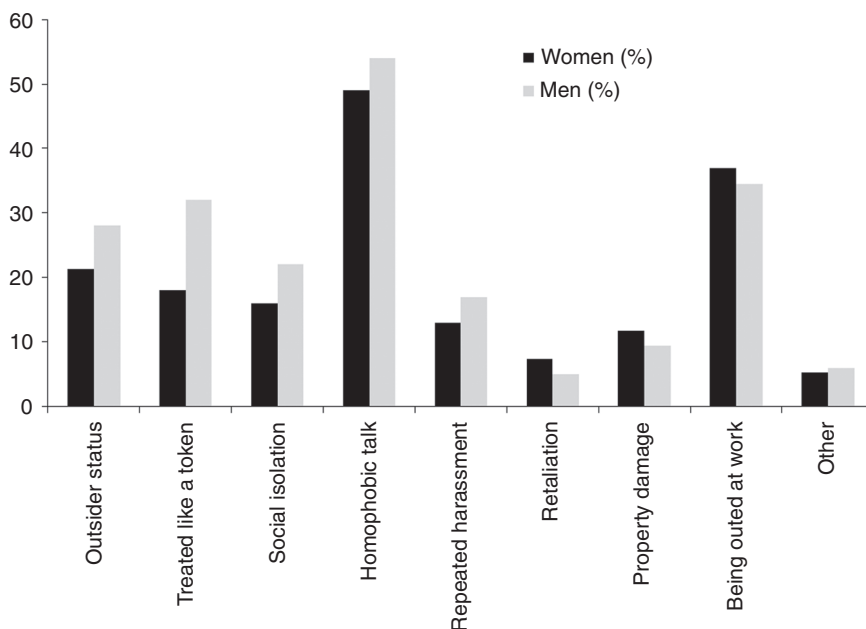


Figure 2.
Differential
treatment in the
workplace

Differential treatment in the workplace

Figure 2 indicates the percentage of lesbian and gay police officers who noted attitudinal barriers to equality in the workplace. In terms of the workplace environment, both gay men and lesbian officers reported high levels of differential treatment. In total, 49 percent of lesbians and 54 percent of gay men reported hearing homophobic talk. In total, 37 percent of lesbians and 34.5 percent of gay men reported being “outed” in the work environment. Finally, 32 percent of gay men and 18.1 percent of lesbians reported feelings of tokenism.

Male and female officers also reported the same categories in terms of minimal differences in treatment. In terms of property damage and retaliation, lesbian officers reported 11.7 and 7.4 percent, respectively. Gay male officers reported 9.4 and 5 percent, respectively.

Of the categories available, only being treated like a token was statistically significant by sex. More gay men than women reported feelings of tokenism in the workplace. The Pearson χ^2 value was 5.334. The χ^2 significance value (asymptotic significance – two-sided) was 0.021.

Discussion

The results suggest some very interesting similarities and differences for lesbian and gay police officers in the UK. First, reasons for joining the force differ to some other studies. Here, both men and women rated career opportunities as one of the main reasons for entering into the field. This contradicts much of the literature, which suggests civic duty or the opportunity to help others as most important. However, the results do support the findings of Foley *et al.* (2008) who noted that racial minorities placed greater importance on the opportunities for advancement. It is possible that some groups of minorities – including homosexuals – now see law enforcement as an option not previously considered. The professionalization of the field, the increased visibility of minorities in the force, and evolving social norms may be contributing factors to a shift in perceptions about the job and one’s motivation for seeking it. It should also be noted that over 11 percent of gay men and 15 percent of lesbians selected “other” as an option for entering law enforcement. It is not clear if additional information about the category would provide us with more precision about motivation. However, while the primary reason for entering law enforcement differs, the second reason – job security – matches closely with the findings of previous research. In this respect, men and women, regardless of sexual orientation denote the importance of this factor.

In terms of barriers or discrimination inside the UK police forces, gay men report more barriers to equal opportunities than lesbian officers. The barriers for gay men were also witnessed at higher levels. Lesbian officers reported and were witnessed to have fewer barriers than gay male officers. While both men and women reported joining or transferring to the force as the most common barrier, men reported it more often. Furthermore, higher percentages of men reported barriers or discrimination in three additional areas to women: work schedules (12.2 percent), promotion (12.2 percent), and postings (10.8 percent). For lesbian officers, after joining or transferring to the force, fewer barriers were reported at lower levels: posting (8.5 percent), training (8.5 percent), and discipline (7.4 percent). Generally, both lesbians and gay men did not experience or witness special employment access or benefits due to their sexual orientation. However, in cases where these benefits were observed, lesbians were perceived to benefit more than men.

Variations in reporting and witnessing barriers and benefits may stem from a number of factors. In terms of barriers, gay men may have faced additional challenges due to negative stereotyping, while lesbians have faced stereotyping in a positive fashion. Colvin (2012) suggested that gender stereotyping of gay men as feminine and weak, and lesbians as masculine and tough may have benefited lesbians in the traditionally masculine environment of law enforcement. That is to say, lesbian officers may be inadvertently benefiting from stereotypes that officers in the majority have about them.

Other reason lesbians may report fewer barriers and more opportunities may be related to their status as women. Since the 1990s, the UK police forces have been actively engaged in increasing the recruitment and retention of female police officers. Positive action and the need for culturally competent women in traditional and non-traditional areas of policing has created special opportunities for women in law enforcement. The value and contribution of women in policing has a longer and more established history than that of other minority groups in policing. Thus, organizationally, the UK police force may be comfortable supporting women in the force.

The results drawn from the barriers and access to equal employment opportunities do suggest positive movement for police forces. The results indicate that institutional systems that promote bias may be in decline. For example, while over 15 percent and over 10 percent of gay men and lesbians reported challenges joining or transferring to a new post, the vast majority (85-90 percent) reported no issues in terms of employment-related activities. Furthermore, the lack of statistical significance suggests that the biases (positive and negative) are random and not systematic.

Although employment-related activities show few differences among officers, attitudinal differences seem to exist for both gay and lesbian officers. A near majority of gay male officers and over half of lesbian officers report hearing homophobic talk in the workplace. Such anti-minority talk is not uncommon in the policing environment. Bolton (2003) reported equally high levels of racist comments, and Colvin (2009) notes homophobic talk as common in police precincts. In addition, over a third of gay men and lesbians reported being “outed” at work against their wishes. This could be an outing to a co-worker or subordinates, or even a witness or victim. Regardless of the recipient, the officers are denied the right or opportunity to manage their identities according to their wishes. Finally, one in five homosexual officers report being treated like a token in the workplace. Tokenism among women was present here and statistically significance. Bias here may be attributable – again – to lesbians’ status as women in the force. Women may be singled out to work with female suspects or witnesses. They may also be asked handle cases involving children or other dependent members of society. These efforts originate from the misplaced idea that women (and thus, female officers) are more nurturing and better suited for these types of situations.

The survey results suggest that attitudinal bias in the UK police still exists and impacts the working lives of gay men and lesbians in law enforcement. Homophobic talk, being “outed” or treated like a token can outweigh institutional factors intended to support officers’ recruitment and encourage retention. Such an environment is ripe for the development of negative shared perceptions among gay and lesbian officers. These shared perceptions could result in lower levels of job satisfaction and motivation, challenges in recruitment and retention, and in the worst cases, police force readiness in the UK.

Conclusion

This research attempts to better understand the working lives of lesbian and gay police officers in the UK. The survey information on 243 officers represents a more comprehensive data set than most of the previous studies. Considering the population and the cultural environment in which they work, collecting representative data is an unusually challenging endeavor. Nevertheless, valuable conclusions can be drawn from this research. Law enforcement agencies are still in need of additional policies and procedures that address equal employment opportunities for qualified applicants and officers, especially gay men.

Efforts to address attitudinal bias to reduce its influence on the behavior of its employees should also be vigorously pursued. As there is an emerging set of shared perceptions among some lesbians and gay officers that there are benefits to actually being an “out” gay person on the force, efforts to increase that shared perception could help to reduce attitudinal bias. While less common than barriers, the access points suggest that change is possible among law enforcement agencies. By examining the shared perceptions of lesbian and gay officers, this research has enhanced the understanding of both officers and law enforcement agencies and identified opportunities for organizational improvement.

Future research endeavors should analyze any differences between the experiences of lesbians and gay men at different levels of visibility within law enforcement, including “out” and “closeted” officers. Research about when officers come out as lesbian or gay – during training, on the force, after they retire – would be insightful in understanding officers’ perceptions and the climate of the force. Because there is broader social acceptance of homosexuality, efforts to better understand both the barriers and access of being “out” as lesbian and gay officers should also be pursued. Finally, research into organizational or mission failure precipitated by failure to create and sustain an inclusive law enforcement environment would be an important addition to our body of knowledge.

Notes

1. The members of Metropolitan Police in London were not able to participate in the survey. According to the GPA, the Met and a few other forces in the UK do not allow e-mail messages with links to web sites, and some still filter key words like gay and lesbian (Gay Police Association, personal communication, 2009).
2. No results – by race or ethnicity – will be presented in this study. Despite the diversity in responses regarding race, over 97 percent of respondents self-identified as white. Robust results could not be obtained with a minority population of 3 percent.

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