Gay men at work: (Re)constructing the self as professional

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ABSTRACT

This article is a study of professional identity work, using in-depth interview material from research conducted into the work lives of 10 gay men employed in a UK National Health Service Trust. Using the men's portraits of professional life, we examine the different ways they understand what it means to be a ‘professional’. The article suggests that while gay men appear to be empowered by forms of agency to self-identify as professionals in ‘gay-friendly’ work contexts, they are by no means unaffected by dominant professional norms and discourses of heteronormativity that treat sexuality and professionalism as polar opposites. Thus how straightforward it might be for the interviewees to self-identify as ‘professional’ and openly gay within an organization that is perceived to be ‘gay-friendly’ is scrutinized in terms of the professional identity dilemmas experienced by the study participants. We conclude that, even within ‘gay-friendly’ organizational settings, fashioning a professional identity is a process marked by negotiation and struggle.

KEYWORDS

gay-friendly workplaces • gay men • identity work • organization studies • professional • sexuality

Introduction

The view that gay men can expect to be discriminated against at work should colleagues know of their sexual identity still holds sway in much of the
literature on the work experiences of lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) employees (Burke, 1993; Hall, 1989; Humphrey, 1999; Oerton, 1996; Skelton, 2000; Ward & Winstanley, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006; Woods & Lucas, 1993). While such an assumption still holds true for a number of LGBT employees, there is also evidence to suggest a more positive outlook may be adopted. Indeed, some commentators on sexuality have pointed out that societal opinion towards LGBT people has improved in recent decades, and that this has contributed to a widening of choices available to LGBT people about how they might choose to live.

For example, Weeks (2007) suggests that transformations in erotic and intimate life since 1945 have altered the lives of LGBT people in the Western world. Nowadays there are, as Weeks points out, numerous possibilities for LGBT persons to attach different meanings to and construct new realities around sexuality. To illustrate, Seidman (2002: 7–8) argues that the ‘closet’, a concept that refers to an ‘individual’s having to make life-shaping decisions in order to pass’ as heterosexual, has changed in how it is understood by gay men and lesbians. Notably, the gay men and lesbians Seidman interviewed in his US-based study did not seek at all times to avoid ‘exposure or suspicion’ about their sexuality, but disclosed selectively to colleagues, friends and family in ways that affirmed a positive sense of self as gay or lesbian.

Thinking specifically about the workplace, and relations between LGBT and heterosexual employees, there appear to be plenty of reasons to suppose that recent social shifts have led to changes in how LGBT people construct identities in organizational settings. For example, sexual diversity in the UK has become an increasingly pressing issue for organizations ever since the enforcement of the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations in December 2003, which outlawed workplace discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. In part, this piece of UK legislation reflects social shifts that have already taken place in how LGBT people are understood and how they are attributed social status and equal rights. While it would be reckless to suggest that the introduction of the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (2003) has led to the eradication of organizational inequalities that negatively affect the work lives of LGBT employees, there is evidence to indicate that organizations are engaging more effectively with the needs of this segment of the workforce (Colgan et al., 2007, 2008; Giuffre et al., 2008; Raeburn, 2004). As Giuffre et al. (2008: 255) note, ‘a new type of workplace has emerged, called “gay-friendly”’: an organization in which LGBT people feel accepted. However, gay-friendly organizations do not, as Colgan et al. (2008: 65) rightly point out, ‘guarantee a working environment which engages with and embraces “sexual minorities” or prevents
homophobic attitudes and treatment across the board’. LGBT employees may still encounter differential treatment due to their sexual identity.

With increasing visibility in scholarly research, apparent in Colgan et al.’s (2007, 2008) investigation of ‘good practice’ among UK companies regarding equality and diversity in relation to sexual orientation, ‘gay-friendly’ organizations are an important object of critical, scholarly consideration. Not least because the initiatives undertaken by employers to project themselves as ‘gay-friendly’ might be said to be re-shaping the choices made by some LGBT employees about how to construct and manage their sexuality in the workplace. However, research in this area is still in its infancy. For instance, what opportunities might be occasioned within ‘gay-friendly’ organizations for LGBT employees to construct identities that relate to sexuality, gender and professionalism, remain patchy.

With the above in mind, we draw on in-depth interview data with 10 gay men. We examine the idea that while gay men appear to be empowered by forms of agency to self-identify as ‘respectable’ professionals in ‘gay-friendly’ work contexts, they are by no means unaffected by dominant professional norms and discourses of heteronormativity that treat sexuality and professionalism as polar opposites. Thus how straightforward it might be for openly gay men to self-identify as ‘professional’ in an organization that appears committed to engaging with LGBT employees is scrutinized in terms of the identity dilemmas experienced by the study participants. Given that wider social and political relations have conditioned the possibility for gay men to self-identify and be identified as socially respectable ‘normal’ individuals (Richardson, 2004; Seidman, 2002), we explore the experiences of those individuals who wish to identify as ‘professional’ and openly gay men in the workplace.

The article is organized as follows. In the first section, we broadly sketch out the feminist research that has interrogated the relationship between professionalism and gender. We extend this debate in the next part of the article by highlighting the paucity of studies that explore the meaning of being a professional from the perspectives of LBGT people. The study’s methodology is outlined before presenting our empirical data. We provide a number of empirical insights into how openly gay men in the workplace construct a professional identity through adhering to forms of self-conduct, evidenced in particularized behaviours, as well as how the professional body is fashioned and shaped. The data reveal a number of identity struggles associated with being a professional and an openly gay man, even in work environments that are perceived to be ‘gay-friendly’. We conclude by underscoring some of the contributions this article makes to existing research, and
the importance of future research that aims to nuance further academic knowledge about the ways in which being a ‘professional’ is understood.

**Professionalism, gender and sexuality**

The major works on the sociology of professionalism (Larson, 1977; MacDonald, 1995; Macdonald & Ritzer, 1988) contain little or no discussion of its relationship to either gender or sexuality. This is remarkable given the history of professionalism wherein, as Davies (1996) and others (Crompton, 1987; Halford et al., 1997) point out, men loom large as the main protagonists. Feminist analyses have been particularly acute in exposing the gendered nature of the professions (medicine, law, and so on) and the concept of professionalism. Early work by Crompton (1987) and Witz (1992), for example, galvanized others to explore the idea that the professions, based on values and techniques of exclusion and closure, were designed by men to serve the interests of men. Indeed, feminist theorists have argued that men’s occupation of the professions is so taken-for-granted as to appear a ‘natural’ state of affairs, reflected in the body of ‘gender blind’ analyses of the professions and their members (Burris, 1996). Consequently, feminist researchers have operated in a corrective fashion, investigating women’s relationship to professionalism. Studies show that women and femininity have often been treated as the ‘Other’ in relation to professionalism, making it hard for women to work within professional sites dominated by men and masculine values that emphasize the virtues of competitiveness, control and instrumentality (Bell & Nkomo, 2003; Bruni & Gherardi, 2001). However, it is important to note that recent research also shows women are being welcomed into professional sites on the basis that specific feminine qualities frequently associated with women are thought to soften the traditional professional image (Bolton & Muzio, 2008).

From some of this research we can see how women, rather like some men, can occupy an ambivalent position in relation to discourses of professionalism. Noting this, some scholars have explored professionalism in relation to gendered identities and subjectivities (Bruni & Gherardi, 2001; Kerfoot, 2001, 2003; Whitehead, 2002). Many of these analyses have provided insights into how professional ‘knowing’, as theoretical knowledge, as technical expertise, and as a mode of being and relating, reproduces a way of engaging with the world that is gendered masculine. Earlier work by sociologist Robert Connell (1987, 1995) also acknowledges the link between professionalism and masculinity:
The combination of theoretical knowledge with technical expertise is central to a professional’s claim to competence and to a monopoly of practice. This has been constructed historically as a form of masculinity: emotionally flat, centred on a specialized skill, insistent on professional esteem and technically based dominance over other workers.

(1987: 181)

As Whitehead (2002) rightly points out, Connell’s commentary on professionalism highlights an important link between professionalism and masculinity, but it can be read as assuming that all professionals adopt a singular and unitary masculinity. Subsequent analyses of the dynamic between professionalism and masculinity have been more illuminating (Dent & Whitehead, 2001), demonstrating that not all professionals possess, or relate in the same way to, the type of masculinity Connell (1987) outlines above.

Academics have also explored the multiplicity of ways in which individuals construct and maintain a contingent sense of identity as ‘professional’. Drawing upon poststructuralist-feminist theorizing on the self, subjectivity and identity (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1979; McNay, 1992; Sawicki, 1991), these scholars explore contested definitions and understandings of what constitutes, in discursive terms, a field of professional conduct, the professional and professional practice (Barry et al., 2003; Dent & Whitehead, 2001; Fournier, 1999; Hodgson, 2005). Some of this research focuses on professionalism as an identity, discursively constructed, open to moments of resistance, and alteration (Kerfoot, 2003). Similarly, our approach to understanding the concept of ‘the professional’ and, relatedly, to the notion of ‘professionalism’ is grounded in these poststructuralist analyses that regard such concepts as discursive constructs. In other words, the ‘professional’ is a discursive subject, and as such always in process: given meaning by the various actions undertaken by the subject to demonstrate ‘mastery’ of a professional ideal. Further to this, like Bruni and Gherardi (2001) and others (Whitehead, 2002), we do not regard the term ‘professional’ to be gender neutral. We acknowledge the merit in recognizing the unpredictable, contradictory and often discontinuous experiences of professionals engaging in and with gendered discourses of professionalism.

However, as much as poststructuralist analyses of professionalism have advanced the analysis of how women and men come to embody and enact a gendered professional self, discussion of how sexuality might influence this process of becoming ‘professional’ is limited. As Deverell (2001) rightly
points out, few scholars have sought to explore how discourses of sexuality intersect within discourses of professionalism; fewer still acknowledge the tensions arising from these intersecting discourses, and the implications for LGBT people who seek to manage themselves as ‘professional’.

Homosexuality and professionalism

Studies that explore how gay men (or LBT people) might construct professional identities are scarce. However, historians of human sexuality have been more astute here. For example, David Greenberg (1988) suggests there is good reason to think that bureaucratization has influenced attitudes towards male homosexuality. The explosion of bureaucratic organizations and the associative legitimization of bureaucracy in the latter half of the 19th century demanded methods of working steeped in impersonality. One result of this, Greenberg argues, was the suppression of emotional responses among men. The internalized prohibition against male-to-male intimacy within bureaucratic organizations provided one condition for hostile attitudes towards male homosexuality. But it is also important to note that ‘impersonality’ ideals that have traditionally underpinned bureaucratic ways of relating have also been invoked against sexualities more broadly. For example, heterosexual men have also found themselves under scrutiny to keep out sexuality from certain professional sites, as evidenced in research that examines the experiences of male primary school teachers (Foster & Newman, 2005).

Nonetheless, social constructionist accounts of sexuality have amply demonstrated that male homosexuality has been discursively constructed in terms of ‘pollution’ and ‘excess’ (Foucault, 1979; Weeks, 1977). Thus claims to professionalism made by gay men in the public domain of work have been and continue to be in some contexts threatened by constructions of male homosexuality as a sin, disease or psychological disorder. Encounters with public service users seem especially fraught, arousing moral anxieties among many heterosexuals. Humphrey (1999: 135) is emphatic on this issue: ‘vilification reaches its zenith precisely at the point when lesbians and gay men become qualified as public service professionals’. There is compelling empirical evidence to support this assertion.

For example, previous research shows how gay men sometimes struggle to appear as ‘competent’ professionals. Studies of gay men employed in public service professions such as teaching (Knopp, 1999; Rofes, 2000; Skelton, 2000), policing (Burke, 1993) and local government (Humphrey, 1999) reveal how some gay men modify their display of ‘professional’
behaviour in order to minimize the threat from discourses of male homosexuality that aim to cast lasting aspersions on their ability to perform professional roles. For instance, in Woods and Lucas’s (1993) study of gay male professionals in the US, many of the men interviewed suggested that it was ‘unprofessional’ to disclose their sexuality to colleagues. An aspect of managing the professional self, exercised by those gay men who sought to appear as competent professionals, is at the level of personal feelings about the relationship between sexuality and professionalism. In Woods and Lucas’s study, the two were often treated as separate areas of activity. Even those gay men who occupied positions of authority, as managers and directors, still insisted that gay male subordinates be discrete about their sexuality in the workplace. In these situations, discourses of professionalism are shown to have a normative dimension inasmuch as they privilege an image of the professional as a ‘rational (male) individual who keeps his emotions in check and his personal matters out of the office’ (p. 68). Indeed, as Woods and Lucas’s study suggests, discourses of professionalism can (un)wittingly constrain the opportunities for gay men to construct a sense of identity in terms of homosexuality.

As we have already mentioned, gay men alone do not encounter identity dilemmas associated with the pursuit of professionalism. But the dearth of research on how gay men may fashion themselves as ‘professionals’ at the level of identity leaves many questions unanswered. For example, not enough is known about how gay men construct professional identities using their bodies, as well as in terms of particularized behavioural displays, and in diverse organizational environments such as those that may be described as ‘gay-friendly’ (Colgan et al., 2007, 2008).

With the last point in mind, Katie Deverell’s (2001) research casts further light on the relationship between sexuality and professionalism. The gay men employed as HIV outreach workers in Deverell’s study had a ‘professional concern defined in terms of sex and sexuality . . . and [were] often employed on the basis of their own sexuality’ (2001: xiv). Deverell found that gay men crossed and violated conventional boundaries and understandings of professionalism and public–private selves, not least of all by bringing gay male sexuality into the public professional arena as a core component of their professional role. Deverell’s study is useful because it shows how gay men can be marginalized by normative discourses of professionalism but equally are able to subvert them in order to construct and affirm a sense of self as professional. Deverell’s work reminds us that gay men are not always excluded from professional sites, and that gay men exercise agency in the process of becoming ‘professional’. Indeed, research of this kind has provided us with a fresh impulse to explore further how and
in what manner gay men constitute a professional self at given moments in their work lives.

**Research methodology**

We draw on poststructuralist theorizing on the self, identity and professionalism in order to provide an analysis of the self-identification practices of 10 gay male professionals employed in a British public sector organization. This is also to conceive of sexuality and gender as discursive constructions that interlink, are historically specific and vary across cultures (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1979). The interrelatedness of gender and sexuality is understood to be fluid (Richardson, 2008), and the meanings given to gender and sexuality are socially organized and discursively constituted (Weeks, 2003). Not only this, but we follow those feminists who borrow from poststructuralism (Butler, 1990; Gherardi, 1995; Sawicki, 1991), and who articulate gender and sexuality in performative terms: as enacted, and as constituted in intersubjective dynamics. This is because discourses on gender and sexuality have an open texture insomuch as they might be challenged, evident in the contestation of meanings that surround gender and sexual identity categories (Butler, 1990, 2004). Thus how gay men construct identities that relate to sexuality, gender and professionalism is regarded as a negotiated, contradictory and ambiguous process. As Halford and Leonard (1999: 109) note, writing on professionalism and the construction of the self, identities are always in a ‘process of being constructed, continually subject to change as the relations, practices and discourses which surround individuals change’.

Within this theoretical frame, we present data gathered from in-depth interviews carried out in the UK between 2004 and 2005 with 10 gay men employed in clinical, managerial, administrative, human resource and training roles, ranging in age from 20 to 48, in one British National Health Service Trust. The sample was constructed using a snowball technique, often used in the study of LGBT people because participants are hard to find due to their ‘invisibility’ (Browne, 2005). The organization is both large and complex, employing over 5000 employees, and structured into eight major directorates that provide (non)emergency health care services to patients. The organization was selected for two main reasons.

First, one of the authors had a personal contact in the organization who knew a number of gay men who might be interested in participating in the study. This helped to overcome some of the problems confronted by researchers when trying to research LGBT employees within one organization (see Ward & Winstanley, 2006). Second, the organization had undertaken
considerable work around establishing ‘good practice’ in the area of diversity policies and practices to recruit, retain, develop and advance LGBT employees (Colgan et al., 2008). For example, the organization was, at the time of research, developing a LGBT support network and steering group that could monitor and advise senior management on how they might engage more effectively with the needs of LGBT employees. Such features are suggestive of a ‘progressive organization’, one that resembles what Giuffre et al. (2008) describe as ‘gay-friendly’.

However, conducting research within a ‘gay-friendly’ organization does not mean that gay men are likely to be more trusting and willing to participate in an academic study. Regarding the process of interviewing, one of the authors conducted the interviews since it was his identity as a gay man that was key in building a research relationship based on trust. While we do not assume that a shared sexual identity cultivates trust, or automatically facilitates an expansive interview dialogue, it was apparent that sharing this information did help to put the interviewees at ease (Heaphy et al., 1998). Prior to commencing the interviews, the same researcher spoke to the men either by telephone or in person to discuss fully the study’s aim and interview schedule. Here, the chance to make clear the study’s purpose for gathering data helped pave the way for developing trust and a participatory approach to the research process. Indeed, the researcher’s sexual identity influenced the data collected, not least because certain lines of questioning, such as those pertaining to sexuality, could be pursued in some considerable depth.

All the interviews were conducted outside of the workplace. The interviews were semi-structured, tape-recorded, and generally lasted between two and three hours, which allowed the men to describe their general experiences of work in rich detail. Initial lines of questioning invited the men to talk about their work contexts, which sparked discussion in some interviews about the organization’s approach towards engaging with LGBT employees. Holding these data in mind, specific questions were asked about, for example, how the men experienced professionalism in the workplace. These conversations were particularly fruitful, providing rich insights into the ways in which different gay men constructed themselves as gay male professionals.

The interviews generated hundreds of pages of transcription. Interpreting the data involved using discourse analysis techniques. We employed a form of discourse analysis that mobilized a Foucauldian concept of discourse (Foucault, 1979) in order to analyse the ‘particular configurations of conventionalized practices (genres, discourses, narratives, etc.) which are available to text producers in particular social circumstances’ (Fairclough,
1992: 194). In so doing, we sought to trace different discourses of sexuality, gender and professionalism within the interview accounts that influenced how certain practices and people are constructed as ‘professional’. More specifically, it is possible to observe from the interview data the incoherencies and ambiguities that characterize the interviewees’ accounts of becoming a gay male professional in the workplace.

From analysing the interview data manually, we noted four major themes connected to sexuality and professionalism: 1) intimacy and friendship; 2) the organizational context of professional work for gay men; 3) professional conduct; 4) and professional bodies. On grounds of space, and given that the first theme has been explored by one of the authors elsewhere (Rumens, 2008a, 2008b), themes 2 to 4 are examined below. These themes were the most prominent in the interview data, but it is important to note that not all the study participants discussed these themes in the same degree of detail. Indeed, the interview excerpts we present below are a careful selection of some of the most articulate expressions of ideas and perspectives expressed by some, but not necessarily all other, interviewees. Thus, while we hope to do some justice to demonstrating the variety of perspectives put forward by the interviews, it must be acknowledged that our presentation and interpretation of interview data here is not regarded as definitive. Lastly, it is crucial to note that in order to protect the interviewees’ anonymity, the names used below are pseudonyms selected by the men.

We focus in the next section on the first of the three themes, which aims to provide some insight into the contextual aspect of the sites of professional work described by the gay men.

‘Progressive’ work contexts: The perceived opportunities for gay men to self-identify as ‘professional’

During the interviews, it was apparent that social, political and organizational factors had been influential in creating ‘gay-friendly’ work contexts in which the interviewees could emphasize their professionalism. For example, most interviewees made reference to the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations, suggesting they had a positive impact on their work lives. As with some of the LGB respondents in Colgan et al.’s (2008) study, our participants put forward the view that the Regulations had either solidified existing organizational sexual diversity initiatives, or provided an incentive to senior management to develop new ‘gay-friendly’ policies and practices. The impact of the Regulations could be felt at an individual level. For instance, Denton (project manager) commented that he does
not feel compelled to censor heavily what he discusses with colleagues and managers in regard to his sexuality in particular, and his personal life more generally. A similar story was told by others, including Douglas (paramedic) who provided numerous accounts of discriminatory behaviours within organizations he had previously worked for. In contrast, Douglas noted that he felt ‘comfortable’ being ‘open’ about his sexuality with colleagues and managers.

Not surprisingly, studies show that gay-friendly work environments can facilitate happiness and greater confidence among LGBT employees, as well as pride and loyalty towards employers (Colgan et al., 2008; Day & Schoenrade, 2000; Giuffre et al., 2008). There is, however, another benefit for LGBT employees, seldom focused on in these studies, which concerns the identity work involved in becoming a ‘professional’. Morgan (senior manager) explains:

I think many people have just stopped caring about homosexuals . . . because it’s just another norm . . . the world’s changed, and even the NHS has tried hard to foster an open environment where I can behave as a normal professional, and be regarded as a professional by others . . . I’m appreciative of that . . . because it’s a place where gay men are just accepted in that way.

We can understand Morgan’s positive outlook in terms of his strong identification with his employer’s efforts to create a ‘gay-friendly’ work culture. For Morgan, this has formed an organizational landscape against which gay men are perceived to be able to ‘come out’ to colleagues without fear of becoming an easy target for homophobic forms of discrimination. Indeed, in a demanding workplace where expectations of work performance are high, and where work outputs are monitored meticulously, apprehensions about the potential homophobia of colleagues seldom occupy the minds of senior managers like Morgan.

Tony, a hospital doctor, is another example. Concerns about whether he will meet his performance objectives override most other day-to-day worries about how colleagues view him as a gay man. Put differently, Tony’s and Morgan’s efforts at constructing a professional identity are not structured by various concerns to ‘hide’ or ‘conceal’ their sexual identity from both their peers and superiors. This is not to say they are ‘happy’ to divulge their sexual identity to anyone in the workplace. As with the other interviewees, they appear to be selective in terms of those to whom they disclose by taking into account the recipient’s trustworthiness, for example. It was not apparent from speaking to the interviewees that the decision to ‘come
Dion’s assertion of professionalism is particularly illuminating because we begin to get a sense of the terms upon which some gay men are able to claim professionalism. While it is clear that wider social, legal and cultural shifts may change discourses on sexuality and professionalism, it would be unwise to assume that gay men can yoke together any version of professionalism and gay male sexuality. In the case of Dion, this is observed in his self-definition as a gay man who wears the ‘acceptable face of homosexuality’. Striking, then, is that Dion, like Morgan, presents as a ‘normal gay professional’. But Dion’s reconstruction of the professional ideal is articulated in a more pointed manner than Morgan’s. His assertion of economic independence and gender conventionality constitutes two socially acceptable characteristics of a normalized gay/lesbian subject (Seidman, 2002). These are significant elements since Dion partly signals his professionalism through a lifestyle that is characterized by middle-class affluence. Constructing himself as an economically independent professional, one who drives a luxurious car, regularly holidays with his partner, and who wears expensive clothes to work, Dion moves away from traditional stereotypes of gay men as hedonistic and licentious individuals. Indeed, Dion’s life bears the hallmarks of a middle-class way of living enjoyed by many of his heterosexual professional colleagues.

Taken together, Dion and Morgan, albeit in differing ways, at once acknowledge how they are different from their heterosexual colleagues in terms of sexuality as well as the ways in which they are similar. Both men see themselves, in large part, as blending into the heterosexual milieu of everyday work life. In a business environment that is perceived not to care much about male homosexuality as an issue of moral concern, Morgan
positions himself as the ‘equal’ of his heterosexual professional counterparts. Similarly, Dion claims a professional identity that is based on similitude. But as a well-heeled gay man, Dion is able to finance the sorts of activities enjoyed by socially respectable, middle-class heterosexual professionals. Indeed, it would be too simplistic to assert that all gay men are equally positioned to lay claim to a professional identity. Other gay men who took part in the study could only imagine the material accoutrements deployed by Dion to inform his own sense of professionalism.

For example, Gordon (a paramedic) strongly identified as ‘a working-class lad’. While Gordon does not regard his working-class identity as being at odds with a professional identity, he recognizes that his desirable vision of professional life cannot be funded on ‘working-class wages’:

Like other gay men I see at work . . . I want to live in a nice detached house . . . with a posh car on the drive, and live a regular life with all its ups and downs . . . but that’s not gonna happen on a paramedic’s salary . . . behaving like a professional is one thing but living a professional lifestyle requires money in your back pocket.

In the case of Gordon, claiming a professional identity is a struggle. On the one hand, his financial constraints do not prevent him from self-identifying – and with pride – as ‘professional’ through his acquisition of specialist (‘clinical’) knowledge and technical skills he possess as a paramedic (Connell, 1987). On the other hand, he feels that the behaviours associated with a professional lifestyle, one that is heavily coded in terms of class, are currently out of his reach.

In summary, the excerpts above indicate that legal, social and cultural changes that have taken place over a number of years have afforded some gay men with opportunities to invent themselves afresh; not as closeted gay men, or token novelties, in the workplace (Woods & Lucas, 1993), but as respected and openly gay professionals. At the same time, there is also a sense in which constructing the self as professional is a struggle, and problematic for promulgating a set of expectations about how gay men should present as ‘professional’ in the workplace. Even in an organization described as ‘gay-friendly’, heteronormative values and perspectives may persist (Colgan et al., 2008), reflected in how, for example, the relationship between homo/sexuality and professionalism is understood. In what follows next we explore further the different ways gay men understand what it means to be a ‘professional’ in the workplace, highlighting some of the struggles encountered by the men in fashioning a professional self.
Professional conduct

Interviewees frequently mentioned that to be a professional involved maintaining ‘professional conduct’ in the workplace. Here more emphasis was placed on cultivating modes of behaviour rather than relying on formal qualifications and technical knowledge to identify as professional. As Grey (1998) and others (Fournier, 1999) note, professionalism sustains a disciplinary logic since identifying as professional through ‘appropriate’ forms of behaviour can entail self-regulation. In wanting to be taken ‘seriously’ as professionals, many of the interviewees said they modified their behaviour at work so as to convey to colleagues their aptitude for conducting themselves professionally. As we stated earlier, dominant ideas about what it is to be professional are premised on the belief that professionalism and sexuality are mutually exclusive. In other words, being professional ought to exclude sexuality (Deverell, 2001). Yet, even in ‘gay-friendly’ work cultures where such dichotomies are perhaps more prone to collapse, some interview accounts suggested that participants sometimes felt their sense of professional identity was in tension with their sexuality.

For example, Gordon suggested: ‘I don’t think sexuality should come into professionalism’. Speaking in the same vein, Tony (hospital doctor) advanced the view that the ‘openly gay professional’ ought to treat his sexuality as a ‘personal matter’. Even though both these interviewees are ‘openly gay’ in the workplace, these comments imply that the expression of gay male sexuality should be limited to the private sphere of life. Other interviewees rejected this perspective. Ciaran (supervisor) perceived the partnership of professionalism and sexuality to co-exist ‘peacefully’ within his ‘gay-friendly’ workplace. Morgan (senior manager) offered more detail: ‘I don’t think being gay makes professionalism problematic, I think how your homosexuality manifests itself does’. For these men, while sexuality is not seen as a problematic element in the construction of a professional identity, much depends on how it is expressed as to whether it is deemed to be an impediment in establishing professional competence.

As Morgan intimates above, the experience of being both openly gay and a professional is informed by discourses on professional conduct that constitute a mode of regulation of the self (Fournier, 1999; Kerfoot, 2003). Ryan, a hospital doctor, explains:

The hospital is not ready . . . for a camp acting doctor . . . because it brings sexuality into the public eye, and is the workplace the right place to do that? I think the answer is ‘no’ because it’s at the expense of patients . . . if you want to have a political, moral and sociological
debate about homosexuality, save it for ‘Question Time’, not when patients are in pain.

We observe in Ryan’s talk that the worst possible expression of gay male sexuality is one that is coded in stereotyped femininity: the performance of ‘camp’ is seen as being disruptive and potentially inimical to the delivery of effective patient care. Ryan provides a flat interpretation of ‘camp’ as the excessive and grotesque display of femininity, one that ironed out its potential for irony and parody to point up sexuality and gender as performative phenomena (Butler, 1990). In wanting to be taken ‘seriously’ as a gay professional, Ryan seeks recourse to a normative cultural standard of what ‘counts’ in his work context as professional conduct. Constructing himself as a busy professional with a burgeoning workload, and harbouring no desire or time to ‘flaunt’ his sexuality on the hospital wards, Ryan sets himself apart from those gay men who might threaten his sense of professional self. Indeed, Ryan goes as far as to suggest that ‘camp’ gay men in the workplace might deserve the harsh evaluations they receive from colleagues:

If I, as a gay man, cannot identify with gay men who are camp, how on earth can a straight person identify with them? A straight bloke looking at a camp gay man is probably thinking this person is not even male . . . I cannot criticize a straight man for criticizing him.

The figure of the camp gay man is constructed by Ryan as a flagrant transgressor of conventional gendered significations, one who is offered up as a legitimate target for vilification. In doing so, Ryan describes camp gay men as ‘unprofessional’; positioning them as an organizational ‘Other’ against which he can define his sense of professional self by what it lacks. It is useful to note here that a parallel may be drawn with how some forms of heterosexual are performed in the workplace. As feminist research shows, similar accusations of ‘unprofessional behaviour’ may also be levelled at heterosexual men and women who engage in overt heterosexual behaviour, such as flirtation or telling sexist jokes (Cockburn, 1991).

What the extracts above show is that (in)formal codes that surround professional conduct are not gender neutral (Davies, 1996; Dent & Whitehead, 2001). Dominant discourses of professionalism sustain the masculinity of organization in the way they endorse certain values, beliefs and actions that have become heavily associated with forms of normative masculinity and men’s practices (Kerfoot, 2001). To illustrate further, depicting himself as an aspiring professional, Tom found his line manager influential in shaping an organization specific definition of ‘acceptable’ professional conduct:
My human resources manager is always talking to me about presenting and behaving as a professional HR practitioner . . . as someone who is commercially aware about ‘adding value’, ‘bottom lines’ and ‘best practice’.

In this work context, Tom is required to be articulate in the vocabulary of the commercially minded human resources professional. As such, Tom’s manager pressures him to comply with a form of professional conduct that is framed by a construction of organizational masculinity premised on a purposive-rational mode of behaviour (Kerfoot, 2001). But, as previous research shows in relation to women (Bruni & Gherardi, 2001), not all individuals are able to match closely such codes of professional conduct.

Tom went on to say:

It’s becoming a hard HRM environment, and I sometimes I feel that I’m exposing myself to criticism from other managers about being too soft, especially if I come across as being a bit effeminate.

Tom is aware that his sense of self as ‘gay’ is sometimes perceived to be out of kilter with how his colleagues understand the meaning of being a professional. Indeed, Tom senses the potential for a stereotyped notion of gay men lacking ‘real masculinity’ (Kimmel, 1994) to hold some currency in his workplace. Thus, employed within a performative-orientated work culture, Tom’s sense of self as professional is subject to constant (re)positioning. Here, unlike Dion or Morgan introduced above, Tom perceives a potential dissonance being located across two signifiers: the professional and the gay man. Engaging in the type of professional conduct his boss advocates is regarded by Tom as a way of resolving the tensions that might arise from simultaneously locating himself across these shifting and intersecting subject positions. One response, grounded in a principle of accommodation, is to engage with a set of traditional discourses on professionalism that narrowly proscribe what it takes to be a professional in gendered terms.

In summary, from Tom’s account we can see how the construction of a professional identity becomes tethered to the technologies of human resource management within the public sector. There is an emerging sense here that some gay-friendly work environments might not provide a wide scope for gay men to construct themselves as professional. Not least because some ‘gay-friendly’ work environments are not discharged of the organizational discourses that trumpet the importance of enhancing organizational performativity through certain gendered modes of engagement, which create tensions that are felt at an individual level. Certainly for Tom, his occupation
of a work role towards the bottom of the organizational hierarchy may restrict (but not foreclose entirely) his opportunity to challenge and reconstitute organizational discourses on professionalism.

**Professional bodies**

Another way in which the sense of being an openly gay professional was made ‘real’ was at the level of the body. Fashioning the ‘professional body’ was taken very seriously by many of the interviewees. At one level, this is not surprising given that styles and brands of clothing, hairstyles and accessories such as jewellery have long been important in how LBGT people culturally perform gender and sexuality. Skidmore (1999) notes that LGB workers use clothing to convey or conceal their presence to employers and colleagues. To illustrate, Ciaran recalled the time he wore a T-shirt to work printed with the slogan: ‘It takes balls to be a fairy’. Even though Ciaran wore the T-shirt on a dress-down day to help raise awareness and money for a LGBT charity, he earned himself a ‘mild ticking off’ from his boss for being ‘unprofessional’. Even in a gay-friendly work context, Ciaran’s action was read by some colleagues as an example of ‘flaunting [his] sexuality in an inappropriate way’.

Other illustrations of dressing the professional body came from those men who invested heavily in wardrobes of designer clothes. Occupying a well-paid managerial job, Morgan said that wearing expensive clothes to work had a positive impact on his sense of professionalism: ‘when I wear my Paul Smith suit to the office, I know that I am a professional and part of the Trust’. To this Denton added that he enjoyed feeling professional every time he wore his ‘Jil Sander suit’ to work, accessorized with a ‘satchel’ from ‘Mulberry’. Cutting a dash in the office enabled Denton, and others like him, to stand above other professionals who paid less attention to constructing the professional body. Expensive Paul Smith suits, noted for their ‘careful tailoring’, ‘brightly coloured linings and stitching’, helps Morgan to cut himself as a sharp suited and minded professional who is not afraid to ‘set trends’. Seen as such, both Denton and Morgan break the traditional mould from which professionals employed in the public sector have been stereotypically cast.

From one perspective, the use of particular clothes to dress the professional body may appear trivial, and certainly plays to a clichéd view that image, style and dress are issues that largely occupy the minds of gay men (Edwards, 2006) and women (Trethewey, 1999). From another point of view, how the professional body is dressed is an important matter, not least
because bodies are not independent of gender norms (Grosz, 1994). In that regard, the presentation of professional bodies in the workplace has material consequences (Trethewey, 1999). For example, the interviewees who set store by what clothes and accessories they wore to work reported feeling better placed to gain promotion. They also said they felt more ‘self-assured’ and ‘confident’. A neatly attired body was mostly considered to be an indicator of professionalism through a demonstration of control and ‘self-discipline’.

Because the gay male body, rather like the female body, can be at risk of being interpreted as site of sexual excess (Edwards, 2006), fashioning the body to appear professional is critical. Thus decisions about what (not) to wear to work are sometimes difficult. As Denton noted:

I want to look more edgy than the other guys in the office, especially the straight ones. I can do that through clothing . . . I guess it panders to the stereotype that gay men dress well . . . I’m okay with that. But you don’t want to overdo it . . . be seen to be a fashion victim that spends more time thinking about what to wear to work rather than on the job in hand.

For Denton, achieving distinctiveness as a professional gay man is partly about dressing well. But he is also aware of the potentially negative consequences of giving the impression of being a ‘slave to fashion’, rather than being a ‘slave to the job’. Put differently, Denton is cognizant of the perspective that suggests his appearance embodies an abbreviated mode of professional status for all to view: for a sign of organizational competence in occupying the body resides in the skill to portray the body in a manner that is culturally acceptable to the organization’s ‘bodily code’ (Kerfoot, 2000: 231). Crucially, such identity dilemmas are not unique to gay men, as previous research on women’s professional bodies indicates (Hammers, 2005; Trethewey, 1999), but they are certainly less remarked upon in the literature that explores professionalism and the body.

Constructing the professional body is not just limited to clothing. The body outline itself may be (re)sculpted in response to the take up of potential subject positions and identities coded in professionalism. For example, Douglas (paramedic) talked about how his ‘toned’ and ‘angular’ body shape projected a ‘straight acting’ version of masculinity. Douglas described ‘straight acting’ as a way of doing masculinity that allowed him to retain openness about his sexual identity that was at once self-satisfying and ‘acceptable’ to his ‘straight . . . mates’ (Martino, 2006). For Douglas, this was not only a conscious undertaking but also a pleasurable one. Douglas appears to ‘enjoy’ his daily visits to the gym and maintaining a ‘high-carb
diet’. There are ‘pay-offs’ for Douglas. First, he has a toned and chiselled physique that gives him the stamina to perform his job well. He also receives positive comments from his female and male colleagues, which he finds ‘flattering’. Second, by crafting a fit and lean body shape he conveys to others, most notably the patients he treats and cares for, that he is physically fit for the job. Douglas recalled one patient who had commented that he felt he was in a ‘strong pair of professional hands’, as Douglas carried him on a stretcher to the ambulance. In jobs that are physically demanding, a fit body helps the individual to cope.

However, one consequence of cultivating distinctiveness at the level of the body, especially for an openly gay man, is that Douglas risks being stereotyped as a vain and narcissistic gay male. Douglas mentioned that he was concerned at times to ‘police’ his appearance, so as to avoid becoming what he regarded to be an extreme version of male gayness: ‘it’s a fine line to tread . . . I have to think about it a lot because I don’t want to end up a Muscle Mary’. Douglas invokes the image of the over-pumped, muscle-bound body of the ‘Muscle Mary’ to indicate a ‘poncey’ and unprofessional body. To avoid being branded as vain, and thus risk being stereotyped in feminine rather than masculine terms, Douglas maintains a toned body that is deemed capable of delivering no more than the dexterity required of the paramedic’s role. Of course, Douglas’s athletic body is vulnerable to being read in ways that conflict with his preferred interpretation. As with all the examples above, Douglas’s efforts to construct a professional identity should not be read as resulting in a well-established and uncontested set of meanings. As feminist studies on female professionalism and the body reveal (Hammers, 2005; Trethewey, 1999), the body may be read in ways that threaten its association with professionalism.

**Conclusion**

This article has explored how 10 gay men construct themselves as professionals. The analysis is set against an organizational landscape that is perceived by the study participants to be ‘gay-friendly’. Perhaps the most interesting observation here is that ‘gay-friendly’ work contexts can facilitate the growth of opportunities for gay men to construct themselves as valued organizational members. Indeed, within such work locales, identities that relate to professionalism may be given primacy over sexuality: not through shame or self-loathing, but because other aspects of the self are considered by gay men to be more important and meaningful at given moments in certain settings (Seidman, 2002). As such, the interview accounts presented
above foreground the professional practices of gay men, as one example of
how people self-identify as ‘professional’ in the workplace. As gay men, like
other sexual minority groups, benefit from being successful and open about
their sexuality within professional arenas, discourses that emphasize the
separation between sexuality and professionalism are likely to come under
increasing criticism. In that regard, this study has shed further light on the
idea that gay men’s relationship to organizational life is changing in ways that,
as some of the interview data show, are deemed positive by gay men for the
expression of a professional identity. Indeed, the arguments presented in this
article build upon the small number of studies that aim to challenge norms of
professionalism predicated on the belief that professional discourses and
homosexuality are linked in problematic ways (Deverell, 2001).

One significant conclusion we may draw from the study is that, even
as more employers engage more sensitively with the needs and interests of
LGBT employees (Colgan et al., 2007, 2008), normative discourses of
professionalism that shape narrow ideals about professional conduct still
persist. Just as some of the men’s accounts of their professional lives may be
read as positive indicators of the visible access and success of gay men within
professional sites, the cultural freight attached to male homosexuality can
still disrupt attempts to self-identify as openly gay and professional in the
workplace. For example, the expression of a stereotyped camp gay male
sexuality is seen by some interviewees (Ryan, introduced above) to undercut
modes of behaviour grounded in rationality and objectivity used to demon-
strate their professional competence.

Another illustration provided in this article concerns how some inter-
viewees pay close attention to what they wear to work as well as how they
sculpt their body outline in order to appear ‘professional’. Clothes and body
shape may operate as a source of confidence and stamina for performing
professional work in a competent manner. While these men exhibit optimism
in their outlook on being able to self-identify as professional at work, they
are also mindful of the discourses that might derail their efforts by stereo-
typing them as narcissistic and unproductive slaves to fashion. Thus, they
are seen to be cautious in how they use clothing or their bodies to construct
a sense of professionalism in the workplace.

Overall, the analytical insights assembled in this article find a clear
resonance with prior research conducted into the identity dilemmas of
professionals. Previous studies suggest that many individuals including
women, people of different age groups and ethnic minorities conform to
professional standards of conduct at work (Bell & Nkomo, 2003). In so
doing, and like some of our study participants, they might limit their
expression of aspects of their identity deemed to be incongruent with
normative ideals of professionalism in any given work situation. As such, our focus on gay men is merely one example of how individuals engage with contemporary norms of professionalism.

However, and to repeat an earlier point, the exploration of how gay men and other sexual minority employees take up discourses of professionalism is underdeveloped. Indeed, one of our intentions has been to provide an impetus for other researchers to examine fully how LGBT people ascribe meaning to being a professional in diverse organizational settings. As this article has shown, the discursive practices of becoming professional are varied, ambiguous and gendered. One concluding remark here is that the contemporary discourses of professionalism described by the study participants do not appear to exclude them from professional sites of work. Yet we cannot go as far as to say that they destabilize entirely those professional practices that have as their archetype ‘not just a man but, to a large extent, a white heterosexual middle-class man’ (Grey, 1998: 584). That some interviewees are vigilant in how they conduct and shape themselves as professionals is revealing of the perceived risks of being labelled ‘unprofessional’ by, for example, being seen to embody a stereotyped gay male sexuality. Certainly, one productive line of future inquiry is to investigate in more detail the numerous ways gay men are able to resist dominant professional norms across different organizational settings. We also endorse research that examines how lesbian, bisexual and transgender employees engage with notions of professionalism, and how such discursive practices are shaped along the lines of class, age, ethnicity and race. Indeed, organizational researchers would do well to nuance further academic knowledge about the impact of aspects of individual difference on shaping professional lives given the heterogeneous dynamics of many contemporary workplaces.

Note

1 In this article, discourse is read through a Foucauldian lens (Foucault, 1979). As such, discourses refer to images, beliefs, concepts, language and actions, which provide the means by which individuals negotiate the construction and meaning of genders and sexualities. Put differently, discourses establish frames of intelligibility by providing the means by which knowledge is regarded as relevant in any given context.

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