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Gay men's identity work and the social construction of discrimination

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Short title: IDENTITY AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF  
DISCRIMINATION

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# IDENTITY AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF DISCRIMINATION

## ABSTRACT

Although the lives of gay men in the post-closet generation are easier in many ways, everyday discrimination still exists in the forms of heterosexism and microaggressions. These forms of discrimination are difficult and risky to talk about, partly because they are often ambiguous, but also because these conversations can disrupt the status quo. In this paper, we explore how the idea of ‘discrimination’ is more complex than it might first appear, and how the boundaries between ‘discrimination’ and ‘not discrimination’ are socially constructed. We conducted qualitative interviews with fifteen undergraduate students who self-identified as gay men, and used dialogical analysis to explore their identity work. Participants constructed discrimination/ not discrimination in different ways as they shifted between different I- positions: I- as authentic individual, I- as what I am not (not camp, and not a victim), and I- as powerful. Our analysis indicates the extent to which ‘discrimination’ is socially constructed (rather than an objective reality), and suggests means by which practitioners and advocates can support clients in talking about discrimination.

Key words: discrimination, identity, attribution, stigma, heterosexism, homophobia

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Most people would agree that discrimination is wrong, and that it should be identified and challenged whenever possible (Billig, 1988/ 2012). In practice, however, defining the boundaries of discrimination/ not discrimination is often fraught and highly contested; if I speak to you in a distant and offhand manner, is it because I am homophobic or because I am unfriendly? If I ask you repeatedly about your sexual history, is it because I am interested or prurient? Deciding that an event constitutes discrimination is difficult, and calling it out is risky (Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Kirkwood, McKinlay, & McVittie, 2013; Linneman, 2000; Schultz & Maddox, 2013): most contemporary examples of discrimination are attributionally ambiguous (i.e., they can be explained in a number of different ways) and/ or everyday microaggressions (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Major & Crocker, 1993; Neblett Jr, Shelton, & Sellers, 2004; Sue, 2010). Even when dealing with examples of outright hate, practitioners may find it difficult to persuade vulnerable clients that what they have experienced is discrimination (Reavey, Ahmed, & Majumdar, 2006): Kirkwood et al., (2013) have suggested that minorities often use discrimination as ‘a last resort’ to explain painful or unpleasant experiences.

In this paper, we explore how self-identified young gay men talk about discrimination, and how this is related to their identity work. We show how the concept of ‘discrimination’ can be constructed and reconstructed in different ways in talk.

### Constructing ‘discrimination’ as a self-identified gay man

It is a painful irony that the many positive social, political, and institutional changes that have affected LGBTQ+ people in the UK (Weeks, 2007) may also make it more

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difficult to talk about discrimination (Harries, 2014). Recent years have seen the repeal of discriminatory legislation, the introduction of civil partnerships, and an increased visibility of people who are LGBTQ+ in the mass media. Young gay men are unlikely to experience homophobic hatred in the way that they might have done in the past, but this does not mean that discrimination is 'over'. Contemporary young gay men may experience regular heterosexist micro-aggressions: they are expected to 'out' themselves in a way that heterosexuals are not; to answer personal and intrusive questions; and to be alert to the sensibilities of non-LGBTQ+ people (Rasmussen, 2004; Taulke-Johnson, 2010). These forms of discrimination are often more difficult to disambiguate in practice (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Major & Crocker, 1993) and are much less likely to be understood as discrimination (Sommers & Norton, 2006).

How gay men construct discrimination is also affected by contemporary performances of gay subjectivities. Duggan (2002) coined the term 'homonormativity' to describe a performance of politically moderate straight-acting. Homonormativity can be seen as a form of social capital that facilitates individual assimilation in a heterosexist environment (Rosenfeld, 2009), but with a cost: a number of studies have indicated how politically conservative discourse seeks to separate 'the good gay' from 'the bad gay' (Smith, 1994; see also Butler, 2002; Epstein et al., 2000; Fejes, 2000; Richardson, 2004; Taywaditep, 2001). The homonormative 'good gay' is straight-acting: discrete, moderate, and private. The 'bad gay', in contrast, is effeminate but also predatory, perverse, and politically strident. Talking about discrimination therefore presents an identity risk because it may be inconsistent with a performance of politically moderate homonormativity.

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### Attributing and/ or constructing discrimination

We are not aware of any research that has looked specifically at how self-identified gay men construct discrimination. However, there are two literatures which have conducted comparable work looking at racism and sexism. First, experimental psychologists have explored the cognitive processes involved in attributing discrimination. Second, qualitative and ethnographic social scientists have described how specific social groups talk about ‘discrimination’.

Experimental psychologists have a longstanding interest in ‘attribution’ (how ordinary people attempt to explain why something has happened). Heider (1958) argued that attribution is motivated by an attempt to understand (and therefore predict) the social world. As we have already outlined, attributing discrimination (explaining why something happened with reference to discrimination) is complex because contemporary forms of discrimination are frequently ambiguous (Major & Crocker, 1993; Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003; see reviews by Barreto, 2015; Carter & Murphy, 2015; Kaiser & Major, 2006). Research shows that participants are strongly influenced by information about intent and harm; for example, people are much more likely to make an attribution of discrimination if there is information that the actor intended to discriminate and/ or that the target experienced material or emotional harm (Swim, Scott, Sechrist, Campbell, & Stangor, 2003). Minorities who identify strongly with their ingroup are more likely to make attributions to discrimination (Sellers, & Shelton, 2003), but this may be counterbalanced by their motivation to fit in with other people more generally (Carvallo and Pelham (2006). Based on this research, we might expect that men who strongly identify with being gay will be more likely to make attributions of discrimination (because they are more alert to

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homophobia). At the same time, however, a strong need to fit in may mitigate against this, because calling out discrimination can be disruptive to relationships.<sup>1</sup>

Research within experimental psychology is important in showing how attributing discrimination is complex and how there can be a push/ pull of different motivations. It is also important in indicating the role of ingroup identification and interactional goals. In contrast, qualitative and ethnographic research emphasises how ‘discrimination’ is constructed within the everyday social practices of minorities (e.g., African-American men, migrants living in Greece, refugees and asylum seekers in Glasgow). This body of research does not aim to account for the processing of objective information (as in the experimental tradition), but rather the construction of an account that is functional in the context that the researcher describes (Edwards & Potter, 1993; Potter & Edwards, 1990). For example, Wilkins (2012) explored how African-American men negotiate predominantly white university campuses. She describes a specific form of identity work called ‘moderate blackness’, which is emotionally restrained, politically moderate, and signals a willingness to get on with white people. Importantly, men who perform moderate blackness also resist constructing experiences as ‘racism’: they attribute potentially racist events to ignorance or a lack of experience (see also Andreouli, Greenland, & Howarth, 2015; Kadianaki, 2014; Kirkwood et al., 2012; Schwalbe, Holden, & Schrock, 2000). There are striking parallels between Wilkins’ (2012) account of ‘moderate blackness’ and Duggan’s (2002) ‘homonormativity’. On this basis, we might expect that self-identified gay men who do homonormativity are more likely to construct potential discrimination as ‘ignorance’.

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There are therefore some interesting parallels between the experimental and qualitative literatures, despite their methodological and ontological differences. Both emphasise how the construction of discrimination is motivated (by the need to belong and to avoid being stereotyped), and the importance of identification (as an ingroup and as a member of a wider society).

### Identity and identity work

Both experimental and qualitative researchers describe the importance of identity in constructing/ attributing discrimination. However, they theorise identity in different ways. In the former, as a relatively fixed individual difference that can be measured (e.g., Neblett Jr, Shelton, & Sellers, 2004; Sellers, & Shelton, 2003); in the latter, as socially constructed and performative, and therefore multiple, fluid, and inter-subjective (e.g., Gillespie, Howarth, & Cornish, 2012; Howarth, 2002). It is this latter position that we took in our analysis: our participants all identified as gay men, but they were different kinds of gay men at different moments (e.g., with their families, with their lovers, and with their straight housemates). We wanted to capture how our participants 'did' gay in different contexts and with different people, and how they were more or less able to talk about discrimination in these different moments.

There are several examples of contemporary research that explore these kinds of identity work. For example, Clarke and Smith (2014) show how self-identified gay men negotiated contradictory identity positions: to be out but not too gay; to fit in with the scene but to avoid an associated loss of individuality. Two findings emerged strongly from these accounts (and elsewhere e.g., Clarke & Spence, 2013; Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Gill, Henwood, & McClean, 2005). First, participants experience a



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tension between group membership and authentic individuality. Second, participants often describe themselves in terms of who they are not, rather than positively affirming who they are.

We were interested in how young, self-identified gay men negotiated the boundaries of ‘discrimination’/ ‘not discrimination’ when talking about their experiences at university. We were particularly interested in how their accounts might be constructed in different ways within different identity positions. Dialogical analysis (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Aveling & Gillespie, 2008; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007; Salgado & Hermans, 2005) provided the tools to explore the different identity positions that our participants took up. It had the advantage of theorising identity as multiple and fluid, while also enabling the researcher to develop a set of structures (described as I-positions) with which to work. We could then explore how participants might perform differently in different identity positions.<sup>ii</sup>

We are not the first to apply dialogical analysis to the study of men. Kahn, Holmes, and Brett (2011) used dialogical analysis to explore masculinity in a domestic violence project. Three of the four I-positions that Kahn et al. described also mapped closely onto our own data: we therefore used these as a foundation for our own analysis. The three I-positions that we used were; ‘I- as authentic definer’ which emphasised ‘being real’; ‘I- as marginalised outsider’ (which we reframed into ‘I- as what I am not’) which outlined how participants distanced themselves from harmful manifestations of masculinity; and ‘I- as empowered advocate’, which described masculinity as providing drive and confidence to make a difference. The fourth I-

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position ‘I- as alternative use of dominance’ did not resonate with the work that our participants were doing and will not be discussed further.<sup>iii</sup>

Kahn, Holmes, and Brett’s analysis gave us a structure from which to move beyond participants’ identity work, in order to explore how they talked about discrimination within each of these I- positions. We would note that although these I- positions were generated using different methods and analysis to that of Clarke, Gill and colleagues outlined previously (Clarke & Spence, 2013; Clarke & Smith, 2014; Gill, Henwood, & McClean, 2005), the emphasis on authenticity and ‘what I am not’ in Kahn et al. was very similar to the work of those authors. This gave us added confidence that dialogical analysis was appropriate for our research.

### The current research

We were interested in the ways that young, self-identified gay men talked about ‘discrimination’. We used dialogical analysis to map the multiple identities that our participants used in talk, and then explored how they were able to talk (or not talk) about discrimination within each of these identity positions.

### METHOD

Data was collected with undergraduate students who identified as gay men (for a fuller description of the project see AUTHOR, 2009). Recruitment materials invited people to participate if they identified as a gay man who had lived/ were living in university accommodation, and who were interested in talking about their experiences. The recruitment materials provided some details about the researcher, including that he was an out gay man.<sup>iv</sup>

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All bar one of the participants were interviewed twice using one to one semi-structured interviews (one participant did not attend the second interview).<sup>v</sup>

Experience of discrimination was not a requirement for participation in the research, but the schedule included questions about negative experiences and feelings of comfort, and participants often talked about experiences that could be constructed as discrimination.

### **Participants**

Participants were fifteen students enrolled at the same university based in the south west of the UK. They were aged between 19 and 23 years old, and studying a range of different courses. All of the participants identified as gay men and as white British, and all bar one were out to their close family and friends. We recruited participants through friendship pyramids, public advertisements, and social media, and through membership of relevant organisations (e.g., the University LGBT society). No incentives were offered to participate in the study.

### **Analytic technique**

Dialogical analysis involved identifying, contrasting, and mapping multiple accounts of self (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007; Kahn, Holmes, & Brett, 2011; Kahn, Goddard, & Coy, 2013; Salgado & Hermans, 2005). We read and reread each of the transcripts, and wrote short biographies for each participant. We then highlighted extracts that seemed relevant to identity work (participants' claims about themselves, how they believed others saw them, and how they negotiated these expectations). We included individual and group identity claims, and both positive and negative claims (when

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participants made claims about who they were, or claims about who they were not, respectively).

Sorting the extracts into I- positions was similar to thematic analysis: we looked for patterns which represented the most frequent ways that our participants talked about themselves, and that provided a good fit for the data as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2012). As already outlined, our analysis was also informed by Kahn, Holmes, and Brett (2011). Once we were satisfied that the I- positions provided a broad framework for our participants' identity work, we started to explore how they talked (or did not talk) about discrimination within each of these I- positions. Finally, we re-read all the transcripts prioritising the reading of discrimination rather than identity. This confirmed that we had identified all substantive talk about discrimination through dialogical analysis.

### ANALYSIS

We worked through each of the I- positions in turn, describing each position and then exploring how participants did/ not talk about discrimination within that position.

#### **I- as authentic individual.**

This was the dominant I- position in our analysis and one that all of the participants used. Participants talked about being authentically themselves and only themselves.

Extract 1: Will, interview two

AUTHOR: Have there been times at university when you've – I think you've answered this – you've felt glad that you're different to the norm?

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Will: Well I don't – I mean I don't – like – I don't feel like 'hurray I'm gay' and I don't – and I wouldn't feel 'hurray' if I wasn't gay you know - you know I think either way I would be what I am sort of thing and it wouldn't – it wouldn't make any difference. The only –the only thing is you know I'm glad that I am the person – one of the people who can go out and be myself.

This I- position was consistent with other research on the importance of authenticity in identity work (Clarke & Smith, 2014; Clarke & Spence, 2013; Gill, Henwood, & McClean; Kahn, Holmes, & Brett, 2011). Researchers have also described how claims of authenticity can contain tensions, and this was evident in Extract one. Will was attempting to claim healthy authenticity in which he was 'gay but not too gay' (Clarke & Smith, 2014): he had to locate himself between the militant gay ('I don't feel like 'hurray I'm gay'') (Duggan, 2002) and the closeted or shamed gay ('and I wouldn't feel 'hurray' if I wasn't gay') (Rasmussen, 2004).

For our purposes, however, the issue was how this I- position was associated with talking about discrimination. When working in 'I- as authentic individual', participants very rarely talked about discrimination directly. This was consistent with Clarke and Smith's (2014) argument that authentic individuality is constructed in opposition to group membership. Will's insistence that his sexuality 'wouldn't make any difference' was a resistance to the category implied in the question (being 'different to the norm'). In this context, 'I- as authentic individual' was an attempt to claim a neutral identity in which sexuality was irrelevant (Tizard & Phoenix, 1995). As such, however, the tools by which participants might talk about discrimination

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(e.g., stories about their own or others' experiences, or group level data showing systematic inequalities) could not be mobilised.

This opposition between authentic identity and group identity can be demonstrated more directly below: participants' claims of authentic individuality were often constructed with reference to resistance to collective action (as represented by the Pride movement or the University's LGBT Society).

Extract 2: Noah, interview one.

[[Noah has been talking about how straight men sometimes make a point of telling him that they think he is 'all right']]

AUTHOR: Do you feel like you're a spokesperson for gay people?

Noah: Absolutely not, no. Er. I'm – just because there's one black person in a class doesn't mean that they are the spokesperson for black people.

AUTHOR: Uh huh.

Noah: In the same way that I have very different views to er – to some other gay people er you know. It should – it shouldn't – the responsibility shouldn't lie with me. Er. But at the same time I am in the minority so I kind of do have this – not – this responsibility to – to maintain – I don't know, some sort of image? But I don't feel like – I don't know. I just don't think – in the same way that ethnicity differentiates, I don't think sexuality really is the same – is the same thing. I don't know. It's a really tough one because it's six of one and half – half a dozen of the other. But I don't – I wouldn't – I wouldn't go on a gay pride march or – or anything like that so I'm not – as I said before I'm just a male that just so happens to be gay. And it's a very – it's a minor part of – not

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a minor part of my life, but it's only a fraction of who I actually am. It's only a fraction of my identity.

As in Will's account, Noah worked up individual authenticity ('I'm just a male that just so happens to be gay') in response to a context in which he might be defined by a his sexuality. In this extract, Noah was negotiating and resisting a master status (Becker, 1963) that others might seek to impose (both inside and outside the interview: Potter & Hepburn, 2005; see also Blackwood, Hopkins, & Reicher, 2015; Hopkins, 2011). Noah performed this resistance through positioning himself as an authentic individual ('it's only a fraction of who I actually am'), and used his non-participation in collective action ('I wouldn't go on a gay pride march or – or anything like that') as part of that work. Noah was emphatic that he was not a spokesperson for gay people, and repeatedly re-asserted his individuality. His repeated use of the word 'but' in the last turn built a contrast between authenticity and collective action. This was consistent with our analysis that I- as authentic individual was constructed in opposition to collective action.

All of our participants talked in the position I- as authentic individual. Talking about discrimination was unusual when participants spoke in this position, since they were resisting the very category in which discrimination might take place.

### **I- as what I am not.**

Identity work is frequently premised on who we are not (Clark & Smith, 2014; Davies & Harre, 1991; Dickerson, 2000): this seems to be particularly evident in young men

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(Gill, Henwood & McLean, 2005). All of our participants talked about who they were not: they turned repeatedly to accounts in which they were not camp and not victims.

*I- as not camp.*

Ten of our participants were emphatic that they were not camp and disliked men who were camp.

Extract 3: Harry, interview one.

AUTHOR: So what – what is it about gay people that you don't like?

Harry: Er. To be honest it's not like – gay people that are really camp that doesn't – that's not a quality that bothers me as in it doesn't offend me, it doesn't embarrass me. It's more gay people that are camp but they feel the need to thrust it in everyone's faces.

AUTHOR: Hmm

Harry: And then they wonder why they get negative reactions or – I'm not – it's really hard to explain. Like they wonder why people might stare, but when they're being so outrageous and stuff it's like – if I'm on the tube at home in London I find it awkward if I'm sitting across from a heterosexual couple and they're being overly affectionate.

AUTHOR: Hmm

Harry: And so I kind of don't know where to look and I might inadvertently like my eyes – like roll my eyes or something. And I'm not saying it's right but I think most people would agree that's it's even more uncomfortable if it's two women or two men doing it. And so I just find any kind of overt sexual



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display of any type just a bit uncomfortable. I suppose it's probably just the way I've been raised [L].

AUTHOR: OK.

Harry: I just find it a bit uncomfortable and then it's – it annoys me when gay people kind of give the impression that you know it's not fair, but it's just like well if you're behaving like that – I don't know, I'm just completely rambling now [[laughs]].

Harry's dislike of camp was a performance of both sissyphobia and homonormativity (Bergling, 2001; Clarkson, 2006; Duggan, 2002; see also Clarke & Smith, 2014). Harry distanced himself from one identity ('gay people... (who) thrust it in everyone's faces') in order to claim a private and more moderate identity.

Harry was therefore talking discrimination within 'I- as not camp' but (perhaps unexpectedly) as a performer of discrimination rather than as a target. He used a number of rhetorical techniques to deflect the reputational risk of appearing prejudiced (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Billig, 1988; Speer & Potter, 2000): note his use of a quasi-experimental comparison ('I find it awkward if I'm sitting across from a heterosexual couple') to claim that it was the behaviour (not the sexuality of the actors) that was the problem (see a similar example in Andreouli, Greenland, & Howarth, 2015). Note also his reference to intentionality ('I might inadvertently ... like roll my eyes or something') (Swim, Scott, Sechrist, Campbell, & Stangor, 2003). Harry was attempting to work around the boundaries of discrimination/ not

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discrimination to construct his position as an accidental response to the actions of others (rather than discrimination per se).

Harry also worked up an impatience with people who call out discrimination ('it annoys me when gay people kind of give the impression that you know it's not fair, but it's just like well if you're behaving like that'). The suggestion that people who call out discrimination were also partly responsible for that discrimination continues below.

### *I- as not a victim*

In defining themselves by who they were not, eleven of our participants positioned themselves as not victims of discrimination.

Extract 4: Daniel, interview one.

Daniel: And er – but I'm not regretting that I am gay.

AUTHOR: No no

Daniel: But obviously it would be easier. I always say that if I wasn't gay my life would be easier because it just general things is easier. You can show affection in the street and not feel like 'Oh my god are people watching?' sort of thing.

It's just -

AUTHOR: Yes

Daniel: But I don't regret it. I don't – like I'm happy.

AUTHOR: Yeah

Daniel: Like I'm not wishing 'Aww I wish I wasn't like that' sort of thing. But I'm not denying that it would be easier. I'm not saying get the violins out.

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AUTHOR: No no

Daniel: But you must know as well it's just a bit – it's different isn't it.

Daniel was negotiating the same tension between 'militant' and 'shamed' gay that we saw in Extract 1. He also acknowledged the effects of the gaze of others in his day to day life ('oh my god are people watching?') (Taulke-Johnson, 2010) and this constituted an ideological dilemma (Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton, & Radley, 1988). Daniel's account of himself as a healthy 'out' man was compromised by his alertness to the reactions of others (which we might construct as heterosexist, even if Daniel does not). He located himself within I- as not a victim as a way to resolve this dilemma: he was not shamed but he was pragmatic.

'I- as not a victim' required that discrimination was acknowledged in order that it could be denied. It oriented towards the Martyr-Target-Victim trope (Rofes, 2004) in order that this could be reworked into something more positive (see also Leisenring, 2006). Thus, although Daniel did talk about discrimination obliquely ('But I'm not denying that it would be easier'), he downgraded his experience into something relatively minor that should not be taken too seriously ('I'm not saying get the violins out'). When talking in this position, Daniel downgraded the restrictions and compromises of systematic heterosexism (e.g., regulating his behaviour to accommodate the gaze of strangers in public places) into 'different' (i.e., from 'discrimination' into 'not discrimination'). We can see this more clearly in Extracts 5 and 6.

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Extract 5: Ollie, interview one

AUTHOR: OK. So that's just like basic background information. Er.

Accommodation. Can you tell me a little bit about where you've lived these past two years?

OLLIE: Er. In university digs er at [[names building]]. The first year I was just a normal student, and then I've gone back as student warden for this year.

AUTHOR: Oh.

OLLIE: So I've lived in student accommodation for two years. I get free rent this year, ooh! [[laughs]]

AUTHOR: That's the one opposite the [[names landmark]]?

OLLIE: Yeah, yeah.

AUTHOR: That's great that you're a student warden. Yeah, we'll come onto that later. And do you like living in halls?

OLLIE: Er. The second half – it was difficult – last year yes, it was fine cos I lived with two girls, two boys and me. And then this year I lived with four boys. Three were Polish, one was English. Er. And it was awful until Christmas. And then I moved upstairs to where the other student warden lives cos it's all girls. Cos they were just really noisy, really – er quite hostile as well. Cos er I'm quite camp I suppose [[laughs]] and er I just don't hide it any way to anyone, and I think they were a bit threatened by it. And er they just kept like – oh it was just childish banter I think.

AUTHOR: OK.

OLLIE: So er yeah then I moved upstairs in December, up to the girls' flat. And it's fine now, yeah.

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The exchange in Extract 5 happened within the first few minutes of the first interview. Ollie presented a chronology within a ‘fact-finding’ conversation. The narrative of noisy and hostile flatmates who caused him to move was part of that chronology, and Ollie volunteered a painful narrative (‘difficult...awful’). Over the course of the interviews, Ollie described this harassment as including banging and screaming outside his door at night, laughing as he walked past, and damage to property. He described how this made him feel (‘er when I was in my room I felt oh very claustrophobic’) and changed his behaviour (keeping his bedroom door closed, moving property from shared spaces, and eventually moving out of the flat). Nevertheless, he framed the experience in a different way later in the same interview.

Extract 6: Ollie, interview one.

[[Ollie and AUTHOR have been talking about how Ollie has become more confident as a gay man]]

AUTHOR: Have you had any negative experiences here at [[names University]]?

Ollie: No.

AUTHOR: Because of your sexual orientation?

Ollie: No. Apart from the Polish boys but - living in residence, but I don’t blame them for that because that’s what they’ve been brought up with. And part of me is intolerant in a way of the way people do treat people like er – LGBT people generically, but I haven’t had any personal experience in uni of it. Unless it’s because I am confident in my sexuality. I don’t know if like a more – a less confident gay student would have had them.

AUTHOR: OK.

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Ollie: But because I'm quite forthwith and I'm quite you know – yeah I'm quite confident, so I think that has a lot to do with it. If I was quite shy and like constantly denying it and going oh no no no no I think then perhaps I would have had some. But no. To date. Touch wood.

Extract 6 followed from a conversation about authenticity, queer politics, and Ollie's journey from a bullied teenager into who he is today. In this context, Ollie quickly denied that he had had any negative experiences, before offering the Polish boys story as a partial qualification to those denials. In contrast to Extract 5 (which Ollie said happened partly because he is 'quite camp'), in Extract 6 Ollie attributed his non-victimhood to his personal agentic qualities (and specifically his confidence).

Ollie therefore constructed and reconstructed the same experience from 'discrimination' into 'not discrimination' depending on the identity work of the moment. In the run up to Extract 6, Ollie had built a 'survivor discourse' (Leisenring, 2006) that was predicated on his authenticity, determination, and personal growth. Talking about 'negative experiences' risked undermining that identity work, but Ollie had already talked about his Polish flatmates earlier in the interview. Ollie resolved the contradiction by reworking homophobia into a form of unintentional, cultural ignorance ('I don't blame them for that because that's what they've been brought up with'): and therefore not discrimination (see also Kadianaki, 2014; Kirkwood et al, 2012; Wilkins, 2012). An 'ignorance' discourse made it possible for Ollie to talk within the position I- as not a victim and to reconcile the potential contradictions in his account.

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There were a number of other examples in which participants transformed ‘discrimination’ into ‘not discrimination’ as they moved between different I-positions. Participants constructed accounts in which they were protected or insulated from homophobia because they were confident or secure in themselves, or because they were relatively straight-acting.

### **I- as powerful.**

Nine participants talked about themselves as powerful in challenging discrimination. This was therefore the only position in which participants talked directly about discrimination. In some cases, participants described doing active educational work (see Extract 8), but more often it was within the context of ‘banter’. Participants talked about how they contradicted and undermined stereotypes by ‘winding up’ and ‘grossing out’ their straight friends.

Extract 7 Toby interview two.

[[Toby has been talking about his straight male friends]]

Toby: But er – like – yeah er I’ll just like they’ll call me ‘Straightboy’ and I’m like ‘Yeah, only until I see you Shane you know, you just get like all these urges in me and I don’t know what to do with them’

AUTHOR: [[laughs]]

Toby: And he’s like ‘Shut up, shut up, shut up.’

AUTHOR: He’s really uncomfortable when you do it?

Toby: Yeah. And like just put my arm on his leg or something [[laughs]]

Toby’s account of competitive masculine ‘banter’ (Gough & Edwards, 1998) was repeated many times in our interviews. Our participants talked about experiences in

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which peers used pejorative language ('straightboy') and how they retaliated in kind. Kehily and Nayak (1997) have described 'banter' as a form of ritualised assault wrapped in the appearance of humour. The game requires that the target responds with indifference and/ or an increase in abuse. Toby presented an account of 'winning' the game: he responded to 'straightboy' with a parody of the hypersexualised stereotype ('I.. just get like all these urges'), and turned the tables on Shane. Shane became 'uncomfortable', and lost the game.

We interpreted Toby's account as a collaborative transformation of 'discrimination' into 'not discrimination' (Condor, 2006). This operated both within his account (transforming the potentially homophobic insult 'straightboy' into banter) and within the interview (transforming a potentially painful account into a funny story). In the story, Toby collaborated with a heterosexist game, and his playful response transformed Shane's use of 'straightboy' from (potential) 'intention to cause offence' into 'intention to be funny' (see Swim et al., 2003).

Participants' described themselves as powerful in winding up and grossing out their friends. These accounts required the naming of events that were potential discrimination, in order that participants could describe how they resisted them. However, participants' accounts often had the effect of constructing these events as humorous banter and therefore 'not discrimination'. We can see how our participants were caught in a double bind: either they accepted the insult as 'banter' (and constructed it as 'not discrimination'), or they challenged it and lost the game (with the associated costs of making a complaint: Edwards, 2005).



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A small number of participants talked about doing active educational work with their peers. This included contradicting stereotypes and assumptions, but also educating their peers about queer culture (e.g., Eurovision parties and films like *Brokeback Mountain*).

Extract 8: Jake interview one

[[AUTHOR and Jake have been talking about Jake's housemates]]

Jake: Yeah. Oh they sometimes talk about gay issues. Like er especially with like gay marriage and er we've had discussions about that. And like adopting kids sort of thing. I'm sure - when that came on one of my housemates was like 'Oh but you need a mother.' I was like no you - mother's important but you just need two loving parents.

AUTHOR: Uh huh.

Jake: And er he was like 'Oh suppose so.' And like - we've talked a bit about like - the fact like that gay men can't give blood cos they had the blood donor thing over the road.

AUTHOR: Yeah.

Jake: Er. And they all - they were all going. 'Are you coming Jake?' I was like 'Well no, I can't.' They were like 'Why?' 'Because I'm gay.' They were like 'Oh piss off, why?' [[laughs]] 'No I can't.' And then one of my housemates, cos like - cos he does like genetics, he's 'Well I can sort of see why they don't do it but it's still sort of bad' So yeah we - yes we do talk about gay issues like that sometimes.

AUTHOR: Hmm. So do you feel in a way that you're educating them?

Jake: Yeah.

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AUTHOR: Yeah.

Jake: Sort of like opening their eyes.

AUTHOR: Opening their eyes.

Jake: Seeing – seeing – seeing the big wide world sort of thing. So yeah I sort of –  
yeah.

AUTHOR: And you're fine doing that?

Jake: Yeah. I mean if they want – if they ask and want to know then tell them like.  
Tell them like it is.

Jake described himself as active in changing his housemates by 'opening their eyes' and 'telling it like it is'. The naming of discrimination (in terms homophobic attitudes and institutional discrimination) was essential to doing this work. Note, however, that Jake built a strong sense of the everyday into his account: he described himself as responding to ordinary situations or questions asked by his peers. Kirkwood et al., (2012) described this as 'normalising' and suggested that it is a way for the speaker to avoid being held responsible for the events that follow. Jake constructed his actions as contingent on others ('if they want- if they ask and want to know') and individualised (rather than collective). We would suggest that this enabled Jake to reconcile being active and powerful, while also remaining within the boundaries of homonormativity.

I- as powerful accounts were therefore the only I- position in which participants talked directly about discrimination. Participants acknowledged and described their experiences of discrimination, and constructed themselves as active within these. This contrasted with Extract 6, in which Ollie said that his experiences were caused by ignorance rather than homophobia. Jake's account of 'educating' his peers was

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predicated on the same assumption (that they do not know ‘how it is’), but Jake presented this as something that he could actively change.

### **Conclusions**

Most people would agree that discrimination is wrong, but it is surprisingly difficult to talk about discrimination in practice. We explored how participants constructed and reconstructed ‘discrimination’ in talk, and how this was related to their identity work. Research shows that talking about discrimination is risky, and people often reconstruct ‘discrimination’ into ‘ignorance’ (e.g., Andreouli, Greenland, & Howarth, 2015). We found this in our sample: although our participants did talk about experiences that were troubling to us as researchers, they often downgraded these experiences from ‘discrimination’ into ‘not discrimination’. This construction and reconstruction was closely related to their identity work and specifically the performance of homonormativity (Duggan, 2002): our participants were negotiating the tension between being a ‘shamed gay’ and a ‘militant gay’ that is integral to homonormativity. Being authentic, being not a victim, and constructing homophobic banter as part of a game, were all ways of negotiating this tension, and which required that experiences were constructed as ‘not discrimination’. Participants only talked about discrimination directly in the position ‘I- as powerful’ and even then, they presented their experiences as every day and contingent on being asked by others.

There is one important limitation to our analysis. All of our participants were in their late teens and early twenties, white, cisgender, and educationally successful UK citizens. This meant that their experiences of discrimination were relatively narrow, and (to our knowledge) on one dimension only (i.e., homophobia). In fact, the

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experiences of gay men are emphatically classed and raced, and many gay men can face both homophobia and racism (Han, 2007; Rodriguez & Oullette, 2000; Teunis, 2007; Wilson & Miller, 2002). Experiences of discrimination also change across the life course: our participants had not yet, for example, experienced the many structural forms of discrimination that older men might recognise (e.g., in marriage and parenting, healthcare, and employment; Doyle & Molix, 2015). Further research needs to be extended into a wider range of participants (e.g., BAME men who identify as gay), and to explore the impact of intersectionality on the different cultural discourses available to them.

Our analysis has theoretical and practical importance. In theoretical terms, we have shown that the boundary between discrimination/ not discrimination is socially constructed, collaborative, and closely related to identity work. This is in sharp contrast to research in experimental psychology, which has emphasised the cognitive processing of objective data and operationalised identification as a unidimensional continuum. Understanding identity as a series of contrasting I- positions enables understanding of, for example, the tension between ingroup identification and the need to belong that we outlined in the introduction. Experimental research could explore how priming I- positions (e.g., individual authenticity versus empowered advocate) might impact on subsequent attributions to discrimination.

We have also shown how dialogical analysis can be extended and applied to address other research questions. The dialogical approach gave our analysis a framework by which to look systematically at the different ways that our participants could do 'being gay'. We were then able to extend this method to explore how identity work

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impacted on a different social practice (in this case, talking about discrimination).

This method gave us a framework that was more systematic compared to an ethnography, but was also more grounded in everyday social practice compared to an experiment. Further, the I- positions that we outlined are consistent with research that both has, and has not, used dialogical analysis (Clarke & Smith, 2014; Kahn, Holmes, Brett, 2011). This gave us added confidence in our findings.

In practical terms, it reminds us that minorities have a general tendency to resist talking about discrimination, and that we should be cautious when interpreting survey data on this subject. We would also make a broader claim: that identifying and objectifying these discourses gives us the tools to begin to challenge them.

Contemporary forms of discrimination are likely to be subtle and/ or structural, and are increasingly being normalised in political discourse. Collective action is partly dependent on persuading communities that there is an injustice that must be addressed: colleagues who do advocacy work for minority groups report that a significant part of their work is spent persuading service users that their experiences are not part of 'normal life' but evidence of discrimination (Reavey, Ahmed, & Majumdar, 2006). Our analysis can help us to understand the psychological barriers to talking about discrimination, and the tools by which practitioners and advocates can facilitate the transformation of problematic experiences from 'not discrimination' into 'discrimination'. In the same way that 'survivor' discourse has replaced talk of 'victims' in sexual and relationship abuse, then we suggest that 'powerful' discourses might support young gay men in talking about discrimination. They might also be a gateway in building support for other kinds of action (e.g., Wilson, Harper, Hidalgo, Jamil, Torres, & Isabel Fernandez, 2010), up to and including collective action. This

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latter can help address structural as well as interpersonal forms of discrimination.

Further research could explore interventions to promote specific I- positions as a way to enable talking about discrimination.

To conclude, then, the distinction between ‘discrimination’ and ‘not discrimination’ is not simple or straightforward, but socially constructed and subject to both micro- and macro-level social forces. In an era of backlash against progressive policies, we suggest that understanding how different social groups make this distinction is of increasing social and political importance.

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## Footnotes

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<sup>i</sup> See also Edwards (2005) on the discourse of complaining.

<sup>ii</sup> Dialogical analysis therefore provides one means by which to resolve the question of ‘personal order’ within discourse (Edley, 2006; Wetherell, 2003, 2007).

<sup>iii</sup> Its relevance to Kahn et al.’s participants might be related to the context in which the data was produced (i.e., a youth group working against domestic violence).

<sup>iv</sup> There is a significant literature on the interpersonal dynamics of ‘sameness’ in social inquiry (Hey, 2000; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001), and the researcher’s positioning did seem to impact on our data (e.g., on participants’ stated self-censorship and willingness to volunteer). The impact of shared sexuality between researcher and participants in this study is developed further in AUTHOR and AUTHOR (in preparation).

<sup>v</sup> We decided to undertake two interviews because we expected that one interview would not be sufficient to engage comprehensively with all the topics that we wanted to address. It also enabled the researcher to ask participants to take photographs of their accommodation, and to bring these images to the second interview. The first interview addressed participants’ experiences at University in general, and included biographies and coming out stories (both before and since arriving at the university). The second interview focused on their accommodation and personal spaces more specifically. This was also an opportunity to clarify and elaborate on what had been discussed in the first interview.