

Heteronormativity at work: Stories from two lesbian academics

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Abstract

Since the 1980s, in spite of societal shifts and legislation that supports women of diverse sexual identities, heterosexual norms still prevail in many workplaces. In this paper we apply Acker's (2006a) 'inequality regime' as a potential framework to unravel heteronormative practices. We use snippets from our lesbian herstories to illustrate how heteronormativity has affected our lives as women in academe. Through this paper we alert lesbian colleagues to our proposed research project on heteronormativity in academic workplaces and ask that they consider participating in this research.

Keywords

Heteronormativity, lesbian, life-history, inequality regime, ethnography

Introduction

'Let's do some research on lesbian academics' experience of heteronormativity in the workplace! Lynne had been keen to undertake such a project since completing her doctorate in 1997 – a study which highlighted the marginalisation of nurses who self-identified as lesbian in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) and in the USA (Giddings & Smith, 2001; Giddings, 2005a; Giddings, 2005b). Since returning to AUT University in 1998, she had floated the idea of researching the experience of lesbians in academia with lesbian identified colleagues, but the time was never right. Judith jumped at the idea. She was keen to hear how lesbian colleagues coped in the current academic milieu, and it provided her an opportunity to see if Acker's (2006a, 2006b) notion of 'inequality regimes' could work as a framework for guiding research on sexual inequalities. It also presented an opportunity to make visible the heteronormative environments in which we work.

Through this paper, we wish to alert lesbian-identified colleagues in NZ polytechnics and universities to our future research – an ethnographic field study of lesbian-identified academics using life-history (Davies, 2008; Gluck & Patai, 1991) and photo-voice (Castleden & Garvin, 2008) methodologies. As we collected journal articles and developed our ideas about how we would go about the research (Pringle & Giddings, 2011), it dawned on us that our lesbian herstories would need to be included. We are both feminist researchers who have drawn on feminist epistemology in our previous research (e.g. Giddings & Smith, 2001; Pringle, Wolfgramm & Henry, 2010). We fully embrace the critique of objectivity, and with Harding (1987) and others, see the separation between researchers and research participants as a false binary. We seek to avoid the subject-object divide where researchers are placed 'on a higher plane than the research participants' (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 23).

Initially, we thought that including our own stories in this paper should not be too difficult. We raced off to write them – Judith in tears during the writing of her first draft – Lynne, staring at a blank screen, muttering, 'I'll do it tomorrow'. With the due date for submission fast coming upon us, we had plenty of academic theoretical information quite suitable for discussing heteronormativity in the workplace that on its own could exceed the word limit, but what about our stories? What to and what not to include? There were also personal dilemmas:

- The women who had shared some of the journey with us – our stories are also their stories. Neither of us claims to be the ‘hero’ in our relationships.
- Our families and friends – some ‘I always knew you were lesbian’ responses, but mostly our stories are of homophobic responses and, at best, stories of discomfort with our identities as women loving women, not to mention the hurt we inadvertently caused them as we struggled to say ‘I am what I am’.
- Our past and present colleagues – with remarkable and wonderful exceptions – who knowingly or unwittingly contributed to our sense of feeling ‘unsafe’ and isolated in our workplaces, reinforcing our internalised homophobia and silencing our stories.
- Our-selves.

Do we write our lesbian life-stories separately or together (both could write a book, we realised)? Should we write only about our lives as lesbians in academia (even though our early life-stories are the background to who we are now)? We came to see that we are the stories of lesbian academics’ experience of heteronormativity in our everyday lives and workplaces. Our dilemmas are captured by the early 1970s feminist slogan, ‘the personal is political’, and significantly extended by Sarah Hoagland in her treatise on lesbian ethics (Hoagland, 1988). An important part of Hoagland’s discussion, and in feminist methodology more widely, is being an active participant in our own research. However, we are mindful of Reinhartz’s (1992) caution on the problems of self-disclosure and ‘generalising exclusively’ (p. 34) from our own experience. Insider research is modified by hearing alternative stories from other people.

Heteronormativity and related terms

To frame our discussion, we need to define some of the terms we will be using. These were constructs coined during our lifetime and, like lesbian music, have had a strong influence on how we think and talk about our sexuality. It is relatively recently that we have had the language to deconstruct heterosexuality. Various terms have been used since the 1970s to signify experiences and practices that render homosexuality problematic. The psychological concept, ‘homophobia’, first appeared in print in 1969 and was used by Weinberg (1972) to mean a fear of homosexuality. For both of us, our reading of Adrienne Rich’s (1980) classic paper entitled *Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence* was significant. At last there was a position from which homophobic and heterosexist assumptions could be challenged. Homophobia and its derivation, ‘internalised homophobia’ (Creed, 2006), are still used today.

By the 1990s, ‘heterosexism’ became a popular descriptor in social science literature as a way to encompass the social, cultural, and historical complexity of ideas and practices that marginalise homosexuality (Herek, 1996). The term ‘heteronormativity’ extended the definition to include ‘the belief system underlying institutionalized heterosexuality [that] constitutes the dominant Western paradigm in Western society’ (Ingraham, 2006, p. 309). Heterosexuality, it is argued, is positioned as the cornerstone of the sex/gender system in which two sexes and two genders exist. Heterosexual norms, relationships, histories and meaning-making are, therefore, naturalised, supported, and enforced through hegemonic discursive practices and structures in everyday life (Leap, 2007). The taken-for-granted nature of heterosexual norms disguises how restrictive they are as social models for sexual identity. They are reproduced everyday in our workplaces and legitimated in society (Gusmano, 2008). We are very aware that ‘Queer theory’ (Du Plessis, 2004; Fenaughty, 2004; Quinlivan, 1999) challenges our use of the terms lesbian and heteronormativity, but we grew up in a time of awakening lesbian consciousness and today live in a heteronormative, not queer, world. We have reflected on the various definitions and in our research we will use Beatrice Gusmano’s (2010) definition of heteronormativity: ‘the practices and institutions that legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and “natural” within society’ (p. 2).

To explore heteronormativity in our lives as lesbian academics, we decided to write our stories for this paper together. As we considered key New Zealand legislation and its relative impact on us, we realised that we needed part of our ‘coming out’ herstories to background our academic lives.

Our life-story snippets

We are both baby boomers. We spent our early childhoods in different provinces in rural South Island, New Zealand, both earning the label of ‘tomboy’. Judith spent her first year of high school at a single-sex boarding school at the age of 12 – unhappily. It was her first close contact living with other girls (ten to a dormitory): ‘I was amazed at the talk of boys and at what I now know as feminine displays’. Lynne moved to Christchurch and attended co-ed schools:

I wanted to play the boys’ games, but this was frowned on by my teachers and peers. I was delighted when a new girl came to school when I was ten who challenged this segregation. We went everywhere together and often challenged sex roles; wanting to wear trousers to school and by playing football. We were the first girls to get motorbikes and to become members of the school rifle club.

We were both introduced to heterosexual relationships through our church connections, which provided certain safeguards and legitimacy. Lynne’s first attempt at going out with a boy at 16 years was met with anger from her best friend, who came out as lesbian in her late teens. By then, Lynne had met her husband-to-be at a youth camp, much to her friend’s chagrin.

Lynne went to nursing school: ‘Nursing opened my eyes to many aspects of life, but not to sexual diversities. I had a group of nursing friends and we all expected that after our twenty-first birthdays we would get engaged and married – and we did’. Nursing practice, too, was drenched in heteronormativity; ‘I met a woman patient who was described by my colleagues as “camp”. They were reluctant to shower her and giggled and smirked when I offered to be “her nurse”. I saw no problem and never connected “camp” with her sexuality’. Meanwhile, Judith was developing a strong independence:

I had pleasure in my own company – roaming the hills and losing myself in pop music; singing innocently along with the boy singers declaring their love for their girls. It was late University before I considered an attraction to girls and took action by buying *The well of loneliness!*

Lynne married at 22. Ironically, it was the intense homophobic response by members of her church to gay and lesbian issues which led her to read intently around gay and lesbian sexuality: ‘Not that I could find many texts on the subject in the medical school library at that time’. Although not having a sexual relationship with a woman, Lynne made a political decision at 27 and came out as bisexual, creating consternation in her work and church environments and bemusement from her husband. Nevertheless, she led a very heterosexual life:

After four miscarriages I gave birth to my daughter – much wanted and much loved. I had a busy life, caring for my daughter, studying full-time at University, putting on dinner parties, and running a household, so issues concerning my sexual identity moved into the background for a time.

After graduation, Judith’s shift to Wellington included increasing exposure to the growing feminist movement and a plethora of life-changing books. New language and feminist arguments caused heated discussion with boyfriends and a desire to connect with feminism. First relationships with men and women occurred at the same time:

I oscillated for some time and chose to go with the woman with support from a dyke and affirmations from Meg Christian and Chris Williamson’s music. Feelings of isolation as a lesbian couple and an inability to be open in public caused a lot of questioning. I had made a conscious decision to be lesbian, fuelled by radical feminist discourse. My lesbian identity lasted a couple of years, before I returned to the safe enclave of heterosexuality, enjoying social acceptance on the arm of a man. Conversations with boyfriends were fraught as

I questioned the societal place of women where respect and approval seemed only available through associations with men. In the 1980s, my return to lesbian land was incremental. I was part of a university feminist support group, performance and consciousness raising groups, and worked alongside lesbian volunteers at the feminist bookshop. To come out to myself and to my close friends, I needed the presence and visibility of other lesbians. It would be a checkered path coming out to my family and in my workplaces over the next 20 years.

Lynne and her family moved to the USA in 1977. Here, she became confronted with feminist ideologies. Ann Oakley's (1976) *Woman's work: The housewife, past and present* shook her world, presenting a mirror to her married and heteronormative life:

It opened Pandora's box. I read everything feminist I could get my hands on. I went to feminist conferences, and joined a women's reading group, while I continued my heterosexual lifestyle. For the first time I saw lesbians and had lesbian friends.

Lynne returned to New Zealand with her family in 1983, took on an academic position, enrolled in feminist studies, and joined the Women's Studies Association and feminist groups. Against her husband's wishes, she became active in petitioning for homosexual law reform in Auckland. Activism around homosexual law reform was perceived as less relevant and male-focused for Judith. At this time she was living in Dunedin and on the verge of a shift to Australia.

After a vigorous and often acrimonious campaign, the Homosexual Law Reform Bill was passed by Parliament in 1986 (Laurie, 2009) approving homosexual acts between consenting males (there were no similar laws prohibiting sex between women) in the eyes of the law. In the heated public discussion surrounding lobbying for the law change, gay men and lesbians became dramatically more visible. For Lynne, this activism for sexual rights marked a critical and dramatic life turning point. Lynne terms this period her 'lesbian adolescence':

Someone should have put a neon danger sign on my head as everything was chaotic and emotionally tumultuous. My tentative moves into the lesbian community while still married were met with anger – I was openly challenged at a 'women-only dance' for using heterosexual privilege and forced to leave. I became quite depressed and ill with glandular fever. It was the support of close heterosexual and lesbian friends, lovers, and a perceptive lesbian counselor, that got me through that period.

On the break-up of her marriage, Lynne 'came out with a bang'. Christmas 1987, she travelled the country informing her family and friends of her decision to identify as 'lesbian with a bisexual orientation'. The responses were mixed. On her first week back at work she changed her surname and came out to her colleagues: 'It had immediate ramifications in my workplace with a number of closeted lesbians reacting by keeping silent and isolating me; heterosexual friends at work suddenly stopped inviting me to dinners and social functions. It was a painful time'. Afraid of commitment, Lynne settled into non-monogamous relationships.

Supporters of the Homosexual Law Reform Act wanted sexual orientation included in the existing Human Rights Commission Act (1977), but it was not until the Human Rights Act was passed in 1993 that they achieved their goal. The Act outlawed discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation in employment, access to public places, provision of goods and services, accommodation, and educational facilities. In this legislation sexual orientation was defined as heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian or bisexual (Sangster & Torrie, 1994, p. 6).

By the time the Human Rights Act (1993) was passed in Aotearoa New Zealand, Judith had already witnessed the effects of the more extensive Affirmative Action Act 1986 (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) in Australian workplaces (Still, 2009). She was now committed to teaching and researching 'women in organisations' from her new business school home in Auckland. 'My teaching sat somewhat uncomfortably between Organisation and Women's Studies, but I chose to remain "working in the mouth of the dragon" of the capital-

ist patriarchy. We fought battles for women's experiences of any sort to be visible and part of the curriculum. I was not in a relationship at the time, was closeted, and felt that being out as a lesbian may have held recriminations as a junior academic'.

Researching lesbian experiences

In 1993, a hundred year celebration of women's suffrage in New Zealand was a wonderfully active time of research and celebration of women's achievements. Lynne, who was by now in a committed lesbian relationship, commenced her Ph.D. in the United States of America; she was away for four years. 'A long distance relationship certainly has its pressures, but with trips for both of us between NZ and the USA and attending the Michigan Women's Music Festival each year – we made it'. This period included her first research on lesbian nurses: 'My impetus for this study was my realisation that homophobia and heterosexism were alive and well amongst my academic nursing colleagues. I had witnessed racism, sexism, and homophobia – the latter at times directed at me and my lesbian supervisor'. In her study (Giddings & Smith, 2001; Giddings, 2005a, 2005b) nurses reported that lesbianism, though often a focus of gossip, was invisible within nursing curricula, even in sessions on human sexuality. Those lesbian nurses who did 'come out' told stories of how they were directly or indirectly punished, sometimes by women who were known to be closeted about their sexual relationships with women. Nurses responded to these heteronormative assumptions by being circumspect in 'coming out'.

Lynne's work is part of the first wave of academic research on lesbians and gays which focused on discrimination and the consequences of social prejudice and homophobic attitudes. Discrimination highlights the heterosexual nature of workplaces – difficult environments for lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender people (LBGT) (Hall, 1989; Shallenberg, 1994; Ragins & Cornwall, 2001; Ragins, Cornwall & Miller, 2003; Ward & Winstanley, 2005). In New Zealand, this style of research characterises Jenny Rankin's (1997) survey of lesbian and bisexual women's experiences, and is reflected again almost a decade later in Hendrickson, Neville, Jordan and Donaghey's (2005) 'Lavender Islands' research.

From the 1990s and into the 2000s, Judith was researching and publishing on women's workplace experiences and reading any relevant lesbian research in her area. Marny Hall (1989) reported that lesbian professionals in corporate organisations carried a double burden of discrimination on the basis of gender and sexuality, highlighting that the effects of disclosure were difficult to predict. Judith tested the water in her own workplace: 'I took a partner a couple of different times to departmental social functions without causing a ripple in the company'. Shifts in the heteronormative world were assisted by the presence in her department of one lesbian and a gay man who were publically 'out'. Studies of women managers and a few of lesbian and gay men (Hall, 1989; Shallenberg, 1994) advocated professionalism and competence as defenses against potential discrimination. In a parallel way, Judith's research with lesbians only happened after she was established in her academic career and in a relatively friendly LGBT workplace. She shifted her place of work in 2005, coincidentally the year the Civil Union Act was passed, and now works at the same institution as Lynne.

A possible sense-making framework

Our proposed study of academic workplaces is part of the second wave of research which focuses on lesbian and gay experiences. This approach uses sexuality as a key organising dynamic in everyday organisational life (Pringle & Giddings, 2011). Interest was sparked for Judith during her research on the experiences of New Zealand lesbian managers. Personal accounts relating to gender and sexuality issues at work revealed how tightly gender was entwined with

assumptions and displays of heterosexuality. 'As a result I argue that gender should be talked about as 'heterogender' to draw attention to the embedded heterosexual assumptions' (Pringle, 2008, p. 118).

For this paper, we will sketch a framework from sociologist Joan Acker (2006a, 2006b), to give examples of how heteronormativity might be unraveled. Acker's concept of 'inequality regime' (Acker, 2006a, p. 443) is a multilevel framework to describe interlocked practices, processes and meanings that maintain and reproduce inequalities. As the practices and effects are so intertwined, it is like unraveling a piece of knitting; it is difficult to know which part to pull first. Ways of pulling at the processes which maintain inequality involve analysing organisational structures, rules and informal interactions, and making visible the legitimacy of inequalities. Over decades, Acker (1990, 2006a) has analysed and theorised gender, class (and latterly, race) inequalities in organisations, but has largely ignored sexuality. Brittan and Logan (2008) argue that sexuality and gender are equally embedded in organisational processes. In spite of extensive discussion of inequality regimes, there are remarkably few empirical studies applying Acker's concepts and we could find none that were directed towards sexual orientation. In the figure below we have adapted and extended Acker's framework as a suggested way of unpacking workplace heteronormativity. A key feature of being non-heterosexual is the tension around in/visibility. Legitimacy, rights, and a full expression of who we are at work demands being visible as lesbians. In a speculative way, we briefly explain each feature from the figure below, using examples from our own experiences and observations in our relatively enlightened workplace.

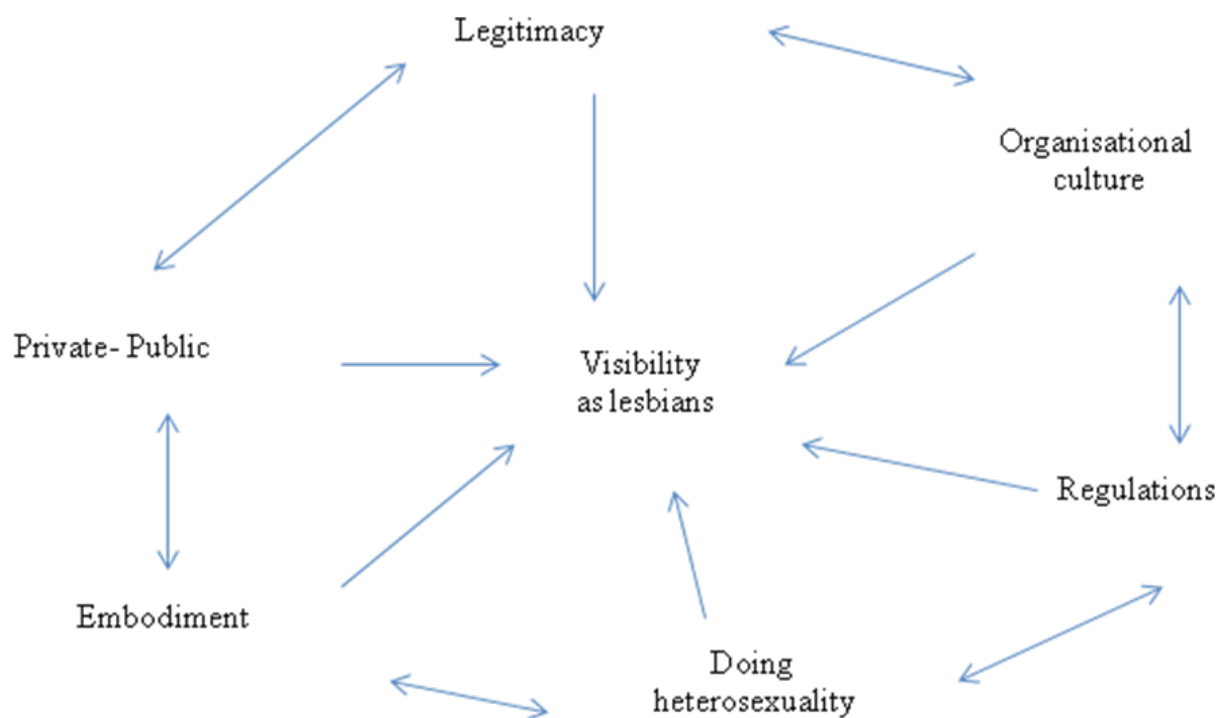


Figure 1. Unraveling heteronormativity using an adaption of Acker's framework

Visibility as lesbians. Every day we choose when to be and when not to be 'out'. We are well practised at scanning and assessing work contexts and predicting how we think people may respond. For example, including the words 'lesbian' in our research plans and curriculum vitae provides a permanent record of the private made public. Using the word 'lesbian' flies the rainbow flag.

Legitimacy. Although people may ‘come out’ as lesbian in their work department, this visibility may not be sanctioned by their organisation. Human Rights legislation that specifically includes sexual orientation as an illegal basis for discrimination is important in helping to create a safe context. We are members of a formally supported and recognised LGBTTT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, takataapui) staff network which makes small inroads into counter-ing heteronormativity in the workplace. Recently our network contributed to the development of a university strategic plan – the outcome is not yet known, but we certainly had our say.

Organisational culture. The symbols and unspoken stories point to the shared understanding of what is ‘ok’ at work. The norms may be unconscious, taken-for-granted, or located in symbols. In the early 2000s, the university’s financing of an ‘Out @ AUT’ float in the Auckland HERO parade signalled at least some level of acceptance of non-heterosexuals in our workplace. Lynne purposely displays a rainbow sticker beside her name on her office door and a rainbow flag in her office to disrupt heteronormative assumptions.

Regulations. Although there is government legislation concerning sexual orientation, how it is implemented into organisational policy varies. Policies can counter discrimination directly and indirectly. Even when a rule appears to be neutral it may have a detrimental effect on people of a particular sexual orientation. Taking leave for a sick partner may have to be scrimped out of annual leave. Although the 2005 Civil Union Act did not directly impact on our lives, indirectly it shifted heterosexual norms to make it more socially acceptable to include our partners. The activism around this Act divided the lesbian community in Aotearoa New Zealand (Whiu, 2004). This discussion was also international in scope as lesbians debated whether or not we wanted to adopt the narrow model of heterosexual relations in ‘commitment ceremonies’ and/or the institution of ‘marriage’ (Ingraham, 2006). Supporters saw it as a chance for public statements of love ‘like everyone else’, not seeing or not being bothered by the heteronormative imperative.

‘Doing heterosexuality’ happens all the time in work interactions. Heteronormativity is highlighted in everyday talk; do we or do we not disclose our same-sex partner? The common Monday question ‘what did you do at the weekend?’ presents inevitable dilemmas: ‘Will I say I went to the lesbian ball and see the imagination sparking on the face of the questioner?’ Lynne tells of a critical incident:

An undergraduate lesbian student phoned me on her graduation to thank me for ‘coming out’ when I was a guest lecturer in her second year nursing class. She told me she had heard the word ‘lesbian’ from the front of the class only twice in her whole degree. At that moment, I made a commitment to come out directly or indirectly in every class.

Embodying heteronormativity. Embodiment relates to how we dress and present ourselves. The expectations of dress subtly shift with specific positions in the hierarchy. Some lesbian women may feel comfortable with the masculine forms of dress implicit in a ‘professional’ code. Within a business school where masculine dress is the norm, Judith advises, ‘get a navy jacket, it’s an essential item for the upwardly mobile academic, lesbian or not’. Lynne has resisted the pressures to wear make-up and the heteronormative feminine professional dress in her female-dominated health faculty.

Private and public spheres. The ambiguities of the public and private divide present dilemmas for all people at work (Burrell & Morgan, 1989), but arguably are more intense for lesbians (Hall, 1989). ‘Coming out’ and talking about one’s same-sex partner violates this historical norm of work-home separation. Heteronormative mores are strongest in the social and informal aspects of work where the private–public line blurs; a common response is to be ‘mute’. At work receptions, ‘heterosexual flirting rapidly accompanies the second bottle of wine’; Judith then leaves.

This brief discussion of Acker's (2006a, 2006b) inequality regime framework suggests that it is a promising start to analysing heteronormativity. However, we expect that other ways of thinking about heteronormativity will emerge during our proposed study.

Conclusion

Memories surfaced in the writing of our life-story snippets, re-lived once more in their telling. They brought tears and laughter. We found ourselves humming old songs, their words and tunes only in part remembered, but the circumstances of our singing them, vivid. Some of the women we could name: Chris Williamson, Meg Christian, Holly Near, the Topp Twins, Judy Small, Joan Armatrading, Melissa Etheridge, Alix Dobkin, Ferron, and, of course, k.d. lang. The censoring we applied to our life-stories showed us the vulnerability involved for our future participants and the sensitivity and respect we will need to bring to our interview and analysis processes. How to capture the 'truths' of past and present stories of lesbians' experiences; how to show the many realities of lesbians' lives in academe, across disciplines and age groups; how to make visible the heteronormativity within New Zealand polytechnics and universities that serves to discriminate against and marginalise those who are non-heterosexual – these are some of the challenges we face.

Out of this research endeavour may emerge a variety of contributions to theory, methodology and understanding of lesbian lives at work. Already we have come to realise the struggle of connecting the personal and the political through academic research structures, even feminist ones. Acker's (2006a, 2006b) broad framework is a useful start to illuminating complex inequality regimes, but we expect other ways of sorting differences to emerge. Over the past 30 years legislative changes in Aotearoa New Zealand have been sweeping, but not always translated into our everyday experiences. At times, change feels glacial. Unravelling heteronormativity in the workplace may provide a way to connect women of diverse sexualities in our quest to better understand gendered inequality.

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