The Office Politics of Sexuality
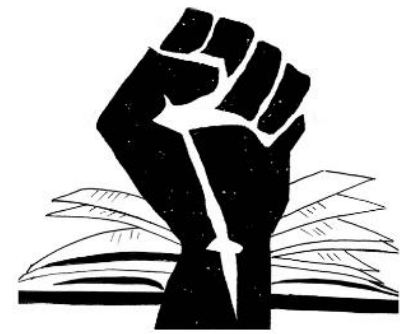
Open Plan Space as a Contemporary Panopticon

by

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with a comment by

Zena Spiers

En-Gender!

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Open Plan Space as a Contemporary Panopticon

By Patrick Vernon

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En-Gender!

Abstract

Recognising that established analyses of the relationship between professionalism and sexuality fail to look at the impact of workplace environments on the construction of the subject, this piece undertakes an analysis of the operation of discourses of sexuality in the contemporary workplace (office) environment. Drawing upon Foucault's work on the discursive construction of sexuality[1] and panopticism[2], this paper uses an auto-ethnographic approach to look the way in which logics of heterosexuality operate in the open-plan office, through both verbal encounters and "speech-acts of the body".[3] Concluding that this environment plays a significant role in the construction of sexual subjectivities, this paper hopes to encourage further academic reflection on discourses of sexuality in seemingly neutral spaces.

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[1] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1, The Will to Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978)

[2] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prision* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975)

[3] Lene Hansen, "The Little Mermaid's Silent Security Dilemma and the Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29, no. 2 (June 2000): 285–306, 302, https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298000290020501.

> *"Walking around the office to introduce myself, the responses I got came either as a polite 'hello and welcome', or as a disinterested grunt. Thoughts began racing through my mind; what had I done wrong? Was I being too camp? Was my outfit too much?"[4]*

Whilst I have always been conscious of my sexuality being different to 'the norm', only recently have I realised that it shifts according to social context, for example acting more camp when I'm with friends or policing my camp-ness when I'm in a formal or professional context. Writing in the vein of furthering this self-discovery, this essay draws upon auto-ethnography to argue that open-plan office space constitutes a contemporary panopticon within which subjects are induced to perform sexuality in-line with dominant logics. In my case, as a queer[5] individual in a 'gay friendly' workplace, this logic constituted homonormativity. This refers to a form of queerness that "does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions…", offering "…a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture…"[6] Making this case, I initially provide an introduction to key Foucauldian concepts and the body of literature which considers the relationship between gender, sexuality and professionalism. Beyond this, my specific case study and methodology are outlined. My analysis is then split into three sections, referring to verbal interactions that I was party to, verbal interactions that I was not party to and "speech-acts of the body",[7] each constituting a mechanism through which power operates in the open-plan office environment. Concluding the paper, I argue that open-plan office space constitutes a panopticon through which discourses of sexuality are regulated, inscribing (hetero)sexual norms within ideas of professional conduct.

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[4] Vernon, Patrick. "Auto-Ethnographic Field Notes on Discourses of Sexuality in Open-Plan Space." (10th July 2018.) Bank on the Isle of Man.

[5] Throughout this paper, I will use queer to describe my subjectivity and epistemological approach, referring to a rejection of all processes of categorisation, seeing all identities as "socially-constructed fiction" *(Noreen Giffney, "Introduction: The q Word," in The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 2.)* Where terms other than queer arise (e.g.: man, woman, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender), this is in reflection of the literature being discussed, or of a subject's expressed desire to identify with this term. Queerness not only relates to one's sexuality, but "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), *8.* As such, this essay interprets any performances of gender and/or sexuality which exceed or destabilise binary understandings of sex, gender or sexuality to be queer.

[6] Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston Beacon Press, 2003), pp.50-51.

[7] Lene Hansen, "The Little Mermaid's Silent Security Dilemma and the Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29, no. 2 (June 2000): 285–306, 302, https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298000290020501.

Queer Theory and Professional Conduct

Contrary to popular beliefs that sexuality is something inherent, unchanging and repressed, Foucault argues that it is discursively constructed .[8] Making this case, he draws attention to Nineteenth Century pscyho-medical discourses which took control of the realm of sexuality, "…intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, *dramatizing troubled moments*" *[my emphasis].*[9] One outcome of this project was the transformation of "the homosexual" from a juridical subject into "…a type of life, a life form, and a morphology…"[10] Due to the emergence of sexology as a field of study, Foucault draws attention to the transformation of sodomy from a discrete legal misdemeanour to a symptom of the perverted 'homosexual', necessitating medical intervention. Underpinning this explanation of sexuality and the homosexual subject is Foucault's view of power, transcending agential and structural accounts; "…power is not an institution, and nor a structure; neither is it a strength we are endowed with."[11] Foucault sees power as a ubiquitous system of logic which operates through knowledge, referring to the norms and naturalised assumptions that construct our 'reality'.[12] One such example of power's operation is the presumed naturalness of heterosexuality and its modes of organisation, commonly referred to as heteronormativity by queer scholars .[13] This, Sullivan argues, "…is a (historically and culturally specific) truth-effect of power/knowledge."[14] Ergo, it becomes clear that sexuality is dependent upon the discursive construction of truth, and the necessary and inherent resistance to that truth,[15] in a particular place at a particular time. This renders Foucault's account of power useful for studying sexual normativity in the contemporary workplace.

One key mechanism through which power operates is governmentality. Referring to "the conduct of conduct",[16] governmentality, in part, describes the internalisation of governing norms within the subject. One key technology of governmentality is that of surveillance,[17] epitomised by Bentham's conception of the panopticon.[18] This is a circular prison featuring a central watchtower

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[8] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1, The Will to Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 12.

[9] Ibid, 44.

[10] Ibid, 43.

[11] Ibid, 93.

[12] Ibid, 94-95.

[13] S. Jackson, "Interchanges: Gender, Sexuality and Heterosexuality: The Complexity (and Limits) of Heteronormativity," *Feminist Theory* 7, no. 1 (April 1, 2006): 105–21, 108, https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700106061462.

[14] Nikki Sullivan, *Critical Introduction to Queer Theory.* (Edinburgh Univ Press, 2003), p.39.

[15] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1, The Will to Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 94.

[16] Michel Foucault, "On Governmentality," in *The Foucault Effect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p.2.

[17] Emma A Foster, "Sustainable Development Policy in Britain: Shaping Conduct Through Global Governmentality," *British Politics* 3, no. 4 (November 20, 2008): 535–55, 538, https://doi.org/10.1057/bp.2008.25.

[18] Bentham, Jeremy. 1843. *Plan of the Panopticon*. In Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 171.

with one-directional windows so as to obscure knowledge of the guard's activities. Foucault notes that the panopticon "…induce(s) the inmate in a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power".[19] This is due to prisoners not knowing whether they are under surveillance or not at any particular moment, and as such self-regulating in the knowledge that they *could* be. Highlighted by Foucault to describe one way in which modern subjects self-govern, the panopticon is of relevance when looking at open-plan office space. As noted by Manning's study into the emergence of open-plan office space in the U.K, this layout generates a sense of being watched amongst employees and is favoured by senior managers who are in charge of a number of staff and supervisors for its ease of surveillance .[20] Thus, it is akin to the panoptic layout as envisioned by Jeremy Bentham, with the same effects of governmentality induced. I would add another level to this, however, and note that within the open-plan office, the inmates [employees] are not kept in their cells but are allowed to roam free within the figurative prison, conversing and watching as they please. This induces a further element of panopticism, in which fellow inmates as well as the 'guard' [manager] become responsible for monitoring behaviour. Given that sexuality is socially constructed, and that open-plan space is a mechanism through which power operates, the study of normative sexual subjectivities within this space becomes relevant. Firstly, however, we must look at established writings on gender and sexuality in professional contexts.

Since the 1980s, there has been a significant body of feminist work which looks at the way in which professional conduct is gendered. Describing professionalism, Connell notes that it has been historically constructed as masculine, entailing a lack of emotionality, a specialised skill and "…technically-based dominance over other workers…"[21] Building upon established work, Martin studies gender as a dynamic and inequality-generating process. Demonstrating this, she provides the example of a male manager intuitively telling a female manager of the same rank to answer the phone when it rang.[22] Furthermore, Lester draws upon a gender performativity framework to argue that 'women' faculty members perform feminine gender roles in the workplace, such as "emotional work" in caring for students and colleagues.[23] The above pieces of work clearly do not constitute the entire body of feminist research on gender and professional conduct. They do, however, give an indication of the epistemological approach that has inspired the emergence of studies of

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[19] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prision* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), p.201.

[20] Peter Manning and Liverpool (England). University. Pilkington Research Unit, *Office Design : A Study of Environment* (Liverpool: Research Unit, , Printing, 1965), p.123.

[21] Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power : Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987).

[22] Patricia Yancey Martin, "'Said and Done' Versus 'Saying and Doing,'" *Gender & Society* 17, no. 3 (June 2003): 342–66, 346, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243203017003002.

[23] Jaime Lester, "Performing Gender in the Workplace," *Community College Review* 35, no. 4 (April 2008): 277–305, 278, https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552108314756.

sexuality and professionalism, in exposing notions of professional conduct to be imbued with gendered discourses[24].

Turning their attention to sexuality, Rumens and Kerfoot look at the persistence of heteronormative logics which exclude sexuality from notions of professionalism, even in perceived 'gay friendly' workplaces.[25] Evidence for this comes from an interview with a 'gay' hospital doctor, who argues that "the hospital is not ready…for a camp acting doctor…" due to it bringing sexuality into public at the expense of patient welfare.[26] They therefore draw attention to the fact that even where being gay is tolerated in the workplace, defiance of binary understandings of gender are interpreted as a signifier of being 'too gay' and are perceived as unacceptable. Writing in a similar vein, Giuffre, Dellinger and Williams problematise the persistence of differential treatment on the basis of sexuality in these workplaces, including stereotyping, sexual harassment and enhanced gender discrimination.[27] Looking at 'non-gay-friendly' workplaces, Collins identifies certain industries such as law enforcement, the military and oil to be "masculinized" in that they are male-dominated and perceived to be risk-laden, hypermasculine and heterosexualised forms of work.[28] This, he argues, produces a context in which gay men are marginalised due to perceptions that they are more feminine.[29] These approaches provide a valuable insight into the extent to which heteronormativity imbues common ideas surrounding professionalism, although they are limited by an ontological assumption of a stable subject who is relatively unshaped by their discursive context What this emergent body of scholarship lacks, therefore, is a poststructuralist account of the operation of power[30] in open-plan office space, analysing the impact that this space has upon the subjectivity of queer individuals. Taking up this task, this paper interrogates the way in which my professional context has shaped my self-perceptions, behaviour and understandings, given that I am a queer individual with significant experience of this. Doing so, it draws upon Foucault's

[24] For further examples of feminist work on professionalism see also; Ronnie J Steinberg, "Social Construction of Skill," *Work and Occupations* 17, no. 4 (November 1990): 449–82, https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888490017004004, Jia Wang, "Networking in the Workplace: Implications for Women's Career Development," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 2009, no. 122 (March 2009): 33–42, https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.332 and Raewyn Connell, "Glass Ceilings or Gendered Institutions? Mapping the Gender Regimes of Public Sector Worksites," *Public Administration Review* 66, no. 6 (November 2006): 837–49, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2006.00652.x.

[25] Nick Rumens and Deborah Kerfoot, "Gay Men at Work: (Re)Constructing the Self as Professional," *Human Relations* 62, no. 5 (May 2009): 763–86, 777, 780, https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726709103457.

[26] Ibid, 777.

[27] Patti Giuffre, Kirsten Dellinger, and Christine L. Williams, "'No Retribution for Being Gay? Inequality in "gay-friendly" Workplaces" *Sociological Spectrum* 28, no. 3 (April 3, 2008): 254–77, 272-274, https://doi.org/10.1080/02732170801898380.

[28] Joshua C. Collins, "Characteristics of 'Masculinized' Industries," *Human Resource Development Review* 14, no. 4 (December 17, 2014): 415–41, 417, https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484314559930.

[29] Ibid, 432.

[30] E.g. see Laura Sjoberg and Caron E Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (London Zed Books, 2007) and Lisa Downing, *The Subject of Murder: Gender, Exceptionality, and the Modern Killer* (Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press, 2013)

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History of Sexuality[31] and Discipline and Punish[32] by looking at the effects of the contemporary equivalent of the panopticon on the (re)production of knowledge about sexuality.

Theory, Case and Method

Before commencing my analysis, it is first necessary to provide some details on what I understand by discourse and heterosexuality. Firstly, I adopt a Foucauldian understanding of discourse as the logics and norms which organise our understandings of the world around us, our identities and the processes of categorisation that we unthinkingly deploy.[33] It is this understanding of discourse as power which informs the three sections of analysis in this paper, with the types of discourse which had the most impact on my understanding of my sexual subjectivity selected. Furthermore, I draw my understanding of heterosexuality from Butler's notion of the heterosexual matrix. This refers to the system of logic which produces 'men' and 'women' as discrete categories, made intelligible through the performance of gender stereotypes in one's physical presentation, behaviour and binaries such as rationality/emotionality and selfishness/altruism,[34] for example. Given that it is through the performance of gender stereotypes that 'biological sex' and heterosexuality are made intelligible,[35] defiance of gender norms is integral to the study of sexuality. For example, gay men are often mislabelled as feminine,[36] with the transgression of norms of sexual orientation being perceived as a transgression in gender norms. The ever-shifting nexus between gender, sex and sexuality is something that I encountered numerous times in the workplace, resulting in the discussion of gender norms informing much of my analysis in the following section, interpreted as a key logic of heterosexuality.

As noted earlier, the open-plan office constitutes a contemporary panopticon, within which employees are not only watched by their managers but by fellow employees. It is given the prevalence of this structure in modern workplaces that it becomes a necessary target of analysis, especially given the aforementioned body of work which indicates that professionalism is sexualised, even in 'gay-friendly workplaces'. My case study is that of a 'gay-friendly' banking office

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[31] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1, The Will to Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

[32] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prision* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975).

[33] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1, The Will to Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 94–95.

[34] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble.* (New York, London: Routledge, 1990), p.151.

[35] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

[36] Cliff Cheng, "Marginalized Masculinities and Hegemonic Masculinity: An Introduction," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 7, no. 3 (March 21, 2007): 295–315, 298, https://doi.org/10.3149/jms.0703.295.

on the Isle of Man, where I worked as a Junior Administrator for six weeks in the summer of 2018. What caught my attention in this setting was that despite company policy precluding discrimination on the basis of sexuality, I routinely felt as though my sexuality was invoked in subtle [or sometimes less than subtle] ways. It was this realisation which prompted me to begin making field notes on a daily basis. In these, I detailed the encounters in which I felt as though a sexualised script was being invoked, as well as the instances in which I caught myself reflexively adjusting my behaviour due to a sense of un-comfortability. The aim of this case study is not to be representative of all offices everywhere, but rather is to reflectively engage with the operation of power in seemingly neutral workspaces, establishing a meaningful field of inquiry. My choice of methodology to conduct this study is auto-ethnography. There are many definitions for auto-ethnography, but in general these tend to centre around the notion of establishing meaning in the relationship between 'I', the subject, and 'my' discursive context, whether this be society or the open-plan office, for example. This is neatly summarised by Neumann, highlighting "the particular experiences of individuals in tension with dominant expressions of discursive power."[37] Auto-ethnography is particularly applicable in a queer inquiry such as mine, due to it helping the writer "…to see themselves and everyone else as human subjects constructed in a tangle of cultural, social and historical situations…"[38] In the context of my workplace, this allowed me to analyse myself as a malleable subject within a field of power relations, as opposed to a discrete and pre-formed individual. This enhanced my ability to look at myself from the outside, tracing the ways in which the expressions of my sexuality had shifted due to context. Auto-ethnography turns "language and bodies in upon themselves",[39] rendering it a queer methodology in challenging hegemonic conceptions of knowledge, drawing attention to discourse and de-stabilising subjectivity.

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[37] Mark Neumann, "Collecting Ourselves at the End of the Century," in *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 1996), 172,198, 189.

[38] Linda Brodkey, "I-Site: An Essay from a Personal Narrative That the Author Has Written about Herself as a Writer and Reader'," *Open Letter: Australian Journal for Adult Literacy Research and Practice* 6, no. 2 (2015): 17–30, 29, https://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary.

[39] Tami Spry, "A 'Performative-I' Copresence: Embodying the Ethnographic Turn in Performance and the Performative Turn in Ethnography," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (October 2006): 339–46, 342, https://doi.org/10.1080/10462930600828790.

The Office Politics of Sexuality

<u>Verbal encounters that I was party to</u>

The most obvious way in which normative power functioned whilst I was in the office was through verbal encounters that I was party to. This was due to them subtly challenging the legitimacy of my subjectivity, often unintentionally, but with the resultant effect that I felt out of place.

A notable way in which I felt exposed to heteronormativity whilst in the office was through the discursive construction of 'the closet', a concept synonymous with contemporary Western queerness. When I was eighteen, my parents discovered that I was queer. This was not due to a specific 'coming out moment', but rather was due to a passing comment. I was going out and my Mum asked me where I was going. I said "to a boy called X's house" and she asked me "is it a date?", which I confirmed. She then told me to "be careful", with a wry smile, and that was the end of the encounter. As such, for many years I believed that 'coming out' was an act of self-indulgence; a concept associated with the culture of a pride-inspired form of queerness, valuing public displays of sexual difference above all else. I have since changed my opinion, seeing 'coming out of the closet' as something that I do on a daily basis, whenever I highlight my deviance from the heterosexual norm. This is summarised well by Sedgwick, who states that ""closetedness" itself is a performance initiated…by the speech act of a silence…"[40] In this sense, the closet is a spatial domain that everyone in a heteronormative society inhabits, but only those who break heterosexual norms notice. One example of me encountering 'the closet' was when I mentioned at work that I studied sexuality and gender studies. Here, the admission of my academic field acted as an unanticipated 'coming out moment'.[41] This is because in the Isle of Man, where few people are openly 'gay', it is virtually unheard of for a 'straight man', or indeed anyone, to study in this field. From this point on, I increasingly found that I was treated differently to my colleagues. When engaging in light-hearted joking, for example, what I said would be interpreted as *"sassiness"* whilst this would be interpreted as *"banter"* if it came from a 'straight male.[42] Similarly, frequent references to my emotional state were made, with colleagues accusing me of being *"overly-excited",* when this was not said to others.[43] This reflects Cheng's observation that gay men are routinely mislabelled

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[40] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, Calif. ; London: University Of California Press, 1990), 3.

[41] Vernon, Patrick. "Auto-Ethnographic Field Notes on Discourses of Sexuality in Open-Plan Space." (16th July 2018.) Bank on the Isle of Man.

[42] Ibid, 8th August 2018.

[43] Ibid.

as 'feminine'[44] due to their failure to conform to hegemonic masculinity's requirement of heterosexual desire.[45]

Once my queerness became clear to my colleagues, I was increasingly treated as an ambassador for the 'gay community', speaking for all 'gays' everywhere. This designation was reflected in questions such as; "*do gay people still do sports?", "what is it like to be gay on the island?",* or *"do you reckon he's gay?",* with the latter making reference to my *"gaydar"*:[46] a presumed radio-wave system that gives me hidden insight into sexuality. In this context, I grew frustrated with the extent to which 'gays' were treated as a homogenous category, and that I had become a spokesperson for a category I never elected to join. Whilst never vociferously denying the term 'gay', due to this constituting what I perceived to be an unprofessional disturbance, I align with Butler's characterisation of the term 'lesbian'.[47] Here, she acknowledges the practical necessity to appear under the signifier of 'lesbian' from time to time but recognises that "to claim that this is what I *am* is to suggest a provisional totalisation of this "I."[48] Like 'lesbian', 'gay' is a pre-formed identity imposed on the subject. Consequently, even in well-intentioned 'small-talk' verbal encounters, I was acutely aware that my sexuality was different to the norm. This reflects one way in which heteronormative discourses operate through unknowing subjects, barring queers from the total inclusivity that 'gay friendly' offices promulgate to represent. This was reflected in the admission of my field of study representing a 'coming out moment', my subsequent feminisation and my treatment as a 'gay ambassador' by colleagues. Although these conversations had a profound impact on the way in which I viewed myself whilst in the office, the open-plan layout did not accentuate these feelings. This was most certainly not the case for encounters that I was not party to and bodily performances of heterosexuality, which were undoubtedly heightened by my panoptical context.

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[44] Cliff Cheng, "Marginalized Masculinities and Hegemonic Masculinity: An Introduction," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 7, no. 3 (March 21, 2007): 295–315, 298, https://doi.org/10.3149/jms.0703.295.

[45] Raewyn Connell, "An Iron Man: The Body and Some Contradictions of Hegemonic Masculinity," in *Sociological Perspectives on Sport: The Games Outside the Games* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990)

[46] Vernon, Patrick. "Auto-Ethnographic Field Notes on Discourses of Sexuality in Open-Plan Space." (17th July and 1st August 2018) Bank on the Isle of Man.

[47] Judith Butler, "Initiation and Gender Insubordination," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 307–20.

[48] Ibid, 308.

Verbal encounters that I was not party to

Another way in which power functioned whilst I was in the office was through verbal encounters that I was not party to. As established, the open-plan office constitutes a contemporary panopticon in which all subjects have the constant ability to watch and listen. This in turn renders verbal encounters that occur in the subject's vicinity just as important as encounters that the subject is engaged in.

As noted earlier, I was often asked to account for the 'gay community' as a whole by colleagues interested in my sexuality. The flipside, however, were the multiple instances in which I was denied a subject position at all, despite the topic of discussion being one of queer gender practices. One particular example of such a discussion was on the topic of 'transgender men[49]' who have become pregnant. On this topic, it was generally agreed that such a practice contravened assumed laws of nature, reflected in comments that *"it's just weird",* or *"it's not right."* [50] Building upon such comments, a number of members of the discussion concluded the conversation through reference to the traditional idea of gender essentialism; *"there are only two genders* [conflated with sex] *and what you're born with is what you are."[51]* When conducting a debate on sex and gender in a 'gay-friendly' public forum, representation of the spectrum of subject positions within that forum would be expected. By conducting debate without considering whether any members of the office do not subscribe to heteronormative understandings, they effectively wrote queers out of existence. This was not intended to cause offence but reflects a process through which power relations are (re)produced in the assumption that queer people, typified by the pregnant transgender man in this instance, exist solely in the 'imaginary' realm of the media.

A second means through which power operated within verbal encounters to which I was not party to was through the (re)signification of 'gay' in the office. Within popular discourse in the Isle of Man, it is very common to denote something peculiar, negative or problematic as *"gay"*, or often *"well gay",* and this occurred in the office on an almost daily basis.[52] This particular use of the term 'gay' is significant in two aspects. Firstly, it ascribes an identity that many people proudly identify as with a negative meaning. Secondly, it demonstrates the ever-shifting nature of discourse. This

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[49] See Paula Cocozza, "The Story of One Man's Pregnancy: 'It Felt Joyous, Amazing and Brilliant,'" *The Guardian*, March 22, 2018, sec. Life and style, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/mar/22/story-one-mans-pregnancy-trans-jason-barker for the article under discussion.

[50] Vernon, Patrick. "Auto-Ethnographic Field Notes on Discourses of Sexuality in Open-Plan Space." (3rd August 2018) Bank on the Isle of Man.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Vernon, Patrick. "Auto-Ethnographic Field Notes on Discourses of Sexuality in Open-Plan Space." Bank on the Isle of Man.

is because it used to be 'queer' that was denoted with such meanings, until it was reclaimed as a "reverse discourse"[53] by activists from its signification of pathology. This evidences the extent to which time does not constitute an endless drive towards progress, but rather constitutes a perpetual engagement of power/resistance.[54] Ergo, through the denial of subjectivity to queer individuals and by ascribing negative meanings to the term 'gay', subjects within the office conducted what Boreus terms "discursive discrimination" through "exclusion from discourse" and "negative other-presentation",[55] respectively. This in turn created an environment in which I felt constrained in my ability to speak, in the knowledge that I was on the one hand denied a subject position to speak from, and on the other, automatically ascribed a negative meaning if I spoke from a positionality involving same-sex desire. At this point, it is also relevant to note that the verbal encounters that I was party to may have also induced this effect in subjects who were listening to my conversations. Such restrictions on speech provide a possible conceptualisation of what Sedgwick means by the silent speech-act of "closetedness."[56] The panoptical character of the office undoubtedly heightened these feelings, as it facilitated the existence of large group conversations in which "*multiple people chipped in by shouting across the room from their desks*" (Vernon, *field notes,* 3rd August 2018). Whilst the open-plan space did not create logics of heterosexuality in the first instance, it allowed them to flow with greater ease through the office body-politic, increasingly gaining the appearance of facts as opposed to opinions with each new participant.

"Speech-acts of the Body"[57]

Analysing the ways in which subordinated subjects can communicate without speaking, Hansen[58] recognises what she refers to as "the speech-acts of the body"**[59].** Indeed, within the open-plan workplace, I found non-verbal speech to be extremely symbolic as a means through which sexual identity was communicated.

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[53] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1, The Will to Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 101 and Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 98.

[54] Ibid, 95.

[55] Kristina Boréus, "Discursive Discrimination," *European Journal of Social Theory* 9, no. 3 (August 2006): 405–24, 410, https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431006065721.

[56] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, Calif. ; London: University Of California Press, 1990), 3.

[57] Lene Hansen, "The Little Mermaid's Silent Security Dilemma and the Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29, no. 2 (June 2000): 285–306, 302, https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298000290020501.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Hansen draws her notion of "speech acts of the body" from Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, referring to "…the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names." (Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter : On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1993), p.2.). This is an idea that is rooted in a Foucauldian approach to discourse and power.

Within the office, a heavy emphasis was placed upon the way in which the body was dressed, with clothing constituting a central signifier for gender and sexual identity. For 'men', desirable outfits featured an emphasis on expenditure and branding as opposed to bold colours or prints. This represented what soon became apparent as an unspoken heterosexual code, as *"one day upon arriving to work in a pair of tartan trousers and a polar neck jumper, I became instantly aware of the surprised looks that I was drawing."*[60] My suspicion that I was dressed 'inappropriately' was soon confirmed by a comment from a manager, who asked whether I normally wear such clothing to work. Such an outfit transgressed the gender norms which constitute the male subject within the heterosexual matrix.[61] By expressing individuality through patterns and colours, as opposed to expenditure and labels, I was made to feel as though I had brought my sexuality into the workplace and flirted with the boundaries of heteronormative professionalism. Admittedly, had a straight male worn similar clothes into the office, he too may have received the same surprised looks and shocked expressions. That being said, for me as a queer person, these looks had a much greater meaning than they would for a straight person. For me, my failure to perform heterosexual norms in the workplace spoke deeply to my subjectivity and historic experiences of feeling weird, deviant or out-of-place. This points towards queer people experiencing spatiality and temporality differently to straight people, as Halberstam has famously noted.[62]

Beyond clothing, the movement and make-up of the body were other signifiers of sexual normativity in the workplace. In a number of instances, I observed the way in which 'male' colleagues moved in a way that exuded control, *"walking confidently with a wide stride, slowly surveying the room."*[63] Furthermore, in meetings, 'male' managers would often sit at the head of the table, consuming as much room as possible.[64] This was one of many acts of "manspreading" I observed in the office, an act described by feminists as emblematic of male entitlement.[65] A further performance of masculinity came from the constitution of 'male' bodies that inhabited the workplace. Within the office, there was a narrow emphasis on muscularity and fitness as a display of masculinity over other possible expressions of gender. Indeed, I distinctly recall the feelings of inferiority I experienced when walking out of the office next to a man twice my body weight, with

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[60] Vernon, Patrick. "Auto-Ethnographic Field Notes on Discourses of Sexuality in Open-Plan Space." (12th July 2018) Bank on the Isle of Man.

[61] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble.* (New York, London: Routledge, 1990), p.151.

[62] Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place : Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Bodies* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

[63] Vernon, Patrick. "Auto-Ethnographic Field Notes on Discourses of Sexuality in Open-Plan Space." (20th August 2018) Bank on the Isle of Man

[64] Ibid, 18th July 2018.

[65] Emma A Jane, "'Dude … Stop the Spread': Antagonism, Agonism, and #manspreading on Social Media," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 5 (March 10, 2016): 459–75, 460, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877916637151.

a protein shake in his hand and muscles protruding from his suit.[66] This reflects a broader trend through which bodily presentation constitutes a key pillar of masculinity. Indeed, Rumens and Kerfoot note that many 'gay men' compensate for their 'homosexuality' by (re)sculpting their body in order to assume "…identities coded in professionalism." [67] Whilst these norms would have still existed in a non-open plan space, the state of permanent visibility present in the office undoubtedly heightened and intensified these norms due to a larger audience witnessing and being influenced by gendered performances.

Whilst I have never made a concerted effort to present myself as 'masculine', the experience of being in a workplace in which 'male' bodies were obviously coded with gendered traits generated a distinct sense of bodily discomfort. Indeed, many of the non-verbal traits exhibited by my 'male' colleagues; smart dressing/appearance of control/masculinity as physicality, are traits that are idealised aspects of hegemonic masculinity.[68] Whilst shifting according to context, one enduring theme of hegemonic masculinity is its opposition to 'homosexuality.'[69] Given that I dressed, moved and was physically constituted in a way that was 'other' to hegemonic masculinity, the panoptical office environment generated a permanent sense of unease that even without talking, I could be conceived as 'the typical homosexual'. This undoubtedly had the effect of making me wear less bold clothing and adjusting my body language.[70]

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[66] Vernon, Patrick. "Auto-Ethnographic Field Notes on Discourses of Sexuality in Open-Plan Space." (13th August 2018) Bank on the Isle of Man

[67] Nick Rumens and Deborah Kerfoot, "Gay Men at Work: (Re)Constructing the Self as Professional," *Human Relations* 62, no. 5 (May 2009): 763–86, 780, https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726709103457.

[68] Raewyn Connell, "An Iron Man: The Body and Some Contradictions of Hegemonic Masculinity," in *Sociological Perspectives on Sport: The Games Outside the Games* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

[69] Ibid, 147.

[70] Vernon, Patrick. "Auto-Ethnographic Field Notes on Discourses of Sexuality in Open-Plan Space." Bank on the Isle of Man

Conclusion: The Homonormative Professional Subject

This essay has demonstrated the way in which logics of heterosexuality[71] operated in the (panoptical) office environment through verbal encounters that I was party to, verbal encounters that I was not party to and "speech-acts of the body."[72] Due to the state of permanent visibility and audibility therein, as a queer individual, I was made to feel uncomfortable, out-of-place and constrained in my speech, despite the office being 'gay-friendly'. It was this realisation which led me to extend Foucault's observation that sexuality is socially constructed[73] to the open-plan office. Through auto-ethnographic enquiry, I realised that my professional environment induced the construction of a homonormative subject,[74] defined by a lack of verbal and visual displays of queerness. Whilst this process of subjectification likely went unnoticed by my straight colleagues, conversations which acted as though there were no queer people in the space[75] and speaking about queer people as though they were objects of perversion,[76] for example, induced feelings that my sexuality and professional role were mutually exclusive. Admittedly, the logics of heterosexuality which I attempted to conform with were not generated by the panoptical character of the space, but this amplified and intensified heteronormative ideals. In line with Butler's notion of gender performativity,[77] those who were most vocal or prominent in their gender performances tended to be 'men'. These speech-acts simultaneously devalued non-masculine traits of femininity and queerness in their meaning, whilst reinforcing the public/private and male/female divides upon which heterosexuality depends through their dominant vocality and physicality. At this point, I should note the extent to which the operation of power is not clear-cut but rather is dependent upon a continuous relationship with resistance.[78] In attempting to converge with the ideals of the homonormative subject, I reinforced the operation of power, adjusting my behaviour to fit with established norms as opposed to challenging them. Nevertheless, my behavioural adjustment entailed simultaneous resistance, with such norms requiring an initial transgression to discover their existence and future transgressions as I navigated the discursive terrain of the office. Despite my best efforts to fit in, as a sometimes loud, slightly camp, boldly dressed and skinny office junior,

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[71] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble.* (New York, London: Routledge, 1990), p.151.

[72] Lene Hansen, "The Little Mermaid's Silent Security Dilemma and the Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29, no. 2 (June 2000): 285–306, 302, https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298000290020501.

[73] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1, The Will to Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 12.

[74] Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston Beacon Press, 2003), pp.50-51.

[75] Vernon, Patrick. "Auto-Ethnographic Field Notes on Discourses of Sexuality in Open-Plan Space." (3rd August 2018) Bank on the Isle of Man

[76] Ibid.

[77] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter : On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1993), p.2.

[78] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1, The Will to Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 95.

I failed to successfully (re)produce established norms of hetero/homonormative masculinity in all verbal/non-verbal forms of communication. It was precisely due to my failure to converge with homonormative ideals of professionalism that I was able to expose the operation of power and expose performances of heterosexuality to be discursive rather than factual.[79] By being bad at acting 'straight', I have thus been able to queer the normative form of queerness in the open-plan office. Building upon this, I hope that more scholars will look at the extent to which seemingly neutral spaces convey discourses of sexuality and the role of professional norms in the construction of knowledge about sexuality.

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[79] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1993), 314

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Commentary on:
The Office Politics of Sexuality

By Zena Spiers

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This article presents an intriguing insight into the modern workplace employing the use of the writer's own personal experience to explore the treatment of sexuality in "inclusive" businesses. The writer specifically, and successfully, draws comparisons between the ever-prevalent open plan office space and Bentham's conception of the panopticon in maintaining a gendered, heteronormative sense of power.

The writer blends together Foucault's perception of power, which draws on Bentham's vision of the panopticon, whilst confidently discussing gender and queer theory. A key point of reference in this article is Judith Butler's heterosexual matrix which is used repeatedly by the writer to underline the continued reference to essentialist views of gender and/or sex. Although these views arguably pre-date the workplace, the writer makes it clear that the open plan office space provides an environment in which they can thrive and are reinforced daily through verbal encounters and speech-acts of the body.

The article's key point of interest, however, lays in the writer's own field notes which understandably drove this line of inquiry. The writer's account of the heteronormativity that he was subjected to is a brave example of self-disclosure and does much to bolster the argument within the article. What is most striking however, is not just the comments made, or the speech-acts of the body demonstrated, but the ways in which these made the writer feel, which can often be difficult to conceptualise in an academic piece of writing. The writer has much success in both

academically and emotionally discussing the heteronormativity within the workplace and the way in which this is perpetuated by the contemporary panopticon.

One point of criticism would be that at times, the writer's individual experience overshadows the potential for further analysis of the conception of power being perpetuated and upheld within the workplace. As such the writer could present a more intersectional approach to the analysis of office politics, in particular the heteronormative, able-bodied, white and masculine view of power. However, I acknowledge that this is a very personal account of the experience of heteronormativity within the office setting and find the writer's use of personal experience exceptionally compelling to the analysis of the open plan office space as a contemporary panopticon. This being said, I think it would be prudent for the author to acknowledge the components of their identity which could be understood as privilege and noting that others may experience policing through the contemporary panopticon along the lines of gender, ability, or race.

Despite this point of criticism, I think this gives the writer the opportunity to develop this line of inquiry further in the future. I hope to see the writer gather more primary sources from individuals who identify with non-conforming or marginalised identities in similar workplaces. I think a greater analysis could also be drawn by taking accounts from experiences throughout the UK, which may provide an opportunity for understanding regional differences, especially in nationwide companies.