

# Working Class Masculinity: Keeping Gay Men and Lesbians out of the Workplace

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**Abstract** Recent survey research suggests that heterosexuals' attitudes toward lesbian and gay rights have become more progressive. However, we find in our research that negative attitudes and barriers against gay men and lesbians in workplaces still remain. Our project represents one case study of hidden animosity toward homosexuals, which varies from "overt disgust" to "don't ask, don't tell" policies that reinforce negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. As such, we contend that attitudes toward lesbian and gay rights are not becoming more progressive; instead various methods of discrimination are increasingly being used to exclude gay men and lesbians from the workplace. We argue that White working class men have constructed and maintained a form of White male solidarity, a collective practice directed toward women, People of Color, and non-heterosexuals that maintains racism, sexism, and homophobia in the local, national, and global context.

**Keywords** Homosexuality · Heteromascularity · Stratification · Sexuality

## Introduction

Researchers who study the White working class have emphasized the need to maintain a place of privilege in the race, gender, and sexual identity hierarchy (Du Bois 1903/1986; Fine et al. 1997; Marusza 1997; MacIntosh 1998; Roediger 1999). In order to secure such placement, White working class men have constructed and maintained a form of White male solidarity (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Plummer 2001), a collective practice directed toward women, People of Color, and non-heterosexuals that maintains racism and sexism, and homophobia in the local, national, and global context. Historically, White working class men have maintained this White male solidarity via unions (Gilroy 1991; Green 1980), recreational activities (Burk 2005), and closed shop floors (Nelson 2001). Although some researchers (Donovan 2003; Lamont 2000) have focused on the boundary work between White working class men and race and class, few researchers (Barnard 2004; Chan 2001) have looked at the boundaries created and maintained between White working class men and sexuality.

We extended the concept of solidarity (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Plummer 2001) to include sexuality by examining heteronormative behaviors of working class men as one aspect of their policing of social boundaries. Ingraham (1994) defined heteronormativity as "the view that institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and prescriptive sociosexual arrangements..." (p. 217). In all male environments, the institutionalization of heterosexuality becomes infused with masculinity to create heteromasculine practices (Chan 2001). For instance, research consistently shows that men hold more negative attitudes toward gay men than women do (Aberson et al. 1999; Battle and Lemelle 2002; Cotton-Huston and Waite 2000; Glenn and Weaver 1979; Louderback and Whitley

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1997; Marsiglio 1993). Furthermore, men are more likely than women to commit verbal assaults and violence toward homosexuals (Berrill 1992). We contend that these assorted attitudes and behaviors sustain rigid boundaries around masculinity and are frequently utilized to create a White working class male solidarity based on the perseverance of heteronormativity. As such, in the present study we asked: What practices contribute to the maintenance of collective White male solidarity in a heteromale workplace?

#### Heterosexuals Attitudes Toward Gay Men and Lesbians in the Workplace

Current social trends have demonstrated a general positive shift in attitudes toward lesbians and gays. Surveys, for instance, have typically demonstrated that heterosexuals respond that gay men and lesbians should have the same civil rights and liberties as everyone else in society (Loftus 2001; MacDonald and Games 1974), with very few exceptions (Wolfe 1998). The current trend in many corporate and government policies, as well as media coverage, in the United States seems to confirm those findings. For example, major employers such as Wal-Mart are undergoing radical changes in their anti-discrimination policies in an effort to protect gay and lesbian employees' rights (Kershaw 2003). Indeed it would appear that prejudice, negative attitudes toward, and discrimination against gay men and lesbians, at least in terms of their human and social rights, may be taking a positive, albeit slow, change.

Loftus (2001), for example, claimed that the general trend of heterosexuals' attitudes toward gay men and lesbians' civil rights in the United States has been an increasingly positive one. The Gallup poll suggested that a higher percentage of heterosexuals agreed that equal employment opportunities for gay men and lesbians should occur—from 56% in 1977 to 88% in 2003. Heterosexuals' views of gay men and lesbians suggest that the negative attitudes toward homosexuals are usually prejudices that may not result in discrimination. Thus, heterosexuals would not preclude gay men or lesbians from getting “good<sup>1</sup>” or stable jobs<sup>2</sup> (Bernstein and Kostelac 2002; Levitt and Klassen 1974; Woods and Lucas 1993).

According to some researchers (Benokraitis and Feagin 1995; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; McDermott 2006;

Myers and Williamson 2001), one of the biggest problems with survey research, especially in regard to ultra-sensitive topics, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, is its validity and reliability in the measurement of respondents' attitudes. That is, in today's society where it is often socially unacceptable to disclose personal prejudices, people are more likely to lie about and hide their illiberality from public scrutiny. Thus, we need more qualitative research on sensitive matters that deal with sexuality to uncover not only what we already know exists (i.e., negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians and their rights), but also to be able to examine how heterosexuals categorize and interpret their own attitudes.

LaPiere (1934) suggested that a response on a survey might not result in actual behavior toward or against homosexuals in the marketplace. Horvath and Ryan (2003), who conducted research on heterosexual college aged men and women, found that discrimination was a factor in evaluating the resumes of gay men and lesbians, but also found that male participants ranked heterosexual women lower than they did gay men and lesbians. However, Hiatt and Hargrave (1994) found no differences between heterosexual and homosexual applicants in selection rates or ratings of job performance in the police force. Pager and Quillian (2005) found in their study of employment that respondents may hold a positive attitude toward hiring ex-criminals, but their behavior is completely different. They interviewed employers as to whether they would hire White and Black criminals and non-criminals. Employers stated that they would hire the best qualified. However, when White and Black criminals and non-criminals applied for positions, race played a factor in those who were called for an interview. Their research suggests that there might not be any correlation between one's attitudes and one's behavior.

Researchers (Humphrey 1999; Schneider 1986) have also found that many homosexuals are fired when their sexual orientation is discovered. In terms of the hiring process, homosexuality, at least initially, may not play as a large factor as actual on the job training or work (Benokraitis and Feagin 1995; Levitt and Klassen 1974). Bernstein and Kostelac (2002), who studied police officers, found that one-fourth of their sample “felt that recruiting homosexual officers undermines department morale” (p. 316). Furthermore, studies have suggested that many lesbians and gay men anticipate discrimination, however, a smaller percentage of gay men and lesbians actually experience discrimination in their workplace (Bell and Weinberg 1978; Humphrey 1999; Levine and Leonard 1984; Saghir and Robins 1973; Schneider 1986; Taylor and Raeburn 1995). Other researchers noted that, in some cases, gay men and lesbians must pass as heterosexuals in order to gain access to the job market (Badgett et al. 1992).

<sup>1</sup> The word “good” here refers to a job that pays above the minimum wage and provides at least the basic fringe benefits, such as health insurance and retirement (i.e., meets the financial needs of the worker).

<sup>2</sup> Benokraitis and Feagin (1995) claimed that homosexuals easily get good jobs but rarely keep them, especially when their sexual orientation becomes known.

## Class and Attitudes Toward Sexual Orientation

Gender and sexualities are performed and regulated everyday (Myers et al. 2004; Seidman 1998; Thorne 1993; West and Zimmerman 1987). Connell (1995) asserted that working class men mark their hegemonic masculinity via collective practice, from making fun of effeminate men (Humphrey 1999; Mac an Ghail 1994; Plummer 2001; Thorne 1993) to violence against women and homosexuals (Berrill 1992; Dean et al. 1992; Fine et al. 1997; Herek and Berrill 1992; Messerschmidt 1993; Messner and Sabo 1994; Sanday 1990). Plummer (2001) wrote that “homophobia marks an intragender boundary between masculine stereotypes and the male other” (p. 21), and Chan (2001) asserted that, for White men, “the oppressiveness of a hegemonic masculinity is displaced by the goal of acquiring and maintaining patriarchal powers at all costs” (p. 9). White working class men try to secure places of privilege in opposition to women, minorities, and homosexuals (see Wong et al. 1999).

Constructions of otherness for White working class men thus re-inscribe cultural mores about both gender and sexuality. Given their lower socioeconomic status, White working class men must reassert their masculinity as a form of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995, 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 1994), proclaiming who they are, by asserting who they are not. More important, these constructions of masculinity demarcate intelligible circumscriptions of gender (Butler 1990). The intelligible circumscription of gender automatically implies heterosexuality: To be construed a “real man” one must be heterosexual. Further, the enactment of the “real man” underscores the performativity of gender in a heterosexual matrix, in which gender norms are naturalized and normalized through various rituals, such as workroom banter and gay-bashing (Sedgwick 1990). Working class men have historically depicted their masculinity on the labor floor of factories and distinguished themselves from upper or middle class men, who may be seen as feminine by working class men (Connell 1995, 2001; Marusza 1997; Willis 1977). With increased economic downturns in a postindustrial economy, working class men have continued to lose economic and social ground to upper and middle class men (Amott and Matthaie 1996; Fine and Weis 1998; Rubin 1992; Schor 1992). Omi and Winant (1994) argued that White working class men have less social and economic power because of the increase in numbers of women, homosexuals, and ethnic minorities in their workplaces.

Not only do White working class men hold negative attitudes toward women, minorities, and homosexuals, they also use those attitudes to construct and maintain White male solidarity (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Plummer 2001) as a collective practice against homosexuals (Bernstein and Kostelac 2002; Messerschmidt 1993). Thus White working class men maintain solidarity not only by expressing their

attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, but also by actively deciding who will be employed and how.

## Method

### Data Collection

#### *Participants*

The data for our case study come from in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations from one of the largest baked goods companies located in the southwestern United States, henceforth referred to as Whitebread. Because the first author worked at a local distribution center owned by Whitebread, the initial hardships faced by most researchers trying to get access to corporate businesses were minimal. After obtaining appropriate IRB approval, as well as permission from Whitebread’s human resource department, the first author recorded 6 months of participant observation at one of the main bakeries as well as at a number of various distribution depots (from January through June of 2002). This was followed immediately by in-depth, semi-structured interviews with workers, supervisors, and lower levels managers who worked in these places.

The study was framed as a research project exploring the class dynamics present in the everyday actions of workers and managers in a work environment dominated by male workers. Whitebread workers and managers were informed by the first author that an ethnographic research project was going to be conducted in the workplace. They were also informed that their daily routines as well as their interactions with one another would be actively recorded on a daily basis for 6 months. This was the only notification Whitebread workers and managers received until the end of the ethnographic study. The interview participants are a convenience sample obtained through snowball sampling of workers, supervisors, and lower level managers at Whitebread. Because the service are covered by Whitebread consisted of depots that ranged from larger warehouses with 20 or more workers to smaller depots that sometimes had only one or two workers, the use of a snowball sampling technique provided an adequate sample of the workers and managers in this company (about 20%). Of the 38 respondents who were interviewed, only 20 answered questions on issues of sexuality. Thus, we focus on those 20 respondents for our analysis in this article.

Eighteen of the respondents were men and two were women. The median age of the respondents was 40 and ranged from 24 to 52 years. Three of the respondents were managers, two were drivers responsible for transporting merchandise from the main bakery to various distribution depots, two were merchandisers responsible for organizing

the merchandise delivered to the distribution depots, 11 were route sales representatives who delivered merchandise from the distribution depots to various restaurants and stores, and two were cashiers at the bakery thrift store owned by Whitebread (both women). Fifteen respondents were White, two were Black, two were Mexican Americans, and one was Asian American. While the sexual orientation of the respondents was not specifically asked, data drawn from the participant observations and interviews suggest that all of the men were practicing heterosexuals.

### *Procedure*

Ethnographic notes were recorded daily (Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday through Saturday) on small notepads that the first author carried in his shirt pocket while working along side respondents throughout the workday. The notes were recorded during work hours that usually began at midnight and ended between 3 and 7 P.M. in the evening.<sup>3</sup> In order to minimize bias that occurs when respondents know that they are being observed, the first author was careful to record his observations either during bathroom breaks or while in the confines of his work truck. In situations where essential observations needed to be recorded immediately, or where there was little chance that notes could be taken in solitude, the first author took notes but used an inventory clipboard as a tool to cover them up. Because the requirements of the job changed from day-to-day, the recorded interactions of workers and managers changed as well.<sup>4</sup> The notes were then transcribed and expanded upon at the end of each day while the memories of the day's events were still fresh. The ethnographic study was purposely conducted before the interview process as a way to locate and select potential interviewees, but also to interpret the interviewees' comments.

The interviews with the 20 respondents lasted approximately 2 h (range=60–180 min). Respondents were asked to first sign a consent form agreeing to be interviewed and

tape recorded. They were then asked a total of 50 questions that dealt with issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The interview questions were open-ended and semi-structured to accommodate the time limitations of the respondents, yet, where necessary and when time permitted, other questions were incorporated that would address or allow the respondents to explain themselves better. In cases where the respondent was either excessively nervous or uncomfortable with the interview, or considerably progressive in her or his views, we referred to the ethnographic notes as a way to validate our findings. For this article, we concentrate on the last 13 questions that dealt specifically with concepts of sexuality, with a focus on three main issues concerning homosexuality in the workplace (see [Appendix](#)). First, what are the respondents' attitudes toward and feelings about homosexuals, and what are their perceptions of other managers' and workers' attitudes toward homosexuals? Second, what do respondents think about homosexuals' contributions and success in the vending industry, and what are their thoughts about whether or not sexual orientation should be a consideration in the hiring process? Third, do heterosexuals in the vending industry have a preference, if given the choice, between a gay man and a lesbian in the workplace?

### **Results**

#### *Progressive Heterosexuals?*

The negative views of gay men and lesbians held by heterosexuals may be much broader than just moral choices. As the data from Whitebread illustrate, the attitudes of workers and management toward homosexuals are much more complex than suggested in the literature. In analyzing the answers from the respondents at Whitebread, we developed three main themes (Glaser and Strauss 1967) that we believe represent the general attitudes of workers and management concerning homosexuality: outright disgust, don't ask—don't tell, and ostracism and fear. It is interesting that only two of the 20 interview respondents (10%), both women, took any favorable or neutral position toward gay men and lesbians in answer to our questions (see [Table 1](#)). Unless noted otherwise, all quotes come from the interviews.

#### *Outright Disgust*

Five of the interview respondents (25%) were repulsed by the idea of homosexuality. The thought itself was almost too much for them to bear. In each of these cases, the respondents depended on science and religion as an explanation for homosexual behavior, and, in one case, the respondent expressed his views by using violent

<sup>3</sup> In Whitebread, route sales persons were off duty on Wednesdays and Sundays, with the option to work on their days off for additional pay. Most route sales persons began their shifts between midnight and 3 A.M. and usually ended their shifts around 3 P.M.. During this time, the sales person would be responsible for transporting goods to various stores on their route, checking in the product with the store receiver, and then stocking the product on the store shelves. All remaining merchandise after the shelves had been stocked would be placed in the merchandise holding area, usually located in the back of the stores. Because the sales person was responsible for ensuring that the store shelves remain full while the stores are open, often they would have to go back to the stores (usually around 5 P.M.) they delivered to earlier in the day and spend an additional 2 or 3 h restocking the shelves.

<sup>4</sup> The distribution centers at Whitebread served as the central warehouse for specific regions. Workers would pick up merchandise at these centers and then proceed to deliver throughout the day to various restaurants and stores, before returning to the center to restock and fill out their paperwork.

**Table 1** Percentage of attitudes from respondents by gender<sup>a</sup>.

Respondent gender	Respondent attitudes				Row totals
	Outright disgust	Don't ask, don't tell	Ostracism and fear	Favorable or neutral	
Women	0	0	0	2 (10%)	2 (10%)
Men	5 (25%)	2 (10%)	11 (55%)	0	18 (90%)
Column totals	5 (25%)	2 (10%)	11 (55%)	2 (10%)	20 (100%)

<sup>a</sup> These numbers do not include any overlapping of attitudes by respondents.

gestures and tones. Don, a 20 year veteran in the bread business remarked:

It's a sickness. A goddamn sickness. You know, the Bible says it's a sin. That's all I need to say...a sickness. Those people need help. They need to check their head cause there's a screw loose. It's a sickness. When asked how he would react if he were to find out that his son was gay, Don replied firmly: I'd disown him. He's out of the family. I'll pay to have them check him out cause it's a sickness you know. When they fix him, then he can come back to the family.

Clearly, Don's argument against homosexuals is of a moral nature. However, Don also made it clear that homosexuals have no place in society other than one reserved for the mentally ill. In one of the participant observations, Larry, who worked in the distribution section of Whitebread, made it clearly known that "just the vision" of two men kissing is "nasty" and made him very "uncomfortable." When asked, in an interview, how he would feel if he were told by management to train someone who is known to be homosexual, Larry responded: "In disgust. But I keep it to myself." Similarly Harry, a White worker in his late 40s, was quick to express his opinions on how most male workers would feel if they were forced to work with someone who was open about being gay: "Sure. With a gay guy we would all be disgusted."

The interview respondents who fell into the *Outright Disgust* category did not simply limit their views of gay men and lesbians to interviews about sexuality. In fact, they often shared their thoughts with the folks around them whenever the subject of homosexuality came up, for example, during political commentary about gay marriage or gay rights.

#### *Don't Ask, Don't Tell*

A larger number of interview respondents (55%) thought that there was no reason for anyone who was homosexual either to express or acknowledge their sexual orientation at work. In many of these cases, the respondents claimed that sexual orientation should not even be discussed in the workplace. This seemed to be an easy explanation for some of the respondents who felt uncomfortable when asked

questions regarding homosexuals in the workplace and who wanted to appear, at least initially, open-minded. George, a transport driver for Whitebread, claimed:

I don't think that even if you're married in the workforce that you should show sexual preferences or, or goofing like that. There's a place for that and work is not the place.

George's response suggests an automatic insinuation that being homosexual makes people unable to control their sexual nature. George assumed that gay men and lesbians cannot control their sexual appetites in or outside of the workplace. The response was the same for management and workers. Sam, a sales manager for Whitebread, said:

Uhhmmm. [Pause] As far as them working somewhere or doing whatever. Working is one thing, sexual is another. It just doesn't belong in the workplace, and it shouldn't be, any part of it shouldn't be shared in the workplace. So what they do should be kept to themselves, whatever their sexual orientation it should be kept to themselves.

An interesting note here is that, in the participant observation, many of the male respondents used sexuality as a way either to promote their masculinity or to create a banter through which they could bond with their fellow workers. Thus, the sexual exploitation of heterosexual men's behavior was seen as the acceptable norm in the workplace, even though it clearly violated Don and George's requirements of acceptable behavior in the workplace.

#### *Ostracism and Fear*

For a few of the respondents (15%), attitudes toward gay men and lesbians tended to consist of exclusion, either on the subject of homosexuality or of the person themselves. When asked whether or not gay men and lesbians should remain in the closet about their sexual orientation, these respondents contradicted themselves by answering positively with the stipulation that they themselves would have nothing to do with the person in question. Larry, a loader for 5 years, remarked: "No, I think they should tell someone...just not me [Laughs]," and "No, I think they should tell, talk to someone about it...but not to me."

This statement makes clear that Larry does not want to have anything to do with anyone he perceives to be homosexual. He believes that gay men and lesbians should be included in society as long as that society does not include him. Similarly, Jose does not want to know if anyone he works with is homosexual. Jose stated:

Ohhhh. I would tell them that's your business, and I don't want to know what's going on. That's whatever somebody does at home, that's none of my business.

Fear also played a role in determining just how acceptable homosexuality was to our respondents. Unlike Levine (1992), who suggested three factors (perversion, moral wrongness, disease) that contribute to the negative views that heterosexuals held toward gay men and lesbians, five (25%) of the respondents from Whitebread did not offer or suggest any reason for their negative views about gay men or lesbians other than a fear that either they might somehow be "hit on" by a homosexual, or they might somehow "catch it" or end up betraying their heterosexuality by feeling pleasure of same-sex behavior. For example, Jack, a competitor of Whitebread in his late 30s, remarked:

Well, being gay is against my religion. But ahhhh, I ain't got a problem with them as long as they don't get near me [laughs].

Larry also explained his fear when asked what his reaction would be if he was told that he had to train a person who was open about being gay or lesbian, especially if the person is a man. Larry's response was:

No...ummmm yeah, yeah it would. [Why?] It wouldn't, doesn't affect me. If it's a guy there's a chance he might hit on me. If it's a woman I know I won't get hit on so...

#### Limiting Gays' Men and Lesbians' Access to the Workplace

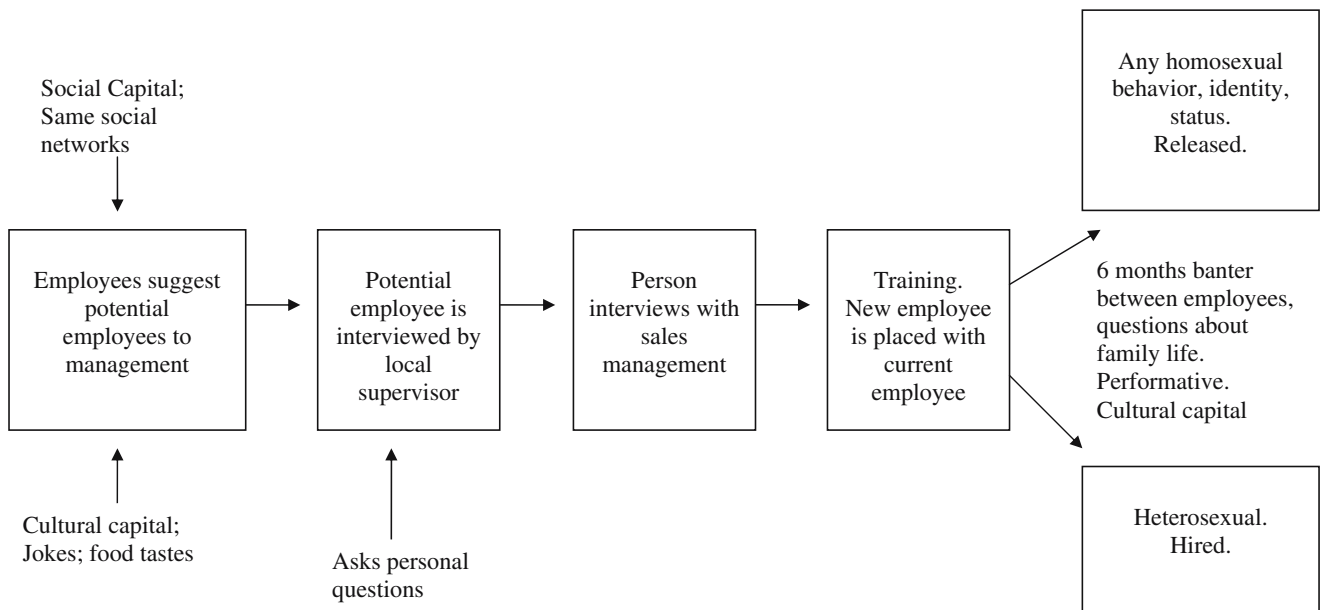
The hiring process at Whitebread consists of several stages, through which a person must pass before becoming officially hired. The first obstacle is the use of a network hiring system by companies to insure that the person being considered for a job is acceptable to the workers. The potential worker must pass two interview stages. The first is with a local supervisor, who often will overlook certain company policies or federal and state laws during the interview process by asking personal questions unrelated to the job description. The supervisor, who is most often a man, may also unofficially ask questions about the interviewee from other vendors within the community.

The second interview stage is with the sales manager, whose questions are restricted by company, state, and federal guidelines, but who also has more experience in judging worker profiles for the company and who has the ultimate

authority in deciding who gets hired and who does not. In addition, the sales managers, who are all men at Whitebread, are also the determiners of who gets promoted to the next level of management in the company. After the interviews, the employees must go through 6 months of probation at which time they are paid a lower income and not given any company benefits, such as medical and dental insurance. Because of the unionization of workers in most vending industries and their use of union contracts, it is harder for workers actually to be fired from their jobs without cause. Thus, this 6 month probation period allows managers easily to fire anyone who does not represent the company's best interest (see Fig. 1).

In the interviews with workers and management we found that 90% of respondents either would not hire anyone they thought was homosexual or would not consider them as their first or best choice to fill in an open job position. In addition, managers who have seen or who have personally hired gay men or lesbians in the past remarked that they would not do so again. Many of the reasons that were given as to why they would not consider hiring homosexuals in the vending industry tended to reflect their concern about the company's image. As one worker mentioned, the typical view of a company that hires homosexuals reflects the negative stereotypes and myths that have surrounded gay men and lesbians since the early 1960s. George, the transport driver mentioned above, said:

Let's face it that's, that's the key, is first impression. If you're gonna have a route guy and he's like, (switches to a high pitched voice) "oh you know" (switches to normal voice), you as say Albertson's or Kroger's looks at that and you're like WOW, you know, but then again you have to also know by laws your supposed to give that individual that choice, but I don't know, let's face it in the REAL world, ok. There's political and then the REAL world, you want to sell your products, you want your trucks as clean as possible, you want them as new as possible, you want the best uniforms of your individual, and you want the most cut and dry guys that are gonna do the job very polite and move on. You have a guy like, (changes to a high pitched voice) ah you know, you know that's (switches to normal voice), you know it hurts you, it reflects on the company saying you know they'll hire ANYBODY to do this job. You know, if you wanna sell and sell this stuff right, you have to show a good image. If you do not show a good image it tarnishes you. And once you're tarnished, you cannot get back up to that level. It's extremely hard to get back up to that level. First impressions are tremendous. We are very impressionistic as far as this country goes, on first impressions.



**Fig. 1** Covert and overt barriers to hiring gay men and lesbians.

Thus, according to George, gay men do not fit the profile of what corporations are looking for because they are effeminate, dirty, impolite, and also unable to keep an organized and professional appearance. In the participant observation, many of the gay jokes uttered by the route salespersons reinforced the view that contrary to idea that gay men are well-groomed and clean cut, there is another side to them that is opposite of those notions.

Other reasons given by respondents focused on gay men's mental abilities rather than their outward appearances. Ron, a sales manager for Whitebread, noted that he knew of two gay men who used to work for Whitebread and commented on why he would not consider re-hiring them:

Uhhmmm [long pause] Well, I've known of two. They both were hired. If, if I had to wind up in choice would I hire them again, I probably wouldn't. And that would be because they were...uhhmmm...too emotional. You know, in our work a lot of times you're gonna walk into a store and have a manager just rip you for something where you have no idea where he's coming from and you may find out that it didn't have anything to do with you and uhh you can't have somebody that's gonna start and stand there crying in this store, and these people, the two that I knew were very emotional people. I mean, they were meticulous people and they really cared about things but once somebody jacked them up, they fell apart, they just couldn't deal with it. So I don't know, I don't know if that would be, you know... I don't know...they would have, have to ahhhh show me that they were strongly interested in the job and I would explain to them what they were up against and they would have to convince

me that they could deal with it, but I would still think that they would fail.

In Ron's viewpoint, gay men cannot deal with the emotional stress that is required as a worker for Whitebread.

#### Masculinity in the Workplace

Gender plays an important role in the prospects that gay men and lesbians have in the job market. Because the vending industry tends to support hyper-masculine behaviors, gay men are typically resented more than lesbians are. However, this does not mean that lesbians are more likely than gay men to succeed in the job market. It only means that, if lesbians were to gain employment in a hyper-masculine industry, the men who worked there would feel more comfortable with them than they would with gay men. A few of the workers, like George, would not budge from their position that homosexuality was wrong whether it be gay men or lesbians. When the idea of lesbian families were even brought up, George quickly remarked:

Two lesbians raising a son? That's insane! Who's the mother? Who's the father? The poor kid's gonna go through life having a complex over breasts and milk! Other respondents were in favor of lesbians over gay men in a similar job position.

Harry, who mentioned previously his disgust with gay men, remarked: "...But a lot of men would be interested in the lesbians. Just to see I guess, if they could find out something new." Larry's concern was that he would feel

**Table 2** Gender demographics of Whitebread by department and job title, 2001<sup>a</sup>.

Department	Percentage of men (%)	Percentage of women (%)
Garage/repair	100	0
Operations [i.e., HR]	97	3
Office	67	33
Sanitation	40	60
Sales	97	3
Sales management	93	7
Sales upper management	95	5
Thrift store/retail	24	76

<sup>a</sup> Source: Whitebread company records;  $N=267$ .

more uncomfortable with a gay man than a lesbian because of his worry that he might be hit on. Larry said: “Yes. Well women I don’t care as much, but men [Pause], pretty nasty [Laughs].” In contrast to some of the respondents’ favorable opinions of lesbians, the demographic data of Whitebread employees show why those attitudes would have no bearing on the success of lesbians in the workplace (see Table 2). At Whitebread, less than 11% of the workers and management are women. In some cases, such as in the transportation and garage division, the percentage of women is zero. In management, the percentage of women is slightly higher than in the company overall, 7% compared to 5%. However, when we consider only those in upper management, or management with power, the percentage drops to 5%.<sup>5</sup>

## Discussion

Recent research (Loftus 2001), as well as many studies that were done in the early 1970s (e.g., Levitt and Klassen 1974, MacDonald and Games 1974), suggests that the attitudes of heterosexuals in the United States toward gay men and lesbians, at least in terms of their civil rights, is increasingly becoming more progressive. We suggest, based on our case study of Whitebread, that those attitudes may represent surface level beliefs that reflect individuals’ attempt to mirror in themselves America’s theme of false egalitarianism. We argue that heterosexuals may hold liberal viewpoints when discussing issues related to gay men and lesbians, however, their actions often contradict their words. For example,

<sup>5</sup> We must also note here that in the case of Whitebread, any worker who works in an office environment was listed under the general management team. Most of the women on our list work in secretarial positions that have nothing to do with management in terms of having power over other workers. Thus, Whitebread was able to exaggerate their claims of women in management even though in reality there are far fewer women than men in supervisory positions.

homosexual jokes at Whitebread were used to increase the collective practice of White male solidarity in their performance of hegemonic masculinity and to exclude any homosexuals from employment in their workplace.

We found three prominent attitudes toward gay men and lesbians of the respondents. First, the reasons that heterosexuals give to explain their negative attitudes toward homosexuals may be more than moral issues and need to be analyzed in greater depth than can be produced by quantitative research studies. In our analysis of the Whitebread data, we found several themes: outright disgust, “don’t ask, don’t tell,” and ostracism and fear. Second, the progressive views of heterosexuals contradict the reality of their actions, at least in the vending industry. Gay men and lesbians have a very slim chance of gaining entry to the good jobs provided by the vending industry much less maintaining their job status on the chance that they do get hired. Finally, gender, class, and sexuality must be looked at in context of one another, especially when considering lesbians in the workplace. Although previous research (Aberson et al. 1999; Battle and Lemelle 2002; Cotton-Huston and Waite 2000; Finlay and Walther 2003; Glenn and Weaver 1979; Herek and Glunt 1993; Kerns and Fine 1994; Kite and Whitley 1996; Lamar and Kite 1998; Lottes and Kuriloff 1992; Louderback and Whitley 1997; Marsiglio 1993), as well as our study of Whitebread, suggests that gay men are viewed more negatively than lesbians by heterosexuals, the persistent discrimination against women that takes place in hyper-masculine work environments places a double burden on lesbians.

We have sought in the present study to examine specific attitudes, behaviors, and practices of White working class men as they reconstitute boundaries around masculinity and femininity. To them, to be a “real” man, one must be heterosexual, which supports Chan’s (2001) claim that “even when gay men practice masculine behavior, it does not mean that they can participate fully or equally with masculine heterosexuals in public life” (p. 16) because they are not deemed fully constituted men. These constructions of masculinity reinscribe Butler’s (1990) notions of the performativity of gender in a heterosexual matrix, and likewise effectively demonstrate several minoritizing discourses about homosexuality (Sedgwick 1990). Indeed it is these very assumptions, prejudices, and rationales that in fact promulgate and sanction defenses of gay-bashers based on homophobic panic (Sedgwick 1990).

The data from Whitebread illustrate that the attitudes of heterosexuals toward gay men and lesbians are not as progressive as some research has suggested. The data also suggest that more qualitative research needs to be done on the attitudes and beliefs of heterosexuals. It is important for us to understand the minds and actions of workers and management in corporations such as this before we make assumptions about the progressive attitudes of America.



Thus, the data from our study of Whitebread indicate that homosexuals do not have equal employment rights. In addition, if gay men and lesbians are fortunate enough to get hired in these types of jobs, there is every indication to believe that their job tenure would be short-lived.

### Appendix I: Interview Questions Dealing with Sexuality

1. How do you feel about gays and lesbians who work in the vending industry and are open about their sexuality?
2. Excluding yourself, what do you think are the reactions of most supervisors when confronted by applicants looking to become a route salesperson who are also open about their sexuality, being gay or lesbian?
3. What do you think are the common reactions of workers in this company concerning co-workers who consider themselves to be gay or lesbian?
4. Should gays and lesbians remain in the closet, keep it secret, about their sexual preferences?
5. Should gays and lesbians who work in the vending industry remain in the closet, keep it secret, about their sexual preferences?
6. Does it make a difference if that person is a man or a woman?
7. Scenario: The sales manager chooses you as a trainer for a new worker, a male [female if the respondent is female] who is open about being gay. What is your reaction?
8. Does it make a difference if the person was a woman [man if the respondent is female] who was open about being a lesbian?
9. Do you think a person who is open about being gay or lesbian can be successful, either as a worker or in management, in the vending industry?
10. Does it make a difference if that person is a man or a woman?
11. Do you think it is ok for sexual orientation, for example—whether you are gay or lesbian, to be a consideration in vending industry jobs?
12. What about the military?
13. Would you like to add any additional comments concerning sexuality to this interview?

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