

The use of self: the conscious or unconscious (sharing or) leaking of identity by LGBTQ cisgender women youth workers in the North of England.

Abstract

Purpose

This paper discusses how professionally qualified cisgender lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer (LGBTQ) women youth workers present their self. The research examined how youth workers consciously or unconsciously shared their sexual identity with young people with whom they worked. Whilst this research focussed on youth workers, issues discussed are relevant for practitioners from a range of professional backgrounds such as therapists, social workers, teachers and health care practitioners. The research focussed only on the experiences of cisgender LGBTQ women as the experiences of men and trans women are different and so requires separate research.

Design/methodology/approach

This research, taking a qualitative approach, used in-depth interviews to discuss how respondents shared information about their identity.

Findings

Some of fifteen youth workers interviewed reported not having choices about being *out* with the young people as their sexuality had been *leaked*. Others were able to *pass* and so choose when, or if, to be *out* with young people. Their different strategies to sharing information regarding their sexuality used by these participants reflected different approaches to being *out*.

Originality/value

Although there is evidence in the literature of how *being out* or *closeted* impacts on teachers there is little written about the effect on youth workers or other professionals. The little research that has been undertaken in this area focusses on the impact of identity on the clients rather than on the professionals. This article contributes to filling this gap in the literature.

Keywords

identity; LGBT; queer; self; youth-work,

Paper type

Research paper

1. Introduction

This paper examines how professionals present their self and how they consciously or unconsciously share or leak their sexual identity. It draws on research with cisgender women youth workers from the North of England who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer (LGBQ). Being an insider in this research (a lesbian working in youth work education) enabled me to gather rich data around this sensitive topic that might have been impossible for other researchers. The acronym LGBQ is used to emphasise that some participants preferred to name themselves as gay or queer rather than lesbian. The research focussed on the experiences of cisgender LGBQ women youth workers, not examining the experiences of male or trans professionals, as their experiences are different (Dhaenens, 2013) and so required separate research.

This paper briefly introduces ideas of the *self*; then discusses, in more depth, the *use of self* within the context of youth work by outlining core values of youth work. The paper moves on to illustrate the prejudices faced by LGBQ young people and professionals. Theoretical concepts including *standing out*, *coming out* or *passing* and choosing whether to share information are presented before describing the methods and findings of the research which then enables a critical discussion of these concepts.

Ideas of the self

The self is a complex social construct (drawing on Goffman, 1959) as this self is 'embedded in the world' (Heidegger cited in Anowai & Chukwujekwu, 2019:2). Goffman (1959) discussed how the self is enacted: to the '*front of house*' (the audience), which brings context to our 'performances' as we act differently, or present a different aspect of our self, in different contexts. In order to remain authentic in our relationships with this audience, we must bring an awareness of who that audience is: Goffman's *backstage*. Heidegger (in his discussion of *Dasein*) also emphasised the importance of understanding oneself in the context and complexity of our social roles within the world (Warburton, 2013). A 'focussed listening', and awareness of our own abilities, is required in order to remain authentic in taking responsibility for our own actions (Anowai & Chukwujekwu, 2019:2).

The use of self in youth work and other professional practices:

The identity, or self, of any professional impacts on how they engage with service users. This self includes the ethnicity, social class, gender, age, sexuality, religion (or none) of the

professional. A youth worker's role in informal education is focused on the relationship that they develop with young people (Ord, 2009). Sharing something of their self is crucial in enabling young people to share something of their own selves, their interests and challenges, with the worker. Deciding when and how to share personal information is challenging. Professionals need an awareness that the problematic or unconscious leaking of identity is inevitable in many situations. Although this paper discusses LGBTQ cisgender women's conscious *use of their self*, the findings are relevant to all youth workers, regardless of their sexuality. It is of particular relevance to workers from other minorities such as Black and Asian minority ethnicities (BAME), disabled workers and workers with challenging backgrounds.

The notion of *the use of self* is relevant for a range of other professionals including teachers (Woolhouse, 2012), therapists (Howard, 2005), social workers (Reupert, 2007) and health professionals (Lieberman, 2013). The *use of self* is seen to be central to the relationships at the heart of these professions (Kubiak and Sandberg, 2011) and professionals often take years to gradually integrate their 'personal and professional' practice (Newman et al, 2008:216). The *self* these professionals bring to their practice is their everyday self: 'her height, her age, her sex, her ethnic origins' (Reupert, 2007:107) and her 'public self: including her clothes ... [and] the photographs on her office wall' (Reupert, 2007:110-111). The *use of self* is always within the context of social structures which confine the practice (Kubiak and Sandberg, 2011). There has been little research into how this *use of self* operates (Reupert, 2007, Fusco, 2012) even though the use of self is seen as essential within these professions.

The little research undertaken around LGBTQ issues within these educational, caring and health professions has mostly focussed on LGBTQ clients rather than issues faced by the professionals (Eliason et al, 2011 - nursing; Messinger et al, 2020 - Social Work; Llewellyn, 2021 -teaching). This article, therefore, contributes to filling this gap in the literature.

2. Professional practice in the context of societal HBT

Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia (HBT-phobia) are still commonplace in the UK (as in many countries) despite the 2010 Equality Act which outlawed discrimination on grounds of sexuality and gender identity (Formby, 2021). The numbers of reported hate crimes based on sexual orientation in the UK has increased since 2013 (Bachmann and Gooch, 2017), and continues to increase (HM Government, 2022), hence 'almost half of all LGBT pupils still face bullying at school for being LGBT' (Stonewall 2017:6). These HBT-microaggressions are not

experienced evenly by all LGBT young people as the experiences are more frequent and relentless for disabled and BAME young people (Stonewall, 2017).

LGBQ professionals face additional challenges not faced by heterosexual cisgender workers. It is not just youth workers who are at risk of HBT-prejudice. Teachers, for example, face particular pressures from management to be closeted regarding their sexuality (Llewellyn, 2021). Whilst LGBT issues might be noted in educational policy statements there is little evidence of inclusion of these issues within the formal curriculum in a range of countries including Canada (Grace, 2006); the USA (Connell, 2015) and the UK (Formby, 2021). LGBT teachers are expected to remain 'professional' (Connell, 2015:166), and so keep their personal lives private (e.g. not displaying family photographs: Holliday, 1999). This contrasts with expectations for straight cisgender teachers who have 'heterosexual privilege' to share information (Llewellyn, 2021). The pressure to remain closeted, or to 'split' their personal and professional identities (Connell, 2015;168) stands in stark contrast with professionals' insights that their own mental health will be negatively affected by being closeted. Teachers know that being *closeted* in their work situation can 'create dissonance and personal turmoil' (Llewellyn, 2021) and they may miss opportunities to be positive role models for other LGBT teachers and students (Lee, 2019). There is similar literature regarding the challenges faced by professionals working in social work (Newman et al, 2008;), therapy (Baines-Ball, 2021) and health settings (Eliason et al 2011).

Youth workers in the United Kingdom (often known as street-workers in other European countries) engage young people in a range of settings. Some work with young people excluded from school in alternative education projects or Pupil Referral Units (PRUs); others work in pastoral roles in schools or colleges but most work in more informal settings with young people who choose to engage with youth workers in youth centres, youth clubs or as 'detached youth workers' in young people's own spaces. Youth workers have to use their *self* in their day-to-day engagement with young people to build the reciprocal relationships which are needed in their practice (Fusco, 2012). This *use of self* 'of necessity involves communicating something personal' (Sapin, 2013:14) through supportive conversations and democratic 'dialogue' (Coburn, 2011:67) where the agenda is 'shaped by young people' (de St Croix, 2020). To be effective as informal educators, youth workers must dispense with the more usual authoritative roles that are often expected between professionals and young

people (Ord, 2009; NYA, 2020) so taking an adult-to-adult approach (drawing on transactional analysis: Berne, 1968). An important tool used by youth workers is their ability to develop reciprocal conversations with young people (Sapin, 2013). These are not casual chats but are spaces in which youth workers listen respectfully to young people, so developing an understanding of young people's perspectives and issues.

Knowing when and how to allow our own identity to impact on practice is difficult. Deciding when, how or what to share about one's own life is challenging and of particular importance for professionals from many different minority communities (e.g. BAME, disabled people) including LGBTQ communities. Youth workers, if they are to build reciprocal and authentic relationships, need an awareness of how they present themselves regarding their image and dress. 'Material disclosures ... [as well as] personal style, character traits and status' (Murphy and Ord, 2013:333) will set the basis for relationships. Disclosures and sharing of information about the self should be intentional and thought through, although not necessarily planned (Murphy and Ord, 2013). It is important for youth workers that boundaries are always appropriate but not static. What is not relevant to disclose to a young person on a first meeting may well be a useful topic for discussion having worked with a young person over a number of months or years. Different 'spheres of disclosure ... [from] free and open ... [through] selective ... [and] discretionary ...[to] private' (Murphy and Ord, 2013:336) may assist youth workers to ponder on what they might disclose to young people.

Theoretical perspectives

This section, moving on from the discussion of challenges faced by LGBTQ professionals in their work, introduces some key theoretical ideas. These include what it means to *stand out* as LGBTQ, the pros and cons of *coming out* or *passing* at work and why professionals may seek to hide or be visible as LGBTQ: drawing in places on ideas from Goffman (1959); Sedgwick (1991) and Halberstam (1998).

Standing out as LGBTQ?

All professionals must decide what to share from their personal life. LGBTQ professionals have to choose whether to 'stand out' (Hutson, 2010:214) as LGBTQ or be *closeted* about sexual identity. We might *stand out* through 'nuanced clothing choices, piercings, tattoos and hairstyles' (Hayfield and Wood, 2019:116). We may also communicate sexual identity through habitually reiterated conscious or unconscious performances (or *performativity*: Butler, 1991)

through the way that we walk or speak, the style of our clothes and other signs and symbols (Stockton, 2002). Our performativity depends not only on our internalised socialisation (Weeks, 2007) but also on the audience to whom we are performing and the 'margin of freedom' or 'elbow room' (Goffman, 1961:31 & 89) that we take in any situation.

Sedgwick's understanding of *sexuality* and *being closeted* is useful here. For Sedgwick (1991:41) *sexual identity* (the term she uses) was 'not a hard-wired biological given but rather a social fact deeply embedded in cultural and linguistic forms of many decades'. Sedgwick emphasised that just because one's sexual identity is culturally structured does not mean that it is easily changed. Homosexuality is seen as 'perversion' (Sedgwick, 1991:9) and 'ignorance' (Sedgwick, 1991:11). Homosexuality (the *abnormal*) is seen in binary opposition to *normal* heterosexuality: so bringing a focus on a binary division (Sedgwick, 1994).

Sedgwick (1991:3) said that 'closetedness' was a performance of a particular form of silence. She suggested that being open or offering a lack of clarity about one's sexual identity were equally powerful. However she pointed out that the very naming of a 'closet' suggested that it is a label (or a performance) we might be ashamed of, as it is seen as 'a demonised space' (Sedgwick, 1991:7). Sedgwick was clear that the closet, 'the defining structure for gay oppression' (Sedgwick, 1991:71), was 'still a shaping presence ... [for even the most] courageous' gay person (Sedgwick, 1991:68). She suggested both advantages and disadvantages of being closeted: noting that *coming out* can strengthen the position of the community but can endanger one's own position. In order to be outside of the closet one needs to come out 'regularly' (Sedgwick, 1991:71) as no one is completely out in all their life.

There is evidence that when LGBTQ women first *come out* they might change their style to avoid the 'gaze' of straight men or to 'attract the gaze of non-heterosexual women': so advertising their membership of this community (Hayfield, et al, 2013:173). 'Fitting in' (Hutson, 2010:214) to an accepted LGBTQ image may become less important once a person is comfortable with their own sexual identity. However individual styles developed by LGBTQ women often conform to typical lesbian norms (Clarke and Turner, 2007). Not being seen or recognised correctly may be disappointing as this can lead to one's 'idealised self' being ignored by others (Holliday, 1999:488). Choosing to *fit in* with LGBTQ identities or to *stand*

out from heteronormative styles can bring risks or rewards (Seidman, 2002): often to do with self-confidence and mental health (Cargill, 2020).

So what are the images that many LGBTQ women fit into? A butch style of dress and haircut have been accepted as the *lesbian look* since the 1920s (Walker, 2001). Other terms such as ‘comfortable shoes’ (Clarke and Turner, 2007:267), ‘a lesbian swagger ... and a “don’t mess with me attitude”’ (Hayfield et al, 2013:176) may also be associated with a lesbian-butch image. Whilst lesbian stereotypes are ‘ever changing’ (Hayfield et al, 2013:173) these signifiers leave ‘femme’ or ‘lipstick lesbians’, who may have long hair, wear dresses, make-up or high heels (Hayfield et al, 2013:173), outside of the accepted *lesbian look*. It may mean that professionals with less money cannot afford the clothes and style that so often signify LGBTQ for women: as class, like sexuality is ‘written on the body’ (Taylor, 2007:165). It may be that LGBTQ women from BAME heritages never fitted the butch/femme duality (Hutson, 2010). The possible marginalisation of BAME women within LGBTQ circles (Mackay, 2021) was supported by this research which concluded that BAME women often found *queer* more useful than a *lesbian* label (Author, 2019). It is important to note that bisexual women are often invisible as they are not able to ‘play the pronoun game’ (Hayfield et al, 2013:177) and there is little ‘evidence of a bisexual look’ (Clarke and Turner, 2007:272).

Coming out or passing?

Deciding when or if to *come out* or to *pass* in any situation in our personal lives is difficult. Deciding on which route to take in professional settings can be more problematic. *Coming out* is a ‘process ... [of] social interaction’ (Hutson, 2010:216) and sharing with others ‘what might be kept back or left uncertain’ (Phelan, 2010:15). People *come out* so they can be authentic: ‘true to themselves’ (Rostad and Long, 2007:321); and feel comfortable with the ‘fit between the outside of one’s body and it’s inside’ (Holliday, 1999:481). Feeling part of a LGBTQ professional community is important for many reasons: feeling that that one is hiding, or not being true to one’s own self and identity, can undermine mental health and confidence and is often the motivation for coming out in work settings (Cargill, 2020).

Passing, a term often used about trans identities, is something we all do to some extent although it is not usually ‘overt or explicit’ (Spear and Green, 2007:337). *Passing* is about behaving in a particular manner to manage how we are seen in different situations. Passing ‘assumes that there is a self that [successfully] masquerades as another kind of self

(Halberstam, 1998:21). It is about how we deliberately and carefully present ourselves: 'bringing a range of features of bodily comportment and appearance under conscious ... control [with] performative deliberateness' (Spear and Green, 2007:337). *Passing*, in terms of sexuality, may be easy for those not fitting LGBQ stereotypes but it 'is a performance' (Sedgwick, 1991:3). Hence passing may be painful if about minimising or managing HBT-phobic stigma (drawing on Goffman, 1959). Passing can have unplanned side effects: as for some participants in the research as discussed below.

Why professionals may or may not seek to hide:

Professionals in a range of jobs may choose to pass, hide, or at least not stand out as LGBQ because workplaces are often 'hegemonically heterosexual' (Holliday, 1999:485). Employees, and the youth workers in this research, know that they might encounter HBT-prejudice in presenting as LGBQ (reflecting Clarke and Turner, 2007). People find a range of ways to manage sexual identity. Professionals can choose to work 'in silence ... quietly ... [or be] boldly outspoken' (Rostad and Long, 2007:318). The way that the self is presented or the way a youth worker (or other professional) dresses 'can be seen as self-disclosure ... a series of choices ... regarding image and style' (Murphy and Ord, 2013: 333). However, it is important to note (as was clear from this research) that LGBQ professionals have 'varying ability' to be *closeted* (Phelan, 2010:15) depending on how they present themselves. The literature, and this research, suggests that some workers who started their role 'in silence' (Rostad and Long, 2007:318) found that if they decided to be *out*, they received unexpected support from colleagues (Wickens, 2020). Such support was vital for participants in this study in deciding how they shared information with young people about their LGBQ identity.

3. Methods

This research followed the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidance (BERA, 2018). It was conducted from a liberal feminist standpoint (drawing on Friedan, 1963, cited in Bryson, 1992), and was designed to collect non-factual information including 'opinions, emotions and experiences' (Denscombe, 2010:173). A qualitative and socially constructed approach enabled an examination of how fifteen cisgender LGBQ women youth workers in the North of England shared information about their lives with young people. To access 'variation' (Bryman, 2012:422) within the study participants (anonymised with pseudonyms, sometimes of their own choosing) were selected (using purposive sampling) regarding certain

characteristics including age, ethnicity, social class and work setting. Participants' ages varied from 22-68. Eight participants were of White-British heritage, two of White-Irish heritage, four of Mixed heritage (White/Afro-Caribbean) and one of Asian heritage. Seven participants identified as working-class, four as middle-class and four as having had working-class roots but now identifying as middle-class.

Whilst fourteen participants identified as lesbian, gay or queer and only one as bisexual, two participants had identified as bisexual earlier in their lives. Participants had worked in a range of youth work settings. Six worked in Local Authority funded mainstream youth work (not specifically with LGBT young people), three in mainstream youth work in the voluntary (or community) sector and one in a Pupil Referral Unit (with young people excluded from school). Five participants worked predominantly with LGBT young people in the voluntary sector.

Identifying as lesbian, so being an insider within this research, brought challenges but also assisted me in building rapport with participants. This enabled the gathering of personal insights from participants that might not have been available to other researchers. A reflexive approach, both to the interviews and analysis of participants' views, assisted in bringing an awareness of my own assumptions, therefore minimising, but not removing the researcher effect (drawing on Denscombe, 2010). Data was gathered through two in-depth semi-structured interviews with respondents (usually in their workplace): allowing some probing of shared information. Findings were analysed using an iterative and template approach to thematic analysis (King, 2012): so ensuring that themes from the literature and the data supported the design of an appropriate template to organise findings. Topics guiding the research included how women youth workers shared or tried to hide their LGBQ identity in their work. Further details of methods and findings in this research are discussed in Author (2020).

4. Findings.

Participants offered rich insights regarding how and when they shared information about their LGBQ identity with young people: reflecting the centrality of this matter within their practice. All participants were clear that self-disclosure always had to be in the interest of the young people and not to benefit themselves.

Findings from the research discussed below start with a focus on *standing out*, or being able to *pass*, and then examining findings from two participants regarding their choice not to share personal information.

Standing out or choosing to pass.

No place to hide.

Some participants shared stories about challenging situations in their professional lives that shed light on how their LGBTQ identity was signalled to young people by their own style or dress. Seven of fifteen participants reported not having a choice about being '*out*' with young people as their sexuality was '*leaked*': young people guessed the youth workers' LGBTQ identity from the way that they presented themselves through their style of dress, haircut or other reiterated performances (reflecting Butler, 1991). This, sometimes unconscious, sharing of 'free and open' information (Murphy and Ord, 2013:336) prevented the seven more butch (following Halberstam, 1998) participants from having any choice of *passing* or being *closeted* about their LGBTQ identity. The leaking of their LGBTQ identity meant workers needed to talk about their sexuality with young people before developing conversations on other topics. These professionals were aware of the importance of authenticity (Goffman's *backstage*) in their presentation of their self, but their performances were impacted by the context of their relationship with young people: their audience (reflecting Goffman, 1959).

These seven participants noted that they had to be *out* as most young people already knew of their LGBTQ identity. As Amy noted: it is '*quite obvious without me saying it because of how I look. I can't hide it. I look gay*'. For most of these participants their short hair seemed to leak their LGBTQ sexuality (reflecting the literature: Hayfield, et al, 2013). Helena said: '*I had a DA [ducks' arse] hair-cut when eleven*' and she had kept her hair short since. Nell reported that sometimes she '*had a shaved head and ear stretcher*': so there was no chance that young people would see her as *straight*. These participants, knowing their gender or sexuality might be seen as ambiguous, were aware that this could be seen as 'deviance' (Halberstam, 1998:20) or a challenging of the norms of society (drawing on Goffman's, 1959 idea of social life as *ritual*).

When discussing if or how they shared information regarding their LGBTQ identity some participants suggested that it was only possible to build professional relationships with young people after being *out* and discussing their LGBTQ identity. Nell talked about when her image

was androgynous, so her LGBQ identity was obvious or *leaked* to many of the young people she worked with. Nell noted that in order to work with young people she was not able to ignore their questions about her LGBQ sexuality:

it's difficult to be seen as a person rather than just a sexuality: "What are you? A fucking dyke?" If I don't answer I'm evading, therefore permitting heteronormativity. Do I ignore: which silences you, but just holds it for another day?

Nell decided that, in order to be seen as a person and perform her job, she had to discuss her LGBQ identity with young people. Nell knew she had to be 'boldly outspoken' (Rostad and Long, 2007:318) about her LGBQ identity in order to develop professional relationships. Nell pointed out that straight colleagues she worked with '*used gendered pronouns* [about their home life] *so this left no space for me not to*'. Again Nell had no choice as she was unable to 'play the pronoun game' (Hayfield et al, 2013:177).

Being able to pass

Four of the fifteen participants noted that, if they chose, they could pass as heterosexual in contrast to these participants whose LGBQ identity was clear to young people. This was often linked to their long hair or style of dress (reflecting other research: Hayfield and Wood, 2019). Issie, with shoulder length hair, stated: '*there is an assumption that I'm straight*'. Rosie, also with long hair, said that her '*femme image*' meant that people would '*assume I'm straight*'. Ellie used her femme image and long hair to challenge stereotypes young people had of lesbians: saying to young people: '*does it mean I have to cut my hair if I'm lesbian?*' Issie and Liz used the fact that they were not identified as '*looking like a lesbian*' (Liz) to take control regarding when and with whom to share information about their home life and LGBQ sexuality: so '*working quietly*' (Rostad and Long, 2007:318) as LGBQ professionals whilst remaining authentic.

Rosie's story offers a different perspective. When Rosie (of dual White/Afro heritage) landed '*the job of my dreams*' in a voluntary sector youth work project she was told that it was '*great to have a straight woman on the team*'. She was surprised as she had not been asked about her sexuality at interview. Rosie was clear that she was a '*dyke ... [but instructed to be] the pretend straight person ... to the outside world*' in order that the project was not seen to have

only LGBTQ staff. Rosie reported, with passion, that being misidentified as straight often made her *'angry'* as she was forced to *'live in that straight box'*. Rosie suggested that if she had *'looked like a proper dyke'* with shaved hair (she had long Afro hair) she might not have been pushed into this box. Being mistaken as *'white and straight'* made her exclaim *'no! I'm black and I'm a dyke'*. Rosie was wounded that her identity was not correctly read by others (reflecting Holiday, 1999). When Rosie was forced to be closeted in her work setting she felt imprisoned (reflecting Seidman, 2003) in that *'straight box'* where *'opacity and ignorance'* colluded (Sedgwick, 1991:4). Rosie might have felt she needed *'to be someone I am not'* so requiring energy to manage her identity (Seidman, 2003:33) and develop *'coping strategies'* (Rostad and Long, 2007:314). The pain and anger Rosie showed when mistaken as straight may link to lower self-esteem that LGBTQ people who pass as heterosexual may feel (reflecting the literature: NCSR, 2017).

Some participants who were able to pass as straight talked about the importance of getting to know young people before sharing information about themselves. Issie noted that she *'wanted to get to know them first without the filter [of young people recognising her LGBTQ sexuality] that could influence their response to me'*: reflecting Orne's (2011:689) *'speculation'*. Issie noted that, when she had time to build relationships with young people before sharing her LGBTQ sexuality, the relationships did not change when she came out as long as *'good relationships'* were already built.

These relationships of trust and respect between youth worker and young people were built, according to the literature, through the *'giving [of] space ... through contact and communication in different circumstances'* (Spence et al, 2006:71-73) so conversations could become *'risky'* (Spence et al, 2006:76). Jane discussed this taking of risks in her relationship with Cath, a vulnerable young woman who had destroyed relationships with many professionals. Jane said that at first she had kept conversations away from her own personal issues: reflecting Orne's (2011:689) *'speculation'*. Jane, at a later time within their professional relationship, was happy to discuss her LGBTQ sexuality with Cath: moving to Orne's *'direct disclosure'* (2011: 689). Jane said:

I did start to share about my childhood, eventually talking to Jane about my sexuality in terms of challenging the homophobia she was throwing at me. Coming

out to her did help to build that relationship as Cath thought she knew everything about me.

Participants, including Jane, emphasised that relationships with young people ‘changed over time’ (Coburn, 2011:66) so they had to develop an individual and an ethical approach to cultivating flexible professional boundaries regarding the sharing of personal information: so developing their own ‘margin of freedom’ (Goffman, 1961:31) and ‘elbow room’ (Goffman, 1961:89) This was in contrast to the rather static approach suggested by the National Youth Agency (2001) (NYA: the body that validates professional English youth work qualifications) in their ethical statements about professional boundaries. It seemed, from this research, that the separation between the personal and professional, as suggested by the NYA ‘can become problematic’ (Murphy and Ord, 2013:327) as such a distinct separation was neither realistic nor desirable for most participants.

Choosing not to share personal information.

Two of the fifteen participants were clear they felt it unnecessary to share much personal information with young people. This was in comparison to most participants who were happy to share such personal information.

Fern was content that LGBT young people she worked with did not know of her bisexuality. Fern stated she was *‘not concerned about being out as bisexual’* around LGBT young people, although her colleagues at the LGBT-organisation where she worked knew her bisexual identity. However, Fern was clear that she ensured young people knew of options regarding sexual identity rather than just straight or gay/lesbian but *‘without saying this is personal experience of mine’*.

Gaby’s discomfort with sharing personal information came from a different position. Gaby, talking about her work in a PRU with young people excluded from school, said: *‘I told kids that I’d had a tough time at school, so they knew I understood them. But I didn’t tell them I was gay: it would have been too hard’*. Gaby needed to be closeted regarding her sexuality in order to keep a positive working relationship with young people: reflecting the literature which names this as ‘concealment’ (Orne, 2011:689) or ‘silence’ (Rostad and Long, 2007:318). Gaby was nervous about young people finding out about her LGBQ sexuality as she believed this would undermine her role at the PRU. It was possible that this was due to the fact that Gaby

had come out to her family relatively recently. This reflects the literature which is clear that *coming out* is an ongoing process (Sedgwick, 1991), rather than something that happens quickly as 'coming out never stops' (Devlin, 2015:176). Maybe Gaby had not yet developed sufficient confidence to question the HBT-phobia of the young people she worked with in this challenging setting. Gaby's boundaries, and the fact that she could pass as straight, allowed her a safe space (reflecting Batsleer, 2008). As Gaby said: *'I never came out to the kids. No point as ... [none of the other workers] challenged homophobia or sexism: I wouldn't dare'*. She pointed out that the young people she worked with said that same-sex marriage was *'disgusting and appalling. So I never spoke about it'*. Young people would share their relationship problems with Gaby but *'I just told them I was not going to discuss'* my personal life. This might have been a powerful opportunity missed by Gaby, but maybe it was not appropriate for her to be *out* given her challenging work setting where other staff members were not questioning HBT-phobia or sexism amongst young people. Only Gaby was able to make this judgement.

5. Discussion:

Standing out or the leaking of LGBTQ identity?

Young people had guessed the LGBTQ sexuality of some participants from their self-presentation: their style of dress, haircut or other performances (reflecting Hutson, 2010; Hayfield and Wood, 2019). This sharing of 'free and open' information whilst, maybe being seen as unproblematic (as suggested by Murphy and Ord, 2013:336), prevented these seven participants from being closeted regarding their LGBTQ sexuality. The *leaking* of their sexuality and their performances to the front of house (drawing on Goffman, 1959), done consciously or unconsciously, meant that participants needed to discuss their sexuality with young people before developing conversations on other topics and so building professional relationships. Other participants were able to make the choice of building relationships before disclosing their sexuality. These findings suggest that what is 'discretionary' or 'private' for some practitioners becomes, of necessity, public and 'open' for others (Murphy and Ord, 2013:336): demonstrating the potential vulnerability of some professionals who have no choice but to share what could be seen as private information. There could be a similar potential leaking of identity for professionals from other minority groups (e.g. practitioners from disadvantaged

backgrounds or practitioners who may have experienced mental health issues, child sexual or criminal exploitation or drug and alcohol misuse).

For youth workers, and maybe other professionals, how the self is presented 'can be seen as self-disclosure ... [or] the process of making the self known to others' (Murphy and Ord, 2013:333). It seems that most participants were happy to perform their *stylised* LGBQ sexuality (drawing on Butler, 2011) as part of the process of constructing and presenting their selves with, and to, young people. A 'series of choices ... regarding their image and style played a vital role' (Murphy and Ord, 2013:333) in how most participants shared information about their sexuality with their colleagues and young people. In presenting their self, youth workers were, sometimes unconsciously (reflecting Spear and Green, 2007), offering the information: so maybe leaking their LGBQ sexuality unwittingly. These women did not see any choice but to be out as LGBQ. Their reiterated performances (Butler, 1991) of their LGBQ identity ensured this *leaking* of their sexuality: consciously or unconsciously presenting themselves with short hair and a butch style of dress. They viewed their style as central to their 'embedded' and 'authentic' self so were 'consistently' acting with 'clarity' and retrieving themselves from the pressures of others (reflecting Heidegger's ideas of *Dasein* cited in Anowai & Chukwujekwu, 2019:4)

Being able to pass as heterosexual was seen by some participants as allowing choice regarding whether to be out or not as LGBQ: reflecting Murphy and Ord's (2013:336) 'selective ... [or] discretionary spheres of disclosure'. However, it also brought challenges so was not always positive. Although other research suggests that bisexual people are not easily identified as LGBQ (Monro, 2015), the one respondent in this research who was bisexual did not talk about being able to pass as heterosexual.

The benefits of coming out.

Transparency about their LGBQ identity enabled some participants to be *out* regarding their sexuality: enabling them to present an authentic self to their *audience* (reflecting Goffman, 1959). This authenticity provided vulnerable LGBQ young people with a safe space to consider the benefits of being *out* regarding their own identities: the importance of which has been noted in the literature over the years (e.g. Trenchard and Warren, 1984; Formby, 2015). Positive LGBQ role models are vital for LGBQ young people due to the persistent lack of visibility of LGBT issues around school buildings or within the curriculum (Formby, 2021).

Young people who are questioning their sexuality continue to have few positive LGBTQ role models in their lives: '75% of young people ... [attending LGBT focussed youth work provision] had no ... [other] supportive adult in their lives' (Lee, 2015:130) despite the increasing visibility of LGBTQ images in the media.

Being *out* enabled these youth workers to build authenticity and self-respect, as they constructed their own visual identity (reflecting Seidman, 2003; Hutson, 2010). It also meant that they were more able to holistically integrate their private and public selves (Rostad and Long, 2007) through accessing support, both within their work setting (for most participants) and amongst their straight friends (Seidman, 2003) as well as within local LGBTQ communities (as noted in Cargill, 2020). Accessing support, both within and outside the workplace, is important for any professional but especially for youth workers who must take risks within relationships with young people. To take appropriate risks youth workers must be confident in their own self-knowledge (Author, 2020) in order to support young people in their self-development.

6. Conclusion:

This paper has examined how LGBTQ identities in the context of *the use of self* might be leaked and why youth workers might choose to *stand out*, *come out*, *pass* or *hide* their LGBTQ sexuality when working with young people. It is clear from this case study that participants had limited choices regarding being out or being closeted. Their choices were limited by the impact of their audience on their actions (reflecting Goffman, 1959). It was limited by their ability or inability to be closeted in a heteronormative society, by their own reservations regarding appropriate times to be out, or by the institutional boundaries (e.g. of working in a PRU). Orne's and Rostad and Long's typologies, together with Murphy and Ord's 'categories of disclosure' offer some useful insights into how these choices were made.

Some youth workers who *performed* what might be seen as a typical lesbian image had less choice to *pass* due to their LGBTQ identity being leaked. These workers were more likely to directly disclose (Orne, 2011) their sexuality to young people. One participant (Gaby) chose to 'conceal' (Orne, 2011:689) their sexual identity due to the challenges in her work: the young people seemed to be HBT-phobic and these negative attitudes prevented Gaby from building the important, and possibly transformative, relationships with young people on which her role depended.

Other participants, more able to *pass*, had some space to offer 'clues', so that young people could 'speculate' about their sexuality (Orne, 2011:687-8). These workers would often build relationships with young people ('working quietly': Rostad and Long, 2007:318) before offering clues, so that relationships were established prior to young people speculating about their sexuality. Choosing to *pass* or *be out* changed in different settings, with different young people and over time (as relationships developed) for practitioners.

This research offers important insights into the space, or lack of space, that LGBTQ youth workers have to *pass* or hide their identity. These insights probably reflect similar issues for practitioners in other education or caring professions. The discussion of choices made by practitioners emphasised why professionals, when using their *self* in their practice, choose to *pass* or *be out*. The findings highlight challenges faced by many LGBTQ youth workers and so underline the importance of support that could be offered by colleagues and managers. Young inexperienced LGBTQ professionals would benefit from guidance from their managers and LGBT colleagues as to the choices that can be made regarding *being out* or *choosing to pass*. Straight cisgender colleagues need to ensure that they challenge HBT-phobia from clients or other professionals so that this burden does not fall on LGBTQ professionals.

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