Firm friends: exploring the supportive components in gay men’s workplace friendships

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Abstract

Research shows that friendships are among the most important sources of support for gay men. Despite insights into how friends can be significant providers of emotional, practical and affirmational support, particularly when gay men ‘come out’ or experience discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, scholars have rarely considered the role of work friends in supporting gay men in the workplace. This is remarkable given that work organisations remain challenging arenas for sexual minority employees to fashion a meaningful sense of self. Drawing on in-depth interview data with twenty-eight gay men employed in the UK, this article argues that gay men can rely on work friends for different forms of support in helping them to negotiate and sustain a viable sense of self. The findings show how the gender and sexuality of organisation influences which men and women are available as work friends, and the types of support they might give. Also, the affirmational support received from work friends is important not only for validating participants’ sexual identities, but also identities of class and parenthood. The study aims to complicate stereotypes of men’s workplace friendships as sources of support used largely for advancing careers and personal gain.

Introduction

Over the past few decades or so, sociologists have significantly advanced our understanding of friendship (Adams and Allan, 1998; Allan, 1989, 1996, 1998, 2001; Pahl, 2000, 2002; Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Problematising the notion of friendship as a relationship largely formed by personal discretion and individual choice, sociologists have shown friendships to be patterned by the social, economic and cultural relations in which they are enmeshed (Adams and Allan, 1998; Litwak, 1989; Silver, 1990). Importantly, the socio-economic-cultural frameworks that make possible and shape friendship ties are in a state of flux, which has given rise to transformations in the place of friendship in people’s lives, how friendships are negotiated by individuals and the uses to which friends are put. Relatively recent shifts in the demography of the family,
domestic life and the economic locations of men and women, to name but a few, have all had a hand in accentuating the cultural significance of friendship as a supportive personal relationship (Allan, 2008; Adams and Allan, 1998; Giddens, 1992).

From this position, Allan (2001: 331) reasons that individuals are more active and participative in their own ‘lifestyle construction, and consequently in framing their own identities’. There is increasing debate and research that shows how friends can play a key role in the construction of identities and selves (Green and Singleton, 2009; Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Green, 1998; Nardi, 1999), supporting the argument that friendships are important ‘sites of activity that give life meaning’ (Allan, 1998: 699). Furthermore, as people’s circumstances change so friends can provide support to help them adjust, and this may include validating a new sense of self when different identities are formed and maintained. Even friendships associated with the workplace, often overlooked or stereotyped as being weak in trust, casual and instrumental (Vernon, 2005), may be treated as a dependable source of affirmational support.

Against the backdrop of these intricate debates, this article’s focal point for exploring the supportive function of friendship is contemporary organisational life. Remarkably, the examination of workplace friendships has received far less scholarly interest than friendships formed in other contexts. In one sense this is astonishing because it is generally acknowledged among organisational scholars that informal workplace relations have potentially important benefits for employees and organisations (Grey and Sturdy, 2007). Indeed, a managerialist literature on the role workplace friendships might play in improving bottom-line results has steadily grown in size (Berman et al., 2002; Morrison, 2004; Song, 2006; Song and Olshfski, 2008), but it has steered attention away from examining the perspectives of individuals involved in workplace friendships. This article holds informal workplace relations such as friendship to be of great significance to many individuals. Previous research shows how friends can use each other to advance their careers (Kram and Isabella, 1985), gain employment (Granovetter, 1973; Pettinger, 2005) and experience intimacies (Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 2004). Choices made by employees rather than employers about whom they choose to relate to at work are likely to reveal insights into how friends can help each other not just to endure the world of work, but also to examine who and what they are. As such, the aim of this article is to explore the role and impact of work friends supporting gay men in negotiating a sense of self in the workplace. To that end, it is no coincidence that the sample from which data is drawn to illustrate the empirical sections of this paper is comprised of gay men.

This article does not simply investigate the supportive dimensions to gay men’s workplace friendships merely because they have, when compared to the study of heterosexuals’ personal relationships, received far less scholarly attention. But it is important to state that gay men are one example of a number of social groups (lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, ethnic minorities, etc) inadvertently marginalised within organisational research on workplace
friendship and within the sociology of friendship (Werking, 1997). Moreover, it is because gay men have often relied heavily on friendship as a source of support for shaping and reinforcing identities at odds with dominant cultural norms that privilege heterosexuality. Prior research has addressed specific concerns about the supportive role gay men’s friends play in helping them to reproduce the cultural features of certain gay lifestyles and communities, and to forge and maintain identities that relate to sexuality and gender (Gottlieb, 2008; Nardi, 1999; Weeks et al., 2001). As Nardi (1999) notes, gay men’s friendships raise provocative questions about the complex ways people structure their lives in terms of support, intimacy, sexuality and gender. Yet these questions rarely dig their teeth into the workplace as a context for understanding the supportive elements of gay men’s friendships. This is a notable gap within existing friendship literature not least because organisations can be potentially hostile arenas in which to live an openly gay identity and life.

This article is structured as follows. The first section examines the influence of gender on current understandings of the supportive function of friendship, and the contexts in which workplace friendships are developed and sustained. The next section considers the supportive dimensions to gay men’s friendships in the workplace, addressing certain issues that arise from considering the literature on the sexuality of organisation. The study’s methodology is outlined before the analysis is presented. Organised into three parts, the empirical sections examine the role and impact of female and male work friends supporting gay men in different organisational settings. They also explore the support given by work friends to help participants negotiate the identity dilemmas that arise when aspects of the self are perceived to be under threat of marginalisation. The article concludes by highlighting the study’s main theoretical contributions to the study of men’s workplace friendships.

Gender and supportive workplace friendships in context

This article draws from sociological research on friendship which emphasises the importance of context in understanding how friendships are formed, developed and given meaning (Allan, 1989; Adams and Allan, 1998). While friendship has long been understood as a spontaneous, voluntary human relationship (Pahl, 2000), it is not entirely sustained by individual free will. As Allan (1989: 8) rightly points out, the argument that ‘people’s choices and actions are constrained by the social structures in which they occur’ applies to friendship as it does to any other human relationship. Friendships are socially embedded and multi-dimensional, influenced by an array of contextual factors located at a personal environment, network, community and societal level (Adams and Allan, 1998).

One factor considered in this article is gender. How we understand friendships that involve a supportive or caring component is shaped by gender, theorised here as a cultural construction that often finds expression in the
identity categories ‘masculinity’ and femininity’. Rejecting the binary logic underpinning notions of masculinity and femininity as being fixed, dichotomous and stable, this article adheres to a social constructivist perspective that views these categories as multiple, fluid and contingent. This is evident in how gendered identities are (re)produced through every day practices, social structures, cultural meanings and individual subjectivities within various socio-political contexts (Jackson, 2005; Connell, 1995; West and Zimmerman, 1987).

Early research on the impact of gender on friendship revealed that men’s friendships are more likely to develop from sharing activities and socialising, whereas women seem to cultivate friendships based on the mutual disclosure of personal information (Caldwell and Peplau, 1982; Komarovsky, 1967; Weiss and Lowenthal, 1975). In these studies, gender has often been treated as a relatively stable and coherent variable, which has led to a dichotomous understanding of gender differences in friendship development (Wood, 1993). Men’s friendship preferences and behaviours have frequently been understood in relation to women’s, and have been found wanting in emotional intimacy. These findings are, by and large, reflected in the organisational literature on the gender differences in how men and women develop workplace friendships (Sias et al., 2003; Cahill and Sias, 1997; Fritz, 1997). These perspectives and others have coloured contemporary ideals of friendships, which are often expressed in ‘feminine’ terms such as intimacy, caring, trust and disclosing (Nardi, 2007; Wood and Inman, 1993). However, the last two decades or so have seen some scholars challenge the methodological approaches and theoretical constructs that have sustained dichotomous differences between men’s and women’s friendships (Kaplan, 2006; Nardi, 1999; Wood, 1993; Walker, 1994). There is little reason to doubt, for instance, the diversity in the supportive components in men’s workplace friendships or dismiss certain forms of support as being inferior to some others, such as privileging emotional expression over practical aid.

The potential variability within men’s workplace friendships is shaped, in part, by the gendered nature of organisational cultures. In work environments that condition the construction of organisational identities based on hierarchical and fixed differentiations being established between male/female and femininity/masculinity (Aaltio and Mills, 2002; Kerfoot and Knights, 1998), problems are likely to arise for those women and men who are not seen to possess the gendered skills and qualities required to succeed in these work contexts (Gherardi, 1995). Making this point opens up an opportunity to explore the implications of the gendering of organisational cultures for how friendships might be formed, and the types of support friends provide. However, research in this area is limited.

Many studies on gender and men’s workplace friendships focus on the support men derive from homosocial networks of friends (Kilduff and Mehra, 1996; Ibarra, 1992, 1997). Studies show that in some heterosexual male dominated organisations men exhibit a preference for the company of other men, organising in ways that establish their differences from women (Witz and
Men’s homosocial networks are useful but competitive circuits through which flows the practical and emotional support needed to shore up the presence of men and the domination of men’s practices, often at the expense of women and some other men (Cockburn, 1991). However, there is little evidence here of how men may be connected and supported differently in workplace friendship, such as through sharing common life events rather than work related goals. In simple terms, it is not always the case that men draw on each other with the aim of furthering careers or their domination over others (Kaplan, 2006; Martin, 2001). Furthermore, these studies examine how heterosexual men’s informal friendship networks can help them to construct masculine identities and selves, leaving unanswered questions about how gay men might similarly use workplace friendships.

From one perspective, gay men might develop workplace friendships as a means of helping them to sustain a viable sense of self at work. In order to gain purchase on this idea, it is useful to consider feminist perspectives on women’s workplace friendships. Andrew and Montague’s (1998) personal account of their workplace friendship within a UK university is a striking illustration. They describe an academic work context in which men’s identities and a masculinist organisational culture appear to dominate women’s. As such, Andrew and Montague use friendship to organise consciously as ‘women’ and as ‘feminists’ in order to provide each other with the emotional and practical support required in sustaining organisational feminist and female identities. Yet they report coming under fire from male colleagues, who berate their friendship for being exclusive, threatening and challenging, because it does not serve the needs of men. This intriguing account of female friendship in the workplace reminds us that while supportive friendships can help people to reflect critically on the processes of identity building within gendered work contexts, they are fragile and vulnerable to criticism from within the organisation.

Establishing a link between gay men’s and women’s workplace friendships is useful, not for suggesting these relationships are identical in nature, but for highlighting the potential for workplace friendships to support unconventional identities and selves under threat of being marginalised. The following section pursues this perspective further.

The supportive role of friendship in gay men’s work lives

Acknowledging that organisations and gender relations are mutually shaping is to recognise also that organisations construct sexuality, and that sexuality is constitutive of organisation (Hearn and Parkin, 1995). Sexuality in the workplace is not just about sexual harassment and sexual intercourse, as it has often been reduced to (Hearn et al., 1989), but encompasses for example, the construction of sexual identities, desires, fantasies and erotic pleasures (Brewis...
and Linstead, 2000). For this article, acknowledging the constructed and constitutive quality of organisational sexualities raises important questions about the challenges faced by many sexual minority employees who wish to develop and live an openly lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) identity and life at work. Numerous studies have shown how sexual minority employees can be subject to discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, which in the worst cases has led to loss of dignity and employment (Bowring and Brewis, 2009; Humphrey, 1999; Ragins et al., 2007; Ward and Winstanley, 2003; Woods and Lucas, 1993). Although this body of literature does not treat friendship as a central focal point of analysis, it is possible to gain an understanding of the dilemmas associated with constructing a gay male identity in the workplace.

One such identity dilemma in the workplace is ‘coming out’ as gay to colleagues and work friends. Here the role of work friends supporting gay men to disclose a gay identity may involve affirmational and emotional support, invaluable when people react negatively (Griffith and Hebl, 2002; Ward and Winstanley, 2005). As an identity development process, coming out prises open opportunities for individuals to establish new friends or cement existing friendships, as noted by some of the gay male professionals in Woods and Lucas’s (1993) US study. But research on this and how work friends can support gay men in negotiating aspects of the self that relate to other identities is limited. For example, studies on the work experiences of LGBT employees often fall short of addressing how the gendered dynamics of organisations influence who is available as a work friend, and the types of support they might give. A similar story of neglect can be told in the organisational literature on the social, emotional, affirmational and practical support work friends can give one another to help them improve the quality of their lives outside and at work (Pettinger, 2005; McGuire, 2007; Hodson, 2001). Coming mainly from academic and populist writing on gay men’s friendships (Gottlieb, 2008; Nardi, 1999; Sullivan, 1998; Weeks et al., 2001), a more detailed picture emerges about the supportive role friendship plays in gay men’s lives.

An important segment of this literature has been the research that reveals some gay men as accomplished in establishing friendships that embody trust, care and acceptance (Nardi, 1999; Sullivan, 1998; Weeks et al., 2001). Nardi’s (2007, 1999, 1992) work has helped to contest the stereotype of men’s friendships as much less supportive and intimate in nature than women’s friendships, which still looms large in the public imagination and in some academic circles. Opening up the possibility of understanding the supportive elements of men’s friendships in a nuanced manner, Nardi has explored some of the factors that have conditioned their emergence. For example, until relatively recently, gay men have lacked ‘ready-made’ cultural models of same-sex intimacies (Blasius, 1994; Weeks, 2007). As such, friends have been important intimates and providers of support, particularly when gay men have come out to family members only to be rejected (Weston, 1991). In these situations, Nardi (1999) argues that friendship can help gay men to reflect critically on and challenge the heteronormativity of everyday life. In turn, this raises unanswered
questions about how work friends can help gay men to negotiate the heteronormative constituents of contemporary organisational life. One important issue here is who might be available to support gay men in this undertaking.

Typically, the gay men in Nardi’s (1999) study turned to other gay men to validate emergent sexual identities, also noted in other studies on gay men’s friendships (Weeks et al., 2001), all of which support a well-rehearsed argument that people tend to look for others who are similar to themselves for comfort, support and understanding (Allan, 1989). At the same time and at the risk of stating the obvious, it is crucial to acknowledge that a shared sexuality is not always an adequate basis for friendship. For example, gay men might seek to rely upon heterosexuals for comfort, identity affirmation and practical aid (Tillmann-Healy, 2001; Fee, 2000; Weeks et al., 2001). This is not the same as saying gay men can rely upon anyone they wish, for support. As suggested previously, the availability of work friends who can provide support is constrained by a range of structural factors within organisations.

In considering sexuality as a barrier to friendship, the tradition of articulating heterosexuality and homosexuality as stable, fixed and separate sexual categories has sometimes made it difficult for people to develop cross-sexuality friendships (Rawlins, 2008). However, helped by the relatively recent cultural explosion of different sexualities which has frayed some of the divisions that dichotomise heterosexuality and homosexuality in the West (Weeks, 2007), gay men and others might have new opportunities to draw upon different people when it comes to defining themselves. For example, while gay men have frequently acknowledged heterosexual women as vital providers of emotional intimacy (Tillmann-Healy, 2001; Grigoriou, 2004), research is also starting to show that heterosexual men, typically positioned as key perpetrators of homophobia against gay men (Bech, 1997), can similarly perform supportive roles (Price, 1999; Fee, 2000). Thus it is important to recognise that certain friendship dyads can provide fresh opportunities for specific forms of support to emerge, helping some gay men to express different dimensions of the self in different contexts.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

The data presented in this article was collected between 2005 and 2007 using audio-taped semi-structured interviews with 28 gay men employed in the UK. The sample was constructed using a snowball technique due to the difficulties in identifying gay study participants (Heaphy et al., 1998). Using this technique, contact was established with gay men who later identified as being ‘openly gay’ to work friends and many of their colleagues. However, it was not my intention to limit the study to ‘out’ gay men, since the perspectives of gay men who are not ‘out’ to colleagues might have produced alternative
perspectives on workplace friendships as a source of support. At the end of the interview, each participant was encouraged to recruit others who might be interested in participating in the study. All responded favourably to my request, although a much smaller number were able to refer me to other gay men who could then spare me the time to be interviewed.

The 28 participants ranged in age from 24 to 58 years. Two identified as Asian and the rest as British-White. Seven participants described themselves as working class, the rest identified as middle-class. Six had been previously married and were now separated and divorced. Five participants have children. Participants were employed at different levels of seniority within organisational settings in the education sector, National Health Service (NHS), local government, the police service, the performing arts and the automotive and leisure industries. Study participants who appear in the analysis below are referred to using a pseudonym to provide anonymity.

Research method and analysis

The main method was semi-structured in-depth interviews covering the meanings ascribed to workplace friendships and the roles of work friends in gay men’s lives. The interviews lasted between one and a half to three and a half hours. For this article, data was drawn from two sections of the interview schedule: the first used open-ended questions to elicit in-depth information about participants’ work contexts, while the second investigated the different roles played by work friends. Specifically, participants were encouraged to discuss work friends they felt were or had been important to them. This helped to generate select accounts of the people participants had befriended in the workplace for significant reasons, many of which revealed the supportive and caring elements of gay men’s workplace friendships. That said, the interview schedule was designed to be flexible, enabling participants to talk as freely as they wished about their work friends. For example, participants were not restricted to discussing current work friends, although many did. Nor were participants curbed in how they could define work friends and workplace friendships. For example, I did not approach the interviews with an a priori definition of workplace friendship. To do so would potentially exclude the different meanings given to work friendships and work friends by interviewees, thus undermining a social constructionist methodology that refuses to fix the meaning of such things.

From a social constructionist position, the study recognises that interview data is co-constructed and situated (Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Kvale, 1996). The accounts of work friends generated in an interview situation might be different to how they are constructed elsewhere. In other words, this study does not make any claim to uncover ‘true’ versions of the realities about work friends and workplace friendships. Rather, a social constructionist methodology insists on the partiality and contingency of what is said in an interview situation (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). My involvement in that process is
acknowledged, not least because I have asked specific interview questions and responded to participants’ commentaries. Together, we have actively constructed different accounts of work friends and the meanings ascribed to them.

The interview data were analysed using traditional qualitative coding techniques. The interviews were transcribed and then read many times to identify an initial set of descriptive data categories (Denzin, 1989; Silverman, 2001). Next, I identified emergent patterns in how categories of data could be developed as themes, and established links between themes. This process of analysis allowed me to familiarise myself with the data to the point where I could construct explanatory accounts of how the interviewees understood the supportive components to their workplace friendships. Each stage of the data analysis process involved comparative analysis between data categories and themes, which helped me to reshape and refine them (Denzin, 1989; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). However, the analysis of study findings should not be regarded as definitive since they merely represent one possible interpretation of the interview data (Silverman, 2001).

Study findings

At this point, it is worth stating that the supportive function of gay men’s workplace friendships is similar to the supportive role of friendships described by, for example, heterosexuals. Participants variously described being the beneficiaries of practical aid such as getting help from friends to complete work tasks, DIY jobs in the home and sharing the drive into work (McGuire, 2007). Participants also spoke enthusiastically about drawing companionship and sociability from their workplace friendships, such as spending time together in the office canteen, travelling to business conferences, dining out at home and playing practical jokes on each other. This links to research that shows the supportive function of workplace friendship is varied and has a positive impact on enhancing the experience of organisational life for work friends (Pettinger, 2005; Parris et al., 2008). These findings are not altogether remarkable, but given that gay men are still at risk from being over defined by their sexuality (Weeks, 2007), it is important to highlight the possibility of crafting alternative analyses of gay men’s lives that do not over prioritise the analysis of sexuality. This caveat notwithstanding, the next section examines the supportive roles played by women in gay men’s workplace friendships.

Female work friends supporting gay men

Few participants mentioned having lesbian women as work friends. From one perspective, this is not altogether surprising given that gay men’s and lesbian’s friendship networks tend to be homosocial (Nardi, 1999; Weeks et al., 2001). But many participants were unaware of women who openly identified as
lesbian at work or spoke with indifference about the possibility of developing workplace friendships with lesbians. Notably, participants commonly described heterosexual women as key providers of emotional and practical support in the workplace. One explanation is that many participants had worked for organisations where women outnumbered men. For some participants, female-dominated professions such as nursing, human resources and social work were attractive because women were seen to be ‘naturally more accepting of homosexuality than men’, as Tom (late twenties, human resources) put it. Although not all participants agreed with this assertion, those who did tended to relax into stereotypes about women being ‘naturally’ more caring, understanding and affectionate than men, making them an ‘obvious choice’ as friends. As noted elsewhere, such assumptions can lead to gay men and women being over-identified with each other, obscuring important gender differences (Tillmann-Healy, 2001; Rumens, 2008). Still, the present research revealed plenty of examples of workplace friendships involving heterosexual women that were characterised by warmth, affection and support.

Participants frequently acknowledged the important role of heterosexual female work friends in providing practical support such as assistance to complete tasks at and outside of work. These examples were varied and included forms of assistance stereotypically associated with men, such as solving IT problems, moving office furniture, completing DIY projects and helping with car maintenance. However, it was the perceived capacity of heterosexual women to listen and act as trusted confidantes that featured prominently as an advantage of having a female work friend. For instance, Kris is in his late twenties and is the only male employed within a female-dominated administrative department at a university. He had recently split up with his boyfriend at the time of our interview, and described his difficulty at having to ‘put on a brave face at work’. His female work friends seemed to him to be an ‘obvious’ source of emotional support over heterosexual and gay men, with whom he had established fewer and less close working relationships. Talking about ‘man troubles’ with his female work friends, some of who had experienced relationship breakdowns with their male partners, appeared to comfort Kris enormously, helping him to cope with the demands of work. These workplace friendships had a pronounced therapeutic dimension, noticeably lacking in Kris’s accounts of workplace relationships involving other men.

Here Kris typified the views of other participants who also felt heterosexual women were ‘better than men’ at discussing ‘affairs of the heart’. This gendered perspective, which articulates the capacity of men and women to act as sources of emotional support in rather simple dichotomous terms (Wood, 1993), is markedly similar to gay men’s views of heterosexual female friends reported in other studies (Tillmann-Healy, 2001; Grigoriou, 2004). However, some participants discussed how female work friends could be relied upon for private conversations at work to critique the gendered dynamics of organisational cultures that marginalised both gay men and women.
To illustrate, Rupert is in his mid fifties and is employed as a lecturer within a humanities subject group in a university characterised by the presence of a relatively high number of women in lecturing, administrative and junior management roles. However, white, middle class heterosexual men occupy the majority of middle and senior management positions. Rupert felt this had a detrimental impact on organisational life, using his relationship with his line manager to illustrate his concern:

Most of the managers are from the same mould as my boss... I have to be disguised with him because I know he’s not fond of gay men. I have to edit my behaviour with him, to avoid talking about personal issues that might reveal aspects of my sexuality. He’s a very stern authoritarian, quite threatening really. He was parachuted into the job to get results, and he does it through fear. Even though I'm in my fifties he can make me feel like a little boy at times, in the way he can make me feel afraid.

The gendered image of university life presented above appears to shape the types of personal relationships made possible between employees. Rupert reported feeling ‘wary’ of and reluctant to disclose personal information to other heterosexual men at work, only describing one heterosexual male work friend he could trust as a friend. Furthermore, not knowing other gay men in the workplace, Rupert has developed a number of friendships with heterosexual women. These friendships are supportive in nature, evident in the reliance on conversation in helping Rupert to sustain a sense of individuality within a heteronormative work environment:

My female friends understand what it’s like here. We share with each other, talking about our experiences and how we feel like outsiders... we also cast a critical eye on things... like the [male] managers who get away with sexist and homophobic behaviour... my girlfriends do a good job of reminding me that I’m not a little boy but a fully-grown gay man who is bloody good at his job.

This interview quote links with qualitative accounts, coming mostly from studies on women’s friendships, of how work friends can be relied upon for critical perspectives on the gendered effects of occupying shared or similar structural locations in the workplace (Andrew and Montague, 1998). The impact of women supporting gay men is noticeable, then, in how they can help to validate that part of the self most vulnerable to being attacked or undermined in the workplace. In this case, Rupert’s interview extract reveals a need to affirm a sexual identity against marginalisation, and the importance of sharing feelings and emotions with female work friends to this end.

The interview extracts above start to evoke questions about the opportunities and limits of emotional and affirmational support in the workplace for negotiating identities and selves. Friendships with heterosexual women appear
to offer gay men valuable opportunities for disclosing that might not be available elsewhere at or outside of work. Furthermore, these friendships provide localised and temporal spaces in which to discuss feelings of marginalisation, which do more than cement a sense of shared oppression. They can help to reinforce a sense of self based on individuality. A cautionary note is warranted, however, not least because gay men and heterosexual women are positioned differently within organisational gendered relations. If a sense of individuality is consequent upon a critique of the normative status of certain gendered organisational heterosexualities, gay men and heterosexual women must use friendship to reflect on the ways they can inadvertently (re)produce the conditions by which the other is potentially disadvantaged (Tillmann-Healy, 2001). For example, this might entail female work friends challenging gay men on (un)wittingly supporting patriarchal values through conforming to normative conceptions of gender (Rumens, 2008). This concern notwithstanding, Rupert’s comments hint at the capacity of workplace friendships to instigate and support unconventional perspectives on the gendered nature of organisational life.

Male work friends supporting gay men

Despite the tendency to make female friendships meaningful largely in terms of support and care giving (Wood, 1993), emotional support is not exclusive to friendships involving women. Although participants claimed not to have known any bisexual male friends, there were some examples of gay men supporting each other within workplace friendships. The relative paucity of illustrations is striking since it is out of synch with many studies that show how common it is for gay men to befriend each other in non-work contexts (Nardi, 1999; Weeks et al., 2001). One reason for the small number of examples is the poor visibility of some gay men within the organisational settings described by participants. Uncertainty about who might be gay is a barrier to workplace friendships between gay men (Woods and Lucas, 1993). Another reason, voiced vociferously by some participants, is that sexuality is not always a desirable criterion for friendship making. Other factors such as personality, sharing the same sense of humour or pastimes, to mention but a few, were judged to be more influential in shaping the path to friendship (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). None the less, when participants spoke about supportive work friendships with other gay men, the impact of gay men supporting each other in friendship could be profound.

For example, when Hugo’s (academic leader, mid fifties) late partner was diagnosed as HIV positive, he was careful about which work friends he confided in. Concerned that other people might assume that he was also HIV positive, and that his domestic situation might be the subject of ‘idle gossip’, Hugo turned to a trusted gay male work friend. One advantage noted by Hugo was their mutual understanding of caring for a loved one with HIV:
[X] was the obvious person to talk to. He knew what it’s like to care for someone who’s slowly dying in front of your very eyes. He knew what that meant for a gay man having to hold down a job and be a carer and deal with the shit about queers getting what they deserve if they contract HIV . . . I eventually told other people at work, who were all very supportive, but no one except [X] could really relate to what I was going through . . . his love and support kept my head above water.

That Hugo’s work friend is ‘gay’ and has experience of living with HIV bears testimony to the importance of friendships based on similarity, and how support can strengthen a sense of affinity between friends. This resonates with non-organisational research that shows how a shared sexual identity can help gay men to develop mutual forms of emotional support, especially at times when they risk being understood within the confines of damaging sexual stereotypes, such as those surrounding gay men and HIV/AIDS (Nardi, 1999; Weeks et al., 2001).

In contrast and contrary to commonplace assertions that heterosexual men are unlikely to befriend gay men in friendship due to conflicting tensions about sexuality (Bech, 1997), the present research contained plenty of accounts of heterosexual men as supportive work friends. These examples were most often associated with descriptions of organisations that were actively engaging with the needs and interests of sexual minority employees. Participants generally described these work contexts as having ‘gay-friendly atmospheres’, but many also acknowledged that even ‘gay-friendly’ workplaces could present dilemmas for individuals choosing to identify as gay (Rumens and Kerfoot, 2009). However, it was generally felt that within these work cultures that homophobic behaviour and values on sexuality were less apparent and not tolerated. Philippe (IT consultant, late forties), reflecting on this characteristic of his workplace in the NHS, noted one implication for friendship making: ‘it’s easier to be friendly with straight people when there’s a general understanding that gay people are a valued part of the workforce’. This point was repeated by Ciaran (training co-ordinator, early forties), whose remarks were typical of those participants who spoke about the emotional impact of having supportive heterosexual male work friends:

I’m much happier for having these guys as friends . . . they’re great, always there for me, like when my father died . . . they just wanted to listen, to lend an ear . . . because you don’t expect straight men to open up and be supportive that makes it such a great thing when it happens . . . it’s heart warming stuff . . . being gay probably helps because it gives them permission to be that way, without fear of getting the piss taken out of them for being soft.

This builds upon research by Fee (2000) and Price (1999) by highlighting the conditions that make some cross-sexuality friendships between men possible.
in the workplace. On this point, the interview extracts above suggest that organisations with supportive atmospheres towards LGBT employees might help some men to challenge preconceptions about how men’s friendships should be organised. Of course it might also provide the impetus for some men to reinforce a sense of sexual and gendered difference from other types of men. Still, the data supports an argument that heterosexual and gay men both stand to gain from supporting unconventional modes of relating in friendship (Nardi, 1999). It is suggested that men can use workplace friendships to explore sharing emotions and feelings. As Ciaran’s comments above indicate, it is limiting to understand men’s emotional concern for each other at work in terms of self-interest. For example, life events may inspire men to relate to each other in ways that engender letting down their defences to disclose deeper aspects of the self. As the next section explores, for some participants revealing deeper aspects of the self in the company of work friends entailed constructing identities and selves much less to do with sexuality.

(Re)constructing identities within gay men’s workplace friendships

The interview findings revealed that sexuality is not an overriding factor in some of the decisions gay men make about friendships outside and at work. As Weeks et al. (2001) note, the identity-shaping role of friendship depends on people’s circumstances and identifications at any given time, illustrated in the following example. Jack, a company director in his early fifties, is someone who has come out as gay later on in life. Jack was married for a number of years before disclosing his gay identity to his wife. His marriage subsequently failed. Although Jack has remained in the same job, he has moved to a different town, and currently lives on his own. He sees his children on a regular basis, and describes himself as a ‘committed father’. Indeed, it became apparent in our interview conversations that Jack’s identity as a father was more meaningful to him than his identity as a gay man.

Notably, the workplace has been an important context for building friendships to help Jack develop and validate his identity as a ‘dad who just happens to be gay’. Disconnected from an established circle of family friends outside of work, many of who have ‘sided with [his] ex-wife’, Jack has found comfort and support in a small number of women he has befriended since the break up of his marriage. These female work friends, all mothers with teenage children, have been more receptive than most others to the change in how Jack identifies in terms of sexuality. In contrast, other work friends have struggled: ‘some of them can’t see beyond the gay thing, it’s like they’ve forgotten that I’m a dad with three kids but just no longer married to [X]’. For Jack, coming out has placed too much emphasis on his sexuality as a marker of identity, overshadowing other aspects of the self. Here, then, commonalities formed between some of his work friends have weakened as perceived differences intensify, placing some long-standing workplace friendships under strain. Helping Jack
to renegotiate a multi-faceted sense of self are his female work friends. Parenting has routinely become a topic and prominent theme of their workplace conversations, thereby helping Jack to (re)construct his identity as a parent and as a gay man.

Other study participants also encountered dilemmas trying to accentuate different aspects of their identity in the workplace. For Sam, in his early thirties and a project manager in a charity organisation, coming as a gay at work seemed to generate much less of a reaction from colleagues than his ‘coming out as working class’, as he put it. Sam feels he has to present to his peers and senior management as ‘middle class’ in order to ‘fit in’:

I put on an acceptable middle class gay persona . . . to a degree, but it doesn’t always sit comfortably with me. I’m from solid working class stock. It’s an important part of who I am, although I need to tone it down or conceal it when I’m working alongside management, most of whom are Oxbridge educated middle class straight men.

Helping Sam to negotiate this identity dilemma is a close female friend, who is similarly positioned within the company as an ‘outsider’, not only because she is one of few women in management, but also due to her working class background. Sam explains:

We went to one of those company barbeques and I heard [X] talking about growing up in a working class family in Scotland. We’ve chatted quite a bit about coming from working class families, and how you can’t really get ahead here if you’re working class. Talking about it doesn’t change how the company is but it does reduce that feeling of isolation that comes from being the only gay working class kid in this place. I don’t lose that side of me when I’m with [X] . . . I can be comfortable with just being myself, and not some model worker the company insists I ought to be.

Striking here is that workplace friendships can afford some respite from expressing the self in particular ways in order to fit in. As Sam’s account indicates, the presentation of self according to an implicit template of an ‘ideal’ worker creates identity dilemmas about whether he is being ‘true’ to himself in certain contexts. In this example, emergent workplace friendships are helpful because they provide opportunities outside and at work for Sam to maintain a sense of self with his female friend in which class is prioritised before sexuality.

**Concluding remarks**

This article builds upon a small body of research on gay men’s friendships, which is still an understudied area in the sociology of friendship and, more obviously, in organisational research on workplace friendships.
Taken together, the interview accounts highlight the importance participants attached to having supportive work friends. Indeed, the study findings show that friendship is a striking characteristic of gay men’s work lives. Of particular interest in this article is the role work friends play in helping gay men to construct identities and selves. Participants recognised the value of supportive work friends in that endeavour, and its positive influence on well being.

Through examining the contexts, roles and the impact of work friends supporting gay men in the workplace, the article extends beyond narrow stereotypes of men’s friendships as emotionally hollow, and thus limited in the types of support they provide. Indeed, the emergence of a nuanced picture of the supportive components in gay men’s workplace friendships is the study’s most significant contribution to the topic of men’s friendships. In line with other studies (Kaplan, 2006; Martin, 2001), stereotypes of men’s friendships outside and at work that suggest they are driven by self-interest are flawed. The interview accounts reveal how participants value and benefit from the supportive nature of workplace friendships that are less about being in control or seeking to exploit others, and more about wanting to help, comfort, listen and provide understanding for the sake of it. As such, the study findings stand in stark contrast to descriptions of men’s workplace friendships (particularly those formed with other men) that emphasise their competitive and emotionally tepid nature. Indeed, as some of the examples above illustrate, sometimes it is common life events such as the death of a parent and caring for a terminally ill loved one, rather than shared experiences or organisational goals, that provide vital nodes of commonality between men. Workplace friendships based on these similarities are noticeably supportive at an emotional level, with evidence of men revealing deeper facets of the self to each other. This problematises the dearth of perspectives that highlight the conflicting tensions over sexuality which can act as a barrier to friendships between men (Bech, 1997; Nardi, 1992). The study data underscores the potential for men to display their vulnerabilities at work using friendship as a ‘safe’ environment in which to do so. This is a fascinating aspect to men’s workplace friendships that requires further research, since cross-sexuality workplace friendships between men might be infringed by the will to dominate and defer in some gendered work contexts (Kerfoot and Knights, 1998).

What is more, the present research offers insights into how the supportive nature of gay men’s workplace friendships can function as an important strategy for sustaining a viable sense of self. In that respect, the study empirically illustrates the argument that people are more active and participative in the construction of identities and selves, and that friendship is playing an important role in supporting these activities (Allan, 2008, 2001; Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Giddens, 1992). For many of the study participants, work friends play a supportive role in helping them to sustain a liveable life as openly gay men. This links with research that has shown how gay men have depended on the comfort, practical aid, love and acceptance from friends outside the workplace to help them develop viable identities as gay men (Nardi, 1999; Weeks et al.,
Acknowledging that work and organisations are crucial to men’s identities and selves (Aaltio and Mills, 2002; Kerfoot and Knights, 1998), this study corroborates the idea that gay men also rely on relations shaped in the workplace to construct meaningful identities and selves. Indeed, the organisational literature on identity disclosure and management among sexual minority workers bears this out up to a point (Woods and Lucas, 1993). In synch with this literature, the findings of this study show how work friends can support gay men who sometimes struggle against marginalisation within work cultures that make sense of them as subordinated sexual minority groups.

However, this research represents one of the few empirical studies to show that gay men are using work friends as a source of affirmational support for developing identities and selves in which sexuality is de-centred. These empirical materials steer attention to how the self is continuously (re)negotiated within and across different contexts that are also subject to alteration. As some participants’ interview quotes reveal, when personal and organisational circumstances change, necessitating the (re)construction of existing and new identities, different friends can play particular roles in providing support to that end. Future research could address further the role of work friends in establishing relational spaces for individuals to negotiate a complex sense of self in terms of age, race, ethnicity, disability, and so on.

In contrary to existing research, it is heterosexuals and not other gay men who figure centrally in this endeavour. For example, heterosexual female friends are prominent providers of support in gay men’s workplace friendships. Such friendships are not just a product of gendered work contexts, but also shaped by participants’ gendered views of women as ‘naturally’ accepting of male homosexuality. Positioned in this way, participants recognised the value of heterosexual female work friends for giving them the type of emotional support stereotypically expected of them. But the nature of these workplace friendships also bears testimony to the provisional nature of gay men’s existence within the world of work.

This gives rise to questions about whether cross-sexuality friendships emerging within specific work contexts, such as those within ‘gay-friendly’ organisations, hold the potential for supporting gay men in their efforts to mount a challenge against the heteronormativity of contemporary organisational life. While Nardi (1999) is adamant about the capacity of gay men’s friendships to support unconventional lifestyles, identities, cultural values, and to deliver social change, there is still much about his optimism that remains empirically open. For one thing, gay men might have less reason to question the heteronormativity of organisational life if they feel advantaged by constructing gay identities that conform to organisational norms of acceptability. Quite possibly gay-friendly work cultures might have a normalising effect on gay men’s workplace friendships, with consequences on the types of support work friends are able or needed to provide in the construction of identities and selves. Clearly, future studies on the affirmational support demanded by gay men from work friends within gay-friendly organisations would yield
fascinating insights into the ways individual needs are addressed within workplace friendships. Such knowledge would complicate further the full picture of how different men understand the meaning of workplace friendships between and among each other.

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Notes

1 On this matter, it is worth referring to Weeks et al. (2001: 64). The gay men in their study also reported few friendships with lesbians, which the authors suggest is explained, in part, by ‘ignorance about each other’s lifestyles’.

2 Descriptions of ‘gay-friendly’ organisations typically contained references to equality and diversity policies which included LGBT people, commitment from senior management towards improving sexuality diversity, sponsorships of LGBT events, LGBT networks and the visible presence of LGBT employees.

References


