For the Benefit of Others -
Lesbian and Gay (LG) People Passing as Straight in the Workplace

by

Deana MacDonald
Bachelor of Arts, St. Francis Xavier University, 1993
Bachelor of Human Ecology, Mount St. Vincent University, 1996
Bachelor of Social Work, University of Manitoba, 2004

and

Dale Vincent
Bachelor of Arts, Dalhousie University, 1997
Bachelor of Social Work, University of Victoria, 2011

A Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

in the Human and Social Development, School of Social Work

© MacDonald Deana and Vincent Dale, 2013
University of Victoria

All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy or other means, without the permission of the author.
Supervisory Committee

For the Benefit of Others -
Lesbian and Gay (LG) People Passing as Straight in the Workplace

by

Deana MacDonald
Bachelor of Arts, St. Francis Xavier University, 1993
Bachelor of Human Ecology, Mount St. Vincent University, 1996
Bachelor of Social Work, University of Manitoba, 2003

and

Dale Vincent
Bachelor of Arts, Dalhousie University, 1997
Bachelor of Social Work, University of Victoria, 2011

Supervisory Committee

Dr. Susan Strega, Faculty of Human and Social Development, School of Social Work
Supervisor

Dr. Lyn Davis, Faculty of Human and Social Development, School of Social Work
Co-Supervisor or Departmental Member
Abstract

Supervisory Committee
Dr. Susan Strega, Faculty of Human and Social Development, School of Social Work
Supervisor
Dr. Lyn Davis, Faculty of Human and Social Development, School of Social Work
Co-Supervisor or Departmental Member

In order to avoid the stigma which often accompanies being part of a sexual minority, or to benefit others who may be uncomfortable, lesbian and gay people may choose or are required not to reveal their true sexual orientation. Often they “pass” as heterosexual. Through our research we explored the impact passing as strait at work has on lesbian and gay men through a narrative approach. Seven individuals were interviewed to explore the way that lesbian and gay employees make sense of their decisions to pass- or not- and how these choices are linked to their subjectivities. Theoretically, we employed Queer Theory perspectives to consider in our analysis how lesbian and gay selves are constructed by the discourses that inform passing. We explored the factors which may lead to passing and the dominant discourses surrounding heteronormativity in the workplace and how such factors serve to discipline lesbian and gay workers to present themselves in certain ways. An outcome of this research is a presentation on our findings to inform organizations/ LGBTI Networks about ways to make workplaces more comfortable for lesbian and gay employees based on the stories and suggestions of our research participants.
# Table of Contents

Supervisory Committee .................................................................................................................. ii  
Abstract .......................................................................................................................................... iii  
Table of Contents ................................................................................................................................ iv  
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................ vi  

Chapter 1: Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 1  

Chapter 2: Literature review ............................................................................................................ 5  
Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 5  
Passing ............................................................................................................................................... 6  
Heteronormativity and Queer Theory ............................................................................................... 6  
Contemporary LG issues in the workplace ....................................................................................... 10  
Policy and legal protections .............................................................................................................. 14  
Experiences of "othering" ................................................................................................................. 20  
Fear of reprisal ................................................................................................................................... 20  
Attitudes of co-workers ..................................................................................................................... 21  
Violence and harassment .................................................................................................................... 22  
Factors that lead to disclosing sexual orientation ........................................................................... 24  
Forced out .......................................................................................................................................... 24  
Influences on deciding to come out ................................................................................................. 27  
What does an LG inclusive workplace look like .............................................................................. 28  
Workplace diversity training ............................................................................................................. 30  
Ally-mentorship programs ............................................................................................................... 31  
Employee LGB networks ................................................................................................................... 32  
Mental health and well-being .......................................................................................................... 33  
Subjectivities and being "othered" at work ....................................................................................... 36  
Conclusion ......................................................................................................................................... 38  

Chapter 3: Methodology .................................................................................................................. 39  
Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 39  
Theoretical framework ..................................................................................................................... 39  
Research process .............................................................................................................................. 42  
Participant selection .......................................................................................................................... 43  
Availability of participants ............................................................................................................... 45  
Phase 1: Hearing stories, experiencing emotions ............................................................................ 46  
Phase 2: Transcribing the material .................................................................................................. 48  
Phase 3: Interpreting transcripts ..................................................................................................... 49  
Phase 4: Exploring experiences of narrators .................................................................................... 53  
Phase 5: Personal and political aspects of the stories ....................................................................... 54  
Phase 6: Similarities and differences in the stories .......................................................................... 55  
Phase 7: Writing the research report ............................................................................................... 56  
Ethical considerations ...................................................................................................................... 58  
Researcher reflexivity ....................................................................................................................... 61  
Researchers working together - working through challenges .......................................................... 63
Chapter 4: The findings ................................................................. 67
Participant profiles ............................................................................. 67
Identity management........................................................................... 70
For the benefit of others................................................................. 71
Preparing to (dis)engage...the social side of work ......................... 72
Under surveillance ............................................................................ 74
LG Agency Work ............................................................................... 75
The pressure to pass ......................................................................... 76
Mirroring and modelling ................................................................. 78
Organizational culture....................................................................... 80
Avoiding stigma ................................................................................ 81
Silencing LG sexual orientation ...................................................... 84
Not rocking the boat ......................................................................... 84
Manoeuvring in a straight work environment .................................. 85
Ways we pass .................................................................................... 87
Playing the pronoun game .............................................................. 89
Straight style .................................................................................... 90
Conversation filters .......................................................................... 93
Visual cues ....................................................................................... 95
Mental health and well-being......................................................... 97

Chapter 5: Discussion and conclusion ........................................... 99
Identity management ......................................................................... 99
Under surveillance .......................................................................... 101
Onus should not be on the LG individual to ensure compliance and educate .................................................................................. 103
Silencing LG sexual orientation ...................................................... 106
Ways we pass .................................................................................... 107
Mental health and well-being......................................................... 107
Welcoming workplaces .................................................................... 108
Hope for the future .......................................................................... 110
Times are changing ......................................................................... 111
Generational differences ................................................................ 112
Increase scope of diversity training .............................................. 113
The next generation ........................................................................ 114
Social justice .................................................................................... 115

Conclusion ..................................................................................... 116
References ...................................................................................... 119
Annex A ......................................................................................... 126
Annex B ......................................................................................... 127
Annex C ......................................................................................... 129
Annex D ......................................................................................... 130
Annex E ......................................................................................... 131
Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the contribution from individual lesbians and gay men who gave their time and openly shared their stories of passing as straight in the workplace. Without your enthusiasm and willingness to participate, this research would not have been possible. Your stories about moving beyond difficult and often painful experiences of passing as straight in the workplace are testament to your resilient nature, and at the same time your positive outlook and hope for the future is inspiring.

A special thank you to Lyn Davis who accepted the role as a supervisory committee member. Your support and commitment to assisting us with our research challenged us to think about the complexities of our topic and to delve into the literature and carefully examine the rich stories as told by the research participants. We appreciate you sharing personal and professional experiences – they have not only helped us with this project in terms of learning about research, but also in our day-to-day lives as we face challenges as people who identify as lesbian and gay.

Susan Strega was not only our supervisor and mentor for this project, but was also the inspiration for our interest in the topic of passing in the workplace. Prior to you introducing us to the phenomenon of passing, we had not considered what a tremendous impact this has had on our lives - personally, professionally and as students. You created space for us to explore ideas about our sexual orientation and how this shapes our beliefs, values and ideas particularly when navigating life in predominantly heteronormative environments. You have challenged us to be questioning, critical, and curious and from this we grew. Your sense of humour and encouragement kept us going.

Deana, it has been an honour working with you on this research project. You have been an excellent research partner and I have learned so much from you – but more importantly you have become a great friend who has been there for me personally and professionally and for that I am grateful. I look forward to many years of fine friendship, and perhaps even venturing into working together on research projects in the future.

Dale, I could not have wished for a better person to be on this journey with me. It is hard to believe we only met while in Victoria at the start of this program, because I feel like I have known you my whole life. You have become one of my best friends. This work has been challenging but we faced it together and I want to thank you for pushing me, supporting me and sticking with me over these past two years!

I am lucky to have a group of supportive friends, coworkers and family behind me but I could not have done it without the love and encouragement from Tracy, Tyler, Robyn and Kendyl. I am thankful everyday for you.
Chapter 1

Introduction

Diversity in the workplace in Canada is a topic that has been well researched and most employers provide some sort of training and education on diversity so that differences in beliefs, values, expectations and ways of communication amongst employees are understood. As working professionals, we embrace and respect diversity within our places of employment and feel that a variety of people with diverse ethnicity, gender, ability, language, economic status, political views and sexual orientation, to name a few, contribute to progressive, collaborative and engaging work environments. As members of a sexual minority who identify as lesbian (Deana) and gay (Dale), we have experienced a lack of freedom to reveal this aspect of our lives at our places of employment, and as such we took measures to “pass” as straight.

Our interest in this topic of passing stemmed from a conversation we had with a professor at the University of Victoria, when she spoke of occasions that she, as a lesbian, was required to pass as straight in the workplace. Over the next several weeks, we spent a lot of time thinking about this phenomenon and were shocked to realize to what extent we pass as straight in the workplace, particularly since we both considered ourselves to be “out” at work. This curiosity resulted in us conducting an extensive literature review on lesbian and gay employees who pass as straight in the workplace and we were surprised at how little research exists on the topic. In an effort to contribute to this under-researched topic and better understand the experiences of gay and lesbian employees, we completed this research project with the contribution of seven participants who gave their time and openly shared their experiences of passing as straight in the workplace.
Many pressures exist within Canadian workplaces today. Employee workloads are high, resources are low, technology is constantly changing and people have to work hard in order to keep up. Skilled workers are in high demand and employees are being asked to “do more with less” in a tight economy. Everyone is talking about creating “work-life balance” and the role that this plays in influencing both the mental and physical health of employees and the success of businesses and organizations. These concerns are in line with neo-liberalism, which positions the economy as the most important focus for both governments and citizens. This can create fears of both employees and employers that a workplace that is not inclusive can be problematic and the tension and conflict that results could compromise productivity which would be detrimental to the organization (Wilson, 2004). For employees, such fears may include job loss and a lack of promotion, while employers’ fears might be profit losses or not having a competitive workforce. This focus on fear slows diversity efforts for the sake of “doing what is right” and promotes the acceptance and understanding of all employees only on the basis of economic growth and security. As Wilson (2004) observes, “The neo-liberal ‘survival of the fittest’ approach . . . assumes the inherent wisdom of the market and that, as with all things in nature, a process of evolution means the fittest (the best able to compete in a global market economy) will survive” (p. 14).

Neo-liberalism contributes to the decisions lesbian and gay (LG) people make when faced with the choice between coming out and closeting themselves at work. The risk of financial repercussions is a well-documented reason for passing (Shippee, 2011). From a neo-liberal perspective, repercussions for employees may include a loss of income and, therefore, the ability to support oneself, partner, children; not being able to
contribute to society through employment; not having the mobility to advance in employment status; and a loss of consumer choice when it comes to housing, clothing and other necessities. Fears that being out would negatively impact their career and a lack of employment protection may encourage a LG person to pass as straight at work.

The purpose of our project is to explore the ways that LG employees make sense of their decisions to pass – or not- and how these choices are linked to their subjectivities. As we explain in more detail in our methodology chapter, using a queer theory perspective allowed us to consider in our analysis how lesbian and gay selves are constructed by the discourses that inform passing. Strega (2005) explains how, “For Foucault, the self/subjectivity is an effect of discourse: historically and socially situated, constituted, and constructed in discourse and discursive practices” (p. 222). Subjectivity is constantly reconstituted as people interact within their society. We were curious about: What happens when home and work identities are in conflict with one another? What influences these internally and externally imposed conflicts? As Strega argues, “Understanding our subjectivity and the range of subjectivities available to us brings not just the possibility of choice but an increased awareness of the mechanisms by which ourselves, our subjectivities, are created, disciplined, and under surveillance” (p. 223). LG employees participate in the surveillance of themselves as they maneuver in the heteronormative environment of many workplaces. For the purposes of this research project, our focus was on the experiences of self-identified lesbian and gay people who passed as heterosexual in the workplace. Issues involving bisexuality, intersex or transgender identity differ and hold additional complexities that were outside the scope of this project and warrant separate studies.
To answer our research question, we interviewed seven LG people in the winter of 2013 who are, or had worked in the province of Nova Scotia. They all worked within helping professions and came with a variety of experiences around passing at work. Individual interviews were conducted in a conversational style using some open-ended questions as a guide. Their stories contained many similarities although with unique perspectives, and spoke of the ways in which discourse operates to produce an LG worker and surveillance happens to control when the LG person chose to pass or be out while at work.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In this literature review, we discuss the recent history of LG issues in the workplace, examine policy and legal protections for LG employees, and look at the experiences of “othering” that LG people describe. We begin with a discussion about what is meant when we say someone is “passing” at work. Then we discuss the many factors that can lead people to disclose their sexual orientation or, alternatively, result in their passing at the workplace. We explore dominant discourses surrounding heteronormativity in the workplace and how they discipline people to produce themselves in certain ways.

Three main discourses will be highlighted within this literature review, with particular emphasis placed on ways in which they contribute to the creation of subjectivities. This includes the discourses about LG individuals who are out as “flaunting it” and trying to “make trouble”. Anything but silence can be seen by employers, colleagues and clients as the LG person flaunting their sexuality and if they discuss their “private lives” at all they are seen as trying to cause trouble or “stir the pot” - this is not the same for heterosexual people. Talking about their family at work would never be considered trouble-making or flaunting their heterosexual lifestyle.

We also look at discourses of heteronormativity that allow heterosexual people to talk about their sexual orientation all the time (often without realizing that they are doing so) and the position this places LG workers in as co-workers. We look at different ways LG workers pass at work to illustrate things we need to change or hide in order to fit in or feel safe at work. We conclude by envisioning what constitutes mental health and well-
being for LG people and what LG inclusive spaces look like. The focus of our literature review sets our research in context and highlights the main issues influencing LG passing at work.

**Passing**

The pressure to produce a socially sanctioned subjectivity often puts added stress on the LG employee - a fact that has significant implications for their social and psychological wellbeing (Luhtanen, 2003; Dyson, 2009; Bouzianis, Malcolm, & Hallab, 2008). If an LG employee fears stigmatization and reprisal in the workplace, they will likely hide their sexual orientation and let people believe that they are heterosexual. This process is often known as “passing.” In order to avoid the stigma which may accompany being part of a sexual minority, LG people may choose not to reveal their true sexual orientation or “pass” as heterosexual (Goffman, 1963).

**Heteronormativity and Queer Theory**

Although sexuality has been studied for centuries, the study of minority sexualities such as LG is recent and has given rise to discourses such as queer theory, which we will use throughout this project in order to better understand relationships between LG and straight employees in the workplace. One doesn’t have to look very far to find disturbing stories of men and women who did not conform to gender norms and expectations — the non-masculine male, the non-feminine woman and people who engaged in same sex activities — faced punishments as severe as execution. For example, Ward (2008) recounts that “between 1730 and 1811, a widespread panic in the Dutch Republic led to a spectacular series of trials for sodomy, with persecutions leading to the
death penalty” (p. 14). While many countries have established legal rights and protections for LG people, it is telling that even in the 21st century, people still face discrimination, harassment and bullying. These unsupportive environments contribute to the suicides of LG young people; a recent Oregon study (Hatzenbuehler, 2011) found that LG youth were five times more likely than their heterosexual peers to attempt suicide. This demonstrates the powerful impact that public perception can and does have on the everyday lives of people who do not identify as being straight.

In The History of Sexuality, Michel Foucault contributes to contemporary thinking about sexuality, suggesting that sexuality is not simply a biological matter, but a socially constructed identity (Hurley, 1990). His work constitutes the foundation of what is now known as queer theory—a discourse that has increasingly become a tool for understanding sexuality and challenging common beliefs about sexuality and gender. Authors such as Jackson (2006), Sharma (2009) and Losert (2008) have written about heteronormativity, basing their observations on research conducted in Germany, the United States and Australia. They agree on the basic principle that these societies still operate on the assumption that individuals are inherently heterosexual and further, that heterosexuals are normal and homosexuals are deviant. We are particularly drawn to Reingarde’s (2010) description of heteronormativity, which is based upon her research with lesbians and gay men in Lithuania. Reingarde says that “the concept of heteronormativity particularly focuses as a normative notion that repeatedly asserts heterosexual life as the right life to live. Heterosexuality as a norm is constructed in politics, media, popular culture, arts, working life, families and so on” (p.83). This definition provided a point of departure for our investigation into why some people
choose to pass as straight in the workplace, while others disclose their sexual orientation at certain times and to certain people.

The use of queer theory allows for new ways of thinking about sexuality and gender and assists in the analysis of discourses around heteronormativity and heterosexism, particularly in terms of the formation of subjectivities. Within this literature review chapter we explore how, with specific attention to the workplace, certain discourses discipline us to produce ourselves in certain ways. This way of looking at LG passing at work will include challenging common beliefs about sexuality and gender and analyzing forms of power that are based on normative models of gender and sexuality (Butler, 1993).

To give an idea of the number of LG people who pass as heterosexual at work in Canada, a study conducted by Silva and Warren (2009) indicates that half (50%) of lesbian women and 28% of gay men in the survey were not out to their work colleagues. Research conducted by Out Now Global Consulting (2011), an international marketing agency, found that 25% of the LGBT respondents in Canada were not open about their sexuality with their colleagues.

The experiences of LG people within this space between work and life —the area where their life as a lesbian or gay person connects with their work environment - has been understudied, particularly in Canada. As Walters (2012) argues,

> Being out at work doesn’t mean that intimate details of your private life are suddenly made public; it simply chips away at the presumption that everyone is heterosexual. This presumption is the elephant in the room for creating an atmosphere where LG people can be open about who they are. (p. 1)

One reason LG people give for feeling that they need to pass as straight at work is the stigma they perceive some coworkers and managers have against the LG community.
Stigma is relative and dependent upon cultural and situational contexts, just as passing is steeped in the structures of meaning and behavior that surround everyday life (Shippee, 2011). It is helpful, therefore, to think about the daily passing practices of the LG person as fluid. This means the LG person is sometimes open about their sexual orientation but at other times is not.

As a brief example of this “in and out” process, consider a typical day for me (Deana) as a lesbian mother, partner and employee. I wake up in the morning next to my partner, free to be open about my sexuality. I leave for work, where I spend my day passing to clients as a heterosexual woman when they ask about my husband, but being open with some of my coworkers when discussing what my partner and I did on the weekend. I go to my daughter’s school function alone so as to not disclose to other families that she has same sex parents, in case they are homophobic and this might have negative implications for my daughter. I go home where I share a meal with friends who are both gay and straight and we make plans to vacation this summer (and discuss avoiding certain places where there’s been recent violence against LGBT people). A telemarketer calls in the evening but I choose not to participate in the survey, which asks about family composition, since I’m not sure what the information will be used for or if it’s anonymous enough to not disclose our family situation to people who may respond negatively or in a threatening way. Every day I go back and forth, sometimes passing and sometimes not, depending on the situation.
Contemporary LG Issues in the Workplace

This section highlights some examples of discrimination based on sexual orientation and looks at the way certain discourses contributed to the decisions of professional LG individuals to pass publicly as straight. We also discuss the way discourse contributes to the LG subjects created in these examples.

It was shocking to read the Separation Notice prepared by The Cracker Barrel Old Country Store in Lebanon, Tennessee, releasing Cheryl Summerville from her duties as a cashier in 1991. Under the reason for separation section, general manager Maurice Watson wrote, “This employee is being terminated due to violation of company policy. The employee is gay” (Krupat, 2001, p. xvii). Although this example of discrimination based on sexual orientation took place 20 years ago in the United States, our literature review reveals that LG people still experience similar situations all over the world, including Canada—a country that takes pride in being recognized as an international leader in human rights (Canadian Human Rights Commission website).

Dr. Sally Ride died on 23 July 2012 in San Diego, USA (Gold, 2012). Her obituary, printed in the Chicago Tribune, depicts her as a sister, academic, astronaut, entrepreneur, educator, activist and partner to Tam O’Shaughnessy. Although she was famous and highly regarded for her many accomplishments, (the most noteworthy was her being first American woman and youngest American in space) newspapers, blogs and gay themed magazines across the world focused not only on her long list of accomplishments, but also on the fact that she was a lesbian. The Globe and Mail featured an article titled, “Astronaut, brianiac, educational force…oh yeah, and lesbian. Why is that the news?” (Timson, 2012). This article not only focuses on her professional
life, but it also delves for the first time into what they call her “private life as a lesbian.” This post-mortem coming out was not accidental—Sally herself made the decision to do so in this way as a declaration of her love for Tam O’Shaughnessy, her partner of 27 years.

On one hand, the article indicates that Sally preferred to keep her work and private life - including her relationship with Tam - very separate. On the other hand, Sally identified as a lesbian to her family and close friends, suggesting that like many others in the workplace, she passed as heterosexual. Andrew Sullivan, blogger for *The Daily Beast*, openly criticized Sally’s decision to remain private about her sexual orientation, suggesting she should have taken the opportunity to expand the horizons and dreams of the LGBTQ community and act as a heroine of sorts. While we may never know Sally’s exact reasons for keeping her sexual orientation private, we feel that Timson (2012) was correct in saying “The image crafters at the male dominated NASA who made household names out of astronauts would have gone with ‘Houston, we have a BIG problem’ and simply not allowed a queer woman in space.”

Websites, blogs and biographies of Sally Ride indicate that she was married to fellow astronaut Steven Hawley in 1982. However, the two were divorced in 1987 for undisclosed reasons ([http://library.thinkquest.org/J001621/sallyride.html](http://library.thinkquest.org/J001621/sallyride.html)). Later, biographies and interviews based on Sally’s educational interests reveal that Sally and Tam were childhood friends and remained in contact over the years. They eventually became colleagues, writing children’s books and developing science curriculum for teachers in schools. In an interview with Nancy Johnson for Book Links (2009), Tam O’Shaughnessy and Sally Ride shared details of their lifelong friendship and professional
interests, yet did not disclose that they were in a lesbian relationship with one another. After years of accomplishment, and having family and friends who were aware and accepting of Sally’s lesbianism, we are left wondering why she did not reveal her sexual orientation publically. Bear, Sally’s sister who is also a lesbian and advocate, when asked why her sister decided to fly under the public “gaydar” responded, “we chalk that up to being Norwegian—or as one gay women I know succinctly put it, it was her own bloody business” (Timson, 2012). This represents the discourse around LG relationships needing to be kept private while heterosexual relationships never have to be. Sally did not keep her previous relationship with Steven Hawley private, nor would anyone think she needed to. Only her lesbian relationship was “her own bloody business”. This discourse reinforces the rule that LG relationships are to be kept a secret (or to be revealed after death), which is further supported in the following example.

Major Alan G. Rogers served in the US Army for 18 of his 40 years before his death in Iraq in 2008. The story of his struggle to balance two competing aspects of his life has moved to the heart of the debate over gay military service. In an article for Independent News a friend is quoted as saying, “Alan was not someone who hid his sexual orientation. He didn’t wear it on his sleeve, but he didn’t hide it under a cloak either” (Foley, 2008). His colleagues indicated they were surprised to learn of Major Roger’s sexual orientation even though they worked closely with him for a number of years. Many people working within the gay rights movement felt it was important that sexual orientation be known publically in order to support their fight for equal rights and repeal the US Military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. This argument was met with criticism, however, and family members and some military personnel tried to prevent
Major Rogers’ sexual orientation from being publicized (Johnson, 2008). This makes a point about gayness and lesbianism having to be kept quiet while heterosexuality never is, nor has to be. Obituaries or other publications can mention the heterosexual relationships people have had, but discussing or acknowledging same sex relationships creates controversy.

The same can be said, in many cases, for day-to-day discussions - especially those concerning work or employment - where some people see a clear divide between work and personal life. This clear divide is enforced for LG people but not for heterosexual people who can feel free to be open about their personal life at work without fear of being seen as controversial, “flaunting it”, or trying to cause trouble. Imagine for a minute a woman at her place of employment discussing her plans for her upcoming wedding (to a man). Would it be seen by coworkers as inappropriate to bring up in the workplace? Would it create controversy? Would people suggest that the worker was flaunting her sexuality by discussing the event? When topics are deemed to be “off limits” for the workplace for LG people, the same rules do not apply to heterosexual people.

These examples highlight some of the struggles LG workers have had to endure even when protections against discrimination are in place and the discourses at work to encourage passing. They reveal how incredible lesbian and gay people have kept their sexual identity hidden at work and from the public, disclosing it only after their death. These represent missed opportunities for LG individuals entering these demanding professions to benefit from positive lesbian and gay role models. The discourse within these examples also works to produce an LG subject which is private and secretive about their relationships to the public and co-workers. It is deemed as being professional to
have this divide and an excuse is needed to justify why they finally disclosed -professing love, or to further the LG rights movement.

**Policy and Legal Protections**

It is important to situate the emergence of workplace legislation and protection for LG people within the historical context of neo-liberalism and homophobia. We have a lot to be proud of in Canada, having established many legislated protections and rights for LG individuals. As Hurley (2007) explains,

> The legal situation in Canada has changed considerably with the introduction of the equality rights provision in section 15 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in 1985. Although it had been decided not to include sexual orientation explicitly as a prohibited ground of discrimination, subsection 15(1) was worded to ensure that the Charter’s guarantee of equality was open-ended. (p. 4)

In 1979, the Canadian Human Rights Commission first recommended that sexual orientation be prohibited as grounds for discrimination under the *Canadian Human Rights Act*. Despite the subsequent introduction of protection against discrimination and harassment under the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and under provincial legislations, many homosexual people still perceive coming out as a threat to their careers. This perception is supported by reports by Buddel (2011), Dyson (2209) and Schwartz (2012) which state that discrimination persists in many workplaces and can negatively affect advancement and workplace opportunities. It is critical that we communicate “the impact of the fact that nearly 10% of the workforce (by many estimates) is not “bringing their whole selves to work on a daily basis” (Brown, 2010, p. 29). This suggests that formal legislation and policy can only go so far in making the workplace a comfortable and safe environment for LG people.
Some workplaces have made great progress over the years in creating more welcoming environments for lesbian and gay employees. Hewlett and Sumberg (2011) report that 85% of Fortune 500 companies have protective policies that address sexual orientation—up from 51% in 2000. Nonetheless, they show that 48% of LGBT respondents report remaining “closeted” at work. Many workplaces have expanded the scope of their diversity policies to include sexuality and gender identity issues. However, a study by Out Now (2011) on LGBT diversity and inclusion, found that a gap still exists between policy and practice. Johnson (2011) reflects that,

One of the starkest findings of the LGBT 2010 research is the extent to which, in each of the countries tested, there exists a gap between the introduction of increasingly sophisticated policies of diversity and inclusion and the actual day-to-day workplace experiences of LGBT people. (p. 2)

This represents a significant finding for our research because we explored the lived experiences of LG workers within organizations that, while they may be following policy and legislation, have not necessarily created a workplace atmosphere that is welcoming and accepting enough of LG employees who still feel the need to pass as heterosexual.

Despite great advances over the last 20 years in creating legislation and policies to protect LG employees in Canada, the gap between policy and practice still needs to be addressed. To use the province of Nova Scotia as an example (our research participants resided there), the province’s Employment Equity Policy objectives include: to promote an inclusive, culturally competent public service that values diversity; to assist with the identification and removal of systemic barriers to employment and the advancement of members of the designated groups; and to achieve a workforce where the designated groups are equitably represented (Nova Scotia Public Service Commission, 2011, p. 1).
In Nova Scotia, these “designated groups” are African Nova Scotians, persons with disabilities, Aboriginal and Acadian peoples. There are plans in place to increase the number of people from these groups in the province’s workforce with the goal of creating a public service that is representative, at all levels, of the people it serves. It is notable, however, that the Nova Scotia Public Service Commission (NSPSC) does not recognize people from the LG community as a designated group. Information regarding LG numbers, positions with departments and education levels, therefore, is not available as it is with the four designated groups. LG as a category is also excluded from current NSPSC diversity programs such as the Diversity Accommodation Fund, Diversity Talent Pool, Summer Diversity Program, Summer Female Mentorship Program, and the Diversity Selection Panel Pool. A review of the NSPSC diversity education opportunities indicates that LG issues are not part of the offerings for public service employees to increase skills and competencies in this area of cultural diversity (Nova Scotia Public Service Commission, 2011). The lack of inclusion of LG groups in diversity policy and programs, along with a lack of focus on LG issues in the training and education for managers and employees, may contribute to feelings amongst LG workers that the workplace is tolerant but not necessarily welcoming of their sexual orientation or aware of the challenges they face within a heteronormative work environment.

In *Pink Triangles: Antecedents and Consequences of Perceived Workplace Discrimination Against Gay and Lesbian Employees*, Ragins et al. (2008) explore the effects of legislation, policies, organizational structure, practices within the workplace and group composition based on sexual orientation. This study, which included 534 gay and lesbian employees in the United States, found that while national, overarching
employment policies such as those in the *National Employment Non-discrimination Act* were critical as a starting point for preventing and addressing discrimination based on sexual orientation, what was more helpful for LGBT employees deciding whether or not to disclose their sexual orientation, was evidence of local policies and practices that illustrated that their employer considered this to be an important issue related to diversity in the workplace. In this qualitative research, “gay employees were less likely to disclose their sexual orientation when they reported either experiencing or observing sexual orientation discrimination at work” (Ragins, 2011, p. 1256). Interestingly enough, even gay employees who disclosed their sexual orientation at work did not necessarily share this information with all of their colleagues. In fact, while 27.6% disclosed their orientation to everyone in the workplace, 61.6% disclosed it only to a few trusted colleagues and 11.7% did not disclose it to anyone at work. Factors that contributed to positive experiences and increased disclosure of sexual orientation included such things as having other openly gay and lesbian employees within the workplace, employee programs that provide same-sex benefits and a workplace environment in which same-sex couples are welcome and choose to attend social events; having even one other same sex couple in the room can make an occasion more welcoming. As well, seeing LG representation around the physical space in pictures, symbols, or advertisements sends a positive message of inclusion.

The literature we have reviewed consistently indicates that legislative and policy protections are not enough to create workplaces that are safe and welcoming for LG employees. Barriers that result in less inclusive workplaces and limited opportunities for career advancement still exist. These are linked most commonly to a lack of awareness
of LG issues, overt discrimination and a lack of role models (Silva & Warren, 2009). These can start to be addressed with better education on LG issues for management and staff and peer mentoring or ally programs, which we discuss later in this literature review.

Although protections have been included in law and policy, the public still presents as tolerant but not accepting in many ways. Media portrayals of LG people are improving (Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, 2010) but when reading articles or letters to the editor in our local papers we observe it is still acceptable to criticize and talk negatively about the LG community and individuals within it, whereas it would not be acceptable to discuss other minority groups in the same way.

An example of this is evident in Nova Scotia surrounding reports in the local paper about the annual Pride Parade – Turning 25 With Halifax Pride (Willick, 2012). Here are three responses to the article by people written on the website:

(http://thechronicleherald.ca/metro/121950-turning-25-with-halifax-pride)

By shawnino | July 29, 2012 - 7:10am
Keep Sex Out of Public Places
If the government is to stay out of the nation's bedrooms, that's fine. But do us all a favour and uphold some sort of public decency standard. This newspaper can try and cram political correctness down our throats all it wants--I totally believe in freedom of the press. But the rest of us have a right to say that we're disgusted.

By voiceofreality | July 29, 2012 - 8:06am
Never Been, Never Will
The usual disclaimer: I don't have anything against what you do in the bedroom with whoever. I see no point to this "parade". Laws are in place to prevent prejudice and punish it. This thing is as outdated as the unions' claims to make workplaces safe. It disgusts me that my taxes are used to promote it and participate in it (I feel the same way about other special interest groups being pandered to) I've never been downtown during "pride" week - nor will I in the future. Glad it's over.

By zeteboy | July 29, 2012 - 8:54am
No progress in 25 years
Seems to me that the GLTG community has not made ANY progress in 25 years. Still have the offensive participants...80 year old man dressed as a very ugly woman, a man dressed in high wedge boots and a leather thong, a guy dressed in a Borat swim suit...and it goes on.
If this group wants to be more accepted by the mainstream society, they have to act responsible and not offensive, however clearly they don't care what people think about them. If that’s the case then they will never be accepted. Plain and simple.

These examples indicate a high level of intolerance for the LG community and are just three examples of many, on one particular event, in one newspaper. The effect this has on LG individuals is to entice fear of being public with their sexuality and possibly remain closeted to avoid insults and negative repercussions. The messages are clear that LG people are to keep themselves out of the public eye and that to not do so is “disgusting” and “offensive”. This has a negative impact on the LG person’s self-esteem, confidence and mental health, and messages easily translate to the work environment as well.

Since “the primary objective of anti-discrimination law is the protection of a disadvantaged group within society” (Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, 2010, p.12), it is important to recognize how legal protections impact discourse around LG issues. Discourse around protections for LG people creates certain subjectivities and identities that contribute to the position of LG as a disadvantaged group. The label of “disadvantaged” affects people and has consequences to the social and political positioning of LG individuals. Since discourses make certain things possible and thinkable (Hurley, 1990), dominant heterosexist discourses surrounding the protection of LG people do not leave room for the community to be powerful, influential, or advantaged. It is set up as a disadvantaged position. Sexuality discourses that are
primarily heterosexual further produce a subject position that is “below” that of a heterosexual person (Cosis-Brown & Cocker, 2011). Gayness/lesbianism has to be kept private but heterosexism never is, nor has to be.

**Experiences of ‘Othering’**

This section explores the management of identity due to fear of consequences, attitudes of co-workers and possible violence or harassment that may occur if workers disclose being lesbian or gay. It shows discourses at work to keep LG individuals silent and marginalized which affect their ability to have a voice at their place of employment and contribute to changing attitudes and practices in the workplace.

**Fear of Reprisal**

What we found to be important when considering passing is that it is only LG people that have to make the *decision* to disclose or not disclose their sexuality. Heterosexual people never think about this, or rarely have to. These are not “free choices”, as they are constructed by dominant discourses and consequences of our created subjectivities. For LG individuals this can be problematic and often stressful as each decision, to pass or not, inevitably has consequences, both personal and professional. So, although we use the term ‘decision’ we recognize there may not be a choice in the matter. In *Gay, straight and who I am: Interpreting passing within the frames for everyday life*, Nathan Shippee (2006) examines the way in which LG individuals describe and interpret the daily contexts in which they decide whether or not to pass as heterosexual. He found that LG employees manage their interactions in the
workplace quite strategically. Making the choice to pass or come out depends on number of factors. Nobody wants to feel stigmatized, marginalized or be disadvantaged and this fear is a contributing factor in many decisions.

In *LGBT Faculty and Researchers: Risks and Rewards*, LaSala et al. (2008) provide an interesting overview of how and why some LGBT faculty and researchers attempt to pass as heterosexual. The overview suggests that they do so in an effort to manage stigma, to fit in, or to advance their careers. Alternatively, they choose to disclose their sexual orientation in an effort to reduce stress, honour relationships with partners and have a sense of freedom. LaSala et al. explore questions such as,

How do LGBT faculty and doctoral students decide whether or not to come out? Does the institution forbid discrimination against LGBT people in their antidiscrimination policies? Is the school or department housed in an institution sponsored by a religion that is hostile to LGBT people and their concerns? (p. 256)

The answers to these questions have an impact on whether LGBT staff and students felt comfortable coming out or decided to pass in their place of employment. Some faculty and students feared that being “too out” could jeopardize research funding or opportunities for promotion, whereas some expressed the desire not to pass, as they wanted to challenge the academic institution to be forward thinking and accepting of diversity.

**Attitudes of Coworkers**

In *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/Questioning Nurses’ Experiences in the Workplace*, Eliason et al. (2011) provide an overview of the attitudes of some heterosexual nurses based on previous research by Randall (2011) and highlight
some of the positive and negative workplace experiences reported by 261 nurses in the United States. The study provided perspectives of nurse educators in the Midwest and there was a generally negative image of gays and lesbians in the nursing field. At that time nursing was an occupation predominantly filled by women, so any men in the field of nursing were “automatically suspect as being gay” (p. 238). The study also concluded that,

52% of respondents believed that lesbians are unnatural, 34% thought lesbians are disgusting and 23% considered lesbians as immoral. Four percent would refuse to care for a lesbian patient, and 13% said they would not allow a lesbian nurse to care for them. (p. 238)

These attitudes would not be conducive for LG nurses or other workers within the medical profession to disclose their sexual orientation at work.

Violence and Harassment

As recently as January 2012, an article entitled “Gay in the Army” published in Xtra, (Scwartz), indicated that homosexuals are harassed, singled out and threatened in the workplace. One example given was that of Warrant Officer Andrew McLean who, based on the perception that he is gay, received a life-threatening note on his desk while serving in Afghanistan. The military responded by saying no investigation would be called, since it was not known who left the note. The problem was individualized and the victim blamed; McLean was removed from his post with no further legal or investigative action taken. During a CBC interview McLean said that, after reading the note and realizing that people assumed he was gay, “I went through a lot of emotions. I went through anger, embarrassment, humiliation . . . fear for my safety.” Although it is not known if McLean was openly gay outside work, when describing his work environment
he said, “You see the negativity all around you, and why would anybody choose to confront that? I tried every trick in the book to be heterosexual” (CBC, 30 January 2012). Like Douglas and many others who had negative experiences in the workplace based on their sexual orientation, McLean has taken early retirement and continues to advocate for the inclusion of a LGBT section in the Department of National Defence’s employment equity training.

Although there are laws and codes of conduct in place that are meant to protect LG people from discrimination (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 1996; Public Service Commission, 2011) respondents to a survey conducted by Silva and Warren (2009) reported incidents of homophobia, inappropriate humour, and exclusion from important connections inside and outside the organization occurring within their workplace. These are not isolated experiences. Dyson’s (2009) study of the experiences of lesbians showed it was “the thoughtless words and immature teasing that were most powerful in regulating their behavior and suppressing subjectivities” (p. 147).

Symbolic violence and exclusion also play out in subtle ways that act both internally and externally on the LG worker. Hearing people use derogatory words or statements can make a person more likely to pass since they do not feel their coworkers are sensitive or tolerant of different sexual orientations. Being excluded from events or discussions around the water cooler can make an employee feel isolated and, if they see it happening to other LG people in the workplace, they will be less likely to come out to their coworkers (Luhtanen, 2002; Shippee, 2011; Silva & Warren, 2009). For example, Buddel (2011) states that gay and lesbian people who are “out” in the workplace tend to be segregated, subject to harassment such as derogatory comments and jokes, destruction
of property, inappropriate physical contact and failure to recognize ability for promotion. He suggests that LG peoples are “bearable as long as we cover and do not flaunt ourselves” (p. 133) and it is expected that we will not show signs of being in a same gender relationship such as speaking about a partner or displaying photographs of loved ones on a desk.

**Factors that Lead to Disclosure of Sexual Orientation**

This section looks at factors that may lead an LG worker to be “out” at their workplace. At times the individual may not have control over this as something happens which indicates their sexuality to others without their consent. Sometimes there are factors which support an LG person to choose to disclose their sexuality. We feel information in this area may contribute to our understanding of what a welcoming work environment may look like and things we can build on to help eliminate heterosexism.

**Forced Out**

Around the same time that Cheryl Summerville was dismissed from her job as a cashier at The Cracker Barrel Old Country Store in the United States, Michelle Douglas, a distinguished officer of the Canadian Forces was released from the military and labeled “Not advantageously employable due to homosexuality” (Bindman, 2011, p. 1). Until 1992, in accordance with *Canadian Forces Administration Order (CFAO) 19-20, Homosexuality – Sexual Abnormality Investigation, Medical Examination and Disposal*, homosexuals were prohibited from serving in the Canadian military and, therefore, anyone who disclosed that he or she was a homosexual was released. This, however, was
not the case with Captain Michelle Douglas, as she did not disclose her sexual orientation. Rather, the Special Investigations Unit suspected she might be a lesbian and subsequently took her to a hotel where she was interrogated her about her sexuality.

Initially, Captain Douglas continued to try to pass as heterosexual during the investigation, but after hours of feeling intimidated, she finally confessed that she was a lesbian. Although the policy that prohibited homosexuals from serving in the Canadian Forces was lifted in 1992—largely due to the efforts of Michelle Douglas, who challenged the policy through a Human Rights complaint and a law suit—a decade later, in a 2002 an interview with Xtra magazine, Douglas said, “we cannot be blind to the very real situations that exist for members of the military who still feel some more subtle forms of discrimination. Policy change is no panacea” (MacKenzie, 2002, p. 1).

As a naval officer with the Canadian Armed forces for the past 23 years, I (Dale) who identify as a gay male also passed as straight within the workplace for fear of losing my job or being harassed in a predominantly male, heterosexual work environment. During my initial security clearance interview, at a time when homosexuals were prohibited from serving in the military, I was asked if I am gay and I answered “no”. Since I wanted to serve my country through military service and at 17 years old I was unsure of my sexual orientation (although I had emotional and sexual attraction toward men that I had not acted on) I decided to not tell the truth of my desire to eventually “come out” so I answered his question by saying “no”.

Since then, with every posting to a new job (every four years) or while on deployment to foreign countries, many who still prohibit gay and lesbian people from serving in their military, I have to make a conscious and hard decision – to pass (or try to)
as heterosexual or reveal my sexual orientation as gay. Not surprising to me, even military members from countries such as Norway (Palm Center, 2009) and the Netherlands (Shilts, 1993) feel compelled to pass as heterosexual during deployment as we are not working in isolation but with multiple Allies who have varying degrees of acceptance, and more often than not in areas of the Middle East or Africa where homosexuality is forbidden and it is expected that homosexuals will not reveal their sexual orientation presumably for fear of offending host nations or Allies, or creating additional conflict in already dangerous areas of the world. So although some LG service members may be out to a select few people, during multi-national operations I have yet to meet someone who is out to everyone across the board as we are often supervised by people from foreign militaries where policies, procedures and acceptance vary greatly. My personal experience is that every situation is unique and I do not feel immediately comfortable in identifying my sexuality to everyone in the workplace despite policies that are meant to protect all employees. While on paper, policies seem ideal and sufficient to prevent harassment and discrimination, in practice this is far from the lived reality of many people who serve in the Canadian Forces.

As we have presented, dominant heterosexist discourses influence if and when to disclose one’s sexual orientation and many factors contribute to whether or not it happens; however, there are times when disclosure is forced. In *Inevitable Disclosure: Countertransference Dilemmas and the Pregnant Lesbian Therapist*, Silverman (2001) describes a situation in which a lesbian therapist had made a conscious decision that she would not disclose her sexual orientation in her practice. When visibly pregnant, however, the colleagues and patients she had known for extended periods of time began
to ask questions about her pregnancy, assuming she was heterosexual based solely on the fact she was pregnant. Her patients made comments such as, “I didn’t even know you were married” to which the therapist replied, “I’m not.” Her reply led one patient to express concern over her being with a “non-committal man” (p. 54), completely discounting the many other scenarios in which a woman, straight or lesbian, might bear a child. This dilemma caused the therapist to reflect on her reasons for passing as heterosexual at work. She discovered that:

I was concerned that my patients would reject or devalue me if they knew of my sexual orientation. I recognize these were my personal feelings however I believe that the psychoanalytic community’s historically negative views on homosexuality and of disclosing it to one’s patients, contributed to my countertransferential concern. (p. 47)

Because such strong, personal and lasting relationships are formed in the therapeutic environment, the therapist questioned to what extent her passing could be considered necessary or problematic for being true to her authentic self.

**Influences on Deciding to Come Out**

For many LG workers, coming out is an ongoing process, as there is always staff turnover, new positions, new clients to meet, and other workplace changes. Klie (2009) highlights this process in her article “LGBT Employees still face Barriers” where the LG employee faces the decision to come out or pass frequently. Klie identifies factors that may affect this decision include geographic location (bigger cities with a strong LG community are easier locations in which to come out); the role models available (i.e., someone respected in the organization who is out); and the length of time employed with
the company (those with track records of good performance are more likely to come out, since they trust they will be judged on their performance).

In their study with gay and lesbian nurses, Eliason, et al. (2011) reported some positive influences within the workplace that led to nurses disclosing their sexual orientation. These included inclusive policies that made specific reference to sexual orientation, open-minded coworkers, agency commitment to diversity and geography. For example, a nurse in New York City felt more comfortable in disclosing her sexual identity than someone living in a small city. Having coworkers speak positively about the LG community also contributed to positive experiences. Nurses who were reluctant to reveal their sexual orientation reported working in hospitals affiliated with a religion, being subject to subtle and not so subtle jokes, and working in an environment of “don’t ask don’t tell” (p. 241). In these situations they felt threatened either personally or professionally and often chose to hide their sexual identity.

Not surprisingly, gays and lesbians face a wide variety of issues in a diverse set of workplaces. Some find it rewarding to disclose their sexual orientation whereas others find it necessary to pass as heterosexual. All of the authors mentioned in this section state that there is a need for further research in the area of sexual identification and the workplace, specifically within a Canadian context.

**What Does an LG Inclusive Workplace Look Like?**

We believe recognition that there is a problem in the workplace is the first step required to change it. Workplaces need to be educated about heterosexist practices that may exclude LG people and make the environment unwelcoming and/or unsafe for all
employees. Knowing what an LG inclusive workplace looks like will contribute to efforts to make changes and bring a greater understanding of what LG individuals experience at work.

A report entitled *Building LGBT-Inclusive Workplaces: Engaging Organizations and Individuals in Change* (Silva & Warren, 2009) found that a lack of awareness - one that might lead other employees to rely on stereotypes - was at the root of the barriers that LGBT employees face. Just 8% of respondents reported that their colleagues are very informed about LGBT issues, even though 41% felt very comfortable with LGBT people. This suggests that coworkers tend to be accepting of their LG colleagues but simply do not understand some of the issues they face. Education plays a crucial role in bridging this gap between the LG person and their co-worker. A rise in awareness will increase understanding, empathy, and the commitment to changing heteronormative ways. This is a call to organizations to develop training for employees in this area. As Dyson argues, “It is important for workers to understand some of the subtle and embodied damage done to members of sexual minorities throughout their lives by both inadvertent heterocentricity and overt homophobia” (Dyson, 2011, p. 151). This understanding can be gained through education and consciousness raising regarding the issues facing LG communities. Highlighting heterocentricity will help develop skilled workers who communicate respectfully and deliberately to include all members of the organization.

Recognizing a problem in the work environment is a pre-requisite for taking action to resolve it. People are starting to realise that their work and home life do not always have clear boundaries. Lowe (2006) proposes that, “a holistic approach to
designing interventions is needed; acknowledging that work and family are not separate spheres” (p.15).

An LG inclusive environment increases employee engagement by allowing employees to be authentic because they spend less time and energy self-editing, leading to greater employee loyalty and reduced turnover (Silva & Warren, 2009). Efforts aimed at creating LG inclusive workplaces such as diversity training, ally-mentoring programs, and employee networks result in LG employees having better workplace relationships, improved perceptions about workplace fairness, and increased organizational commitment and career satisfaction. This is important when employers are competing for skilled employees and wanting to retain workers.

**Workplace Diversity Training**

Although government policy and legislation is necessary in protecting the rights of Canadian employees regardless of their sexual orientation, evidence in this literature review shows that this is not sufficient and that the most positive experiences result from organizations that have local policies, procedures and educational programs that promote diversity based on sexual orientation. Large companies such as Bank of America, Toronto Dominion Bank, Harvard University, Ford, and AT&T to name a few (Diversity Guides, n.d.) have realized the importance of providing a safe, equitable and diverse workplace. They have comprehensive programs, policies and supports for all staff - gay or straight - that address LGBT issues in the workplace. Recognizing that issues of sexuality have been largely left out of contemporary employment equity policies and training, many of these and other companies have sought the services of world renowned
corporate diversity consultant Brian McNaught (who identifies as being gay) to help develop such programs. As McNaught (2010) explains, “companies want to both welcome the widest possible net of employee talent and protect themselves from any possible claims of discrimination. Diversity training arms employees - especially front line managers - with reliable information, helping companies meet both goals” (p. 3).

**Ally-Mentoring Programs**

In *Straight Allies: What Predicts Heterosexuals’ Alliance with the LGBT Community*, Fingerhut (2011) illustrates that the fight for even basic human rights has not been fought solely by minority members. In the introduction to his paper he quotes Jack Lichstenstein, a heterosexual friend of the gay and lesbian community as saying, “the protection of civil rights is not relegated to any group of folk... every group that protects and fights for our civil rights should be dear to all of our hearts” (p. 2230). This suggests to us that while we all have rights, we also have responsibilities to ourselves and to one another to protect such rights regardless of the issue, be it sexual orientation, poverty, ability, racism, etc.

Fingerhut (2011) defines allies as “the majority group members who support and advocate for minority individuals and populations” (p. 2231) and in this case, the straight ally or heterosexual individual who advocates for the rights of lesbian and gay people. His paper suggests that little is known about what types of people constitute straight allies, but he indicates that they often include parents and family members of LG people, those who empathize with LG people based on lived experiences (witnessing discrimination, for example, or their own experiences of discrimination), and people who
have had close contact with LG individuals, such as neighbors, roommates, etc. Fingerhut’s on-line study of 1000 individuals from across the United States asked questions related to ally behavior, sexual identity, empathetic concern, perspective taking, prejudice, gender, education, etc. The study concluded that “heterosexuals’ understanding of their own sexual identity—including an understanding of their own sexual values, needs, orientation, preferences, and so forth—likely contributes to a deeper understanding of LG others and to LG affirmative evaluations and behaviors” (p. 2244).

As we have learned in the course of our social work studies, an important aspect to consider when creating alliances is to find allies who look deep within themselves and know themselves. This is not only true of heterosexual-homosexual alliances. From personal experience as being White allies, we’ve found that deeper relationships are possible if we open our hearts and minds and are willing to listen to what is being asked of us from others. Perhaps more important, is to comprehend what privileges are associated with being White and disrupt these unearned privileges or at least challenge the many systems that make them possible. What is needed in an LG ally is a willingness to understand and appreciate the privileges associated with being heterosexual.

**Employee LGB Networks**

An example of how to get the message out and be proud of who you are as gay and lesbian employees comes from The Canadian Heritage Department. In 2004 they began publishing “*Out and About,*” a document that speaks to the work environments of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered employees. The initiative started in the late 1990s when a group of about 45 gay and lesbian Heritage Canada employees began
meeting on a regular basis to share ideas and stories and to raise important LGB issues within the workplace. In 2001 a small group of people decided they wanted to print their stories in a newspaper that would be distributed in the workplace. They initially met with resistance and were asked, “Why do we need to talk about our sexual orientation in the workplace?” (p. 1). The group did not give up, however, and in 2004 they published their first piece. Sylvia Giasson, one of the group’s original members, says, “the publication tackles such issues as when and whether to be out on the workplace, the stress upon the LGBT employees and how this affects the quality of their work, their relationships with fellow employees and, importantly, their own health” (p. 2). The document serves as a mechanism to educate employees on key definitions, provides sources of information, and encourages dialogue among people regardless of their sexual orientation; “[it asks] those who are out about their lives, just as they would any of their straight colleagues” (p. 2).

The response to their efforts highlights that many heterosexual people do not recognize that they talk about their sexuality all the time at work. They do not see that discussion about their partner is as much about their sexual orientation as an LG person talking about theirs.

**Mental Health and Well-being of LGB Workers**

An important reason to examine the issues faced by LG workers is that it affects their mental health and well-being and contributes to the environment being a positive or negative place to work. This has further implications to businesses financially and within
human resource management. Most of us spend many hours at our jobs and if it is a negative experience this can be dangerous to our mental health.

Johnson (2011) explains that “The power of being able to honestly be oneself at work is one most workers taken for granted but which, for LBGT workers, is a most prized commodity” (p. 3). LG people who are not out at work must constantly watch what they talk about, how they refer to their partner in conversations, which pictures are up in their office or accessible to people at work, as well as anything else that might reveal what they are trying to hide about their lives. This can take its toll, both mentally and physically, since so much time is spent in the workplace and it is difficult to avoid interacting with one’s colleagues altogether.

In contrast, an environment of trust and safety can make the worker feel more comfortable coming out and being themselves. The report entitled *Building LGBT Inclusive Workplaces: Engaging Organizations and Individuals in Change* (2011) gives two main reasons for choosing not to come out at work: a preference for keeping personal and professional identities separate, and the fear of possible repercussions. Reasons for deciding to come out include a desire to be more authentic, to form stronger relationships with coworkers, to become role models and to combat homophobia (Klie, 2009, p.8). The effect of remaining closeted at work can be stressful and harmful to employees. In *For LGBT Workers, Being Out Brings Advantages*, Hewlett and Sumberg (2011) state that:

closeted workers suffer anxiety about how colleagues and managers might judge them and expend enormous effort concealing their orientation, which leaves them less energy for actual work. Further, LGBT workers who feel forced to lie about their identity and relationships typically don’t engage in collegial banter about such things as weekend activities—banter that forges important workplace bonds. Some 42% of closeted employees said they felt isolated at work. (p. 28)
This isolation impacts the effectiveness of organizations as well because it prevents open and honest communication between staff and prevents employees from getting a clear picture of the diversity that exists within their organization. This likely leads to high staff turnover, lack of commitment to the organization and its goals, and employee dissatisfaction. Such consequences are already documented within organizations. Hewlett and Sumberg (2011) found that “A closeted worker is 73% more likely to leave their job within three years if they feel isolated at work” (p. 29). Creating an environment that is hospitable to LG employees should be a priority for companies given the ever-increasing demand and competition for skilled workers.

In research undertaken by Anne Balay (2011) with LGBT steelworkers in northwest Indiana, participants related wanting to feel supported and their desire to have friends at work. One lesbian worker, who said she will not come out at work, said, “[as soon as I] drive over those tracks, I’m in a different world. I’m not even me. I’m just doing my job, earning my paycheck, and keeping to myself” (p. 18). For more than half of her life this woman denies her true identity, since she works almost constant back-to-back 12-hour shifts! Hearing more stories like this and examining the experiences of LG people who choose to pass at work will help spread an awareness of these issues among employers and coworkers. This, in turn, will help to create more a positive environment, foster greater comfort-levels and decrease heteronormativity in the workplace.

The Nova Scotia Public Service Commission (NSPSC) hosted a celebration for Pride Week and showcased a forum put on by the Department of Health and Wellness regarding health inequities and their impact on the mental health of LGBT communities. The NSPSC (2011) reported that “The forum attracted more than 80 participants, with
over 80% reporting an increase in knowledge of health equity, after the event” (p. 6).
This indicates an effort made on the part of provincial government departments to raise awareness about LG issues and shows some success with cultural education in this format. Hopefully this can be expanded upon in the future.

The outcomes of not addressing the issues around inclusion in the workplace can be serious for LG employees who have in various studies reported feelings of depression and suicidal ideation (Dyson, 2011); anxiety, lack of energy, and stress (Hewlett & Sumberg, 2011); and harassment (Colgan, Creegan, McKearney & Wright, 2008). As Dyson (2011) argues,

Research has identified mental health as a significant health issue for lesbians. Not because of any essential psychological, physical, or genetic difference between lesbians and heterosexual women, but from the stress of living in a society that labels those who do not conform to gender or sexual norms deviant. (p. 151)

Subjectivity and Being “Othered” at Work

Dyson (2009) studied lesbian experiences within the health care system and how the non-disclosure of their sexual orientation affected the care they received as well as their own subjectivity. The invisibility of these women within the health care system contributed to their receiving poor service and having poor health outcomes. This is analogous to the invisibility of LG individuals within some workplaces. LG workers can go unrecognized since “Being out or passing are both options for sexual minorities, unless they choose to be visible” (Dyson, 2009, p. 146). As in Dyson’s study, lack of LG visibility in the workplace may lead to lost opportunities for improving conditions, poor access to career assistance and benefits, and limited possibilities for advancement.
As with all people, a positive identity, peer acceptance and friendship are associated with higher levels of self-esteem and well-being for LG individuals. Being connected to the LG community may offer validation and understanding. Such connections legitimize same sex feelings and behaviors and help the LG individual feel positive about themselves and their sexual identity (Luhtanen, 2003). Unfortunately, if the LG person is not out at work they may not have these community connections or may avoid associating with LG groups and networks that could provide support as they do not want to be identified as lesbian or gay. At the same time, being out at work could position them as members of a “deviant” group that is stigmatized and marginalized. This is the process of “othering” that happens when the LG person is viewed according to their sexual orientation and is perceived as not belonging to the dominant (heterosexual) majority.

The literature shows both positive and negative perspectives of passing at work. As Willis (2011) summarizes,

Ward and Winstanley (2003) perceive the discourse of silence in the workplace as a contradictory position that is simultaneously empowering and oppressive for LGB-identifying workers—oppressive by cloaking gay and lesbian workers from visibility whereas empowering through having to avoid assuming a fixed subject position within a heteronormative agenda. (p. 960)

This viewpoint is also supported in research by Shippee (2011) and Dyson (2009), in which participants discussed feeling positive about having control over to whom and when they disclose their sexual orientation, but also expressed negative feelings when they felt they were lying about their identity or misleading coworkers and/or family members.
Conclusion

Although the literature on LG employees passing as straight in the workplace has become more prevalent over the past decade, we have noticed that much of the literature focuses on European or American research reports or personal stories expressed in LG newspapers or LG websites; very little research is written from a Canadian perspective. This is very interesting given that Canada is perceived to be forward thinking and progressive with human rights issues as well as a country that embraces diversity. Yet there remains an alarming rate of LG people who pass as straight at their places of employment … as many as 50% of lesbian women and 28% of gay men (Silva & Warren 2009) – which made us want to dig deeper into the experiences of LG peoples to know why this continues to be the case.

Research in this literature review focused on high profile people such as former Astronaut Sally Ride and events that have become very public through law suits. However, what is missing are the narratives and stories of the day-to-day lives and work experiences of everyday LG people. We wanted to leverage what information is available based on previous research, policies, theory and workplace practices and learn from LG employees to expand information that is available to assist in disrupting heteronormative practices in the workplace.

In the following chapter, we outline our methodology and the details of our research process that we took to further investigate the experiences of LG passing in the workplace.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter outlines our approach to the research and the framework we used to explore the ways that LG employees make sense of their decisions to pass - or not- and how these choices are linked to their subjectivities. We examined through our research how the discourse around protection and anti-discrimination, and sexuality, contribute to the subjectivity of LG workers and influences their decisions around passing at work.

Theoretical Framework

Queer theory provided the overall framework for this research as we explored the heteronormative environment within workplaces and the effect on LG employees. This research used narrative methodology by means of interviews with seven LG employees who pass(ed) as straight in the workplace at all times or during some instances at their place of employment. We wanted to explore experiences and learn what can be changed to make work environments more comfortable and accepting of LG people. We also hoped to increase knowledge around the effect that passing, or coming ‘in and out of the closet’ has on the LG employee. This methodology was very much in line with our own epistemological perspective: that within research each person has the right to share their stories and experiences and have their voices heard, particularly in environments where they may be silenced or face discrimination, in this case based on their sexual orientation. We enjoyed listening to and learning from personal stories and had a desire to influence social change within this research.
Although research concerning the experiences of LG peoples in the workplace is limited, authors such as Ward (2008) have demonstrated the importance of such research as it provides an opportunity to disrupt heteronormative environments where gay and lesbian peoples do not enjoy the freedom of choice. People often remain closeted and as such assume and inherit identities that do not correspond with their actual being and lived experience, but rather with who they are perceived to be, or ought to be, in the workplace. In his research, Ward provides insight into minority sexual identity by relating and retelling stories told by literally hundreds of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual people between 2000 and 2004 (Ward, 2008).

In his research, Ward provides several definitions of a story ranging from historic Aristotelian tradition to contemporary media reports which circulate the globe within seconds with the click of a computer button. We were particularly drawn to the definition that he cites from Brown (2003:97) as “stories and narratives are processes for sense-making; stories, as they are the preferred sense-making currency in human relationships, have become an important symbolic form, through which meanings in organizations are constructed and shared” (p. 5). Accessing the stories and narratives of closeted LG people in the workplace has historically been a challenge for a multitude of reasons, including fear of reprisal. However, research by Ward and others [Alderson (2000); Nixon et al. (2004); Reingarde (2010)] suggest that it is possible to build relationships with people who have important stories to share, primarily by assuring anonymity and building a trusting and respectful alliance. Our intent with this research was to deviate from previous research where stories and narratives of many people were used in a general nature – by consolidating the spirit or synthesis of several stories, to
provide detailed narratives of fewer people where their stories are told verbatim where possible – allowing common and unique themes to arise and be represented in this research project.

A narrative analysis was chosen as an appropriate methodology to gain insight into the reasons why LG employees choose to pass or not in their work environment as “narratives present and explain individual experiences by organizing actions and events, creating a sense of fulfillment and a connection between the narrator and those listening or reading” (Follseo et al, 2010, p. 127). We looked at motivations, effects on the worker, and current and past experiences around passing. Participation in the working world often brings with it a set of rules and guidelines that are heteronormative and thus marginalizing to LG employees. This could include what television shows are talked about around the water cooler, such as *X Factor* and *American Idol* versus the *L Word* or *Queer As Folk*; or the posters placed around the office showing families without including posters of same sex families. This affects what an LG worker can say about her experiences, how they are interpreted, and who gets to speak openly about their personal life.

There is space in narrative analysis for different voices and accounts to co-exist such as those of the researchers, participants, people they interact with, etc. We were attracted to that aspect of this methodology as researchers as we feel that narratives are interpretive devices that people use to represent themselves and their worlds to themselves and others, as described by Strega (2012) in course notes. We were curious about hearing first-hand accounts of experiences and feelings. We wondered if we would see ourselves in some of what they would tell us, and how LG individuals would tell
stories about their lives in the workplace. This project included the voices of LG individuals by not just transcribing conversations, but also by having participants review the analysis for accuracy and discussion of ways this work will be disseminated and useful to them.

While the issue of passing or disclosing one’s sexual orientation can occur in any work environment, as social workers conducting this research we self-located and disclosed our sexual orientation to research participants. However, we recognized times we passed as heterosexual during the course of our research in various situations.

**Research Process**

As new researchers embarking on our first project together, we recognized our strengths in working through difference and being open to learning through hearing the stories of others. We also recognized the constraints of working with an unfamiliar process to achieve the end state of completing a project and graduating with a MSW. With this in mind, we accepted responsibility for the task before us and found comfort in knowing that we are not alone in this process as we have each other, research participants, a committee and documentation to support us throughout this process.

**Research Participants**

Seven LG individuals who were working or had worked in an environment where they had experiences of passing as a straight employee participated in this research project. The number of participants was few in order to complete an in-depth analysis of interviews and cover a breadth of issues within the topic of passing in the workplace.
The participants were between the ages of 26 and 70 years old, three who self-identified as being lesbian and four who self-identified being gay. Six participants self-identified as Caucasian and one participant identified as Mètis/Acadian French. Six participants were currently employed and one participant is retired.

For this study, only LG individuals (and not bisexual, transgendered or gender non-conforming people) were included in the research focus as the action of passing holds additional complexities for those identities that are beyond the scope of this study. We feel a separate study would be warranted on those issues.

**Participant Selection**

As the research took place in Nova Scotia, participants were sought through use of advertisements in the *Wayves* magazine (LGBTQ newspaper in Halifax), *gay Halifax* (LGBTQ resource website), Pride Health, PFLAG, DalOut, Saint Mary’s University LGBTQ society, and by word of mouth as some participants suggested others to participate. We recognized this approach may not have reached some potential participants so we also used social media to spread the word about our project and enlist people who may have wanted to speak with us about the research.

We focused participant selection on individuals who were 19 years old or older, 19 being the age of majority in Nova Scotia. The participants were either working or had worked within the social service field, including occupations such as social workers, nurses, teachers, doctors, lawyers, policy makers, advocates, etc. We decided to focus our research around the experiences of people employed in such occupations assuming that they would not only have personal and professional lived experiences of passing in
the workplace, but they may also have a common understanding of workplace policies and practices that are intended to offer protections to LG employees. These same policies and procedures often place LG employees in fracture lines between a heteronormative work environment and life within a LG community.

Advertisements (attached as Annex D) included contact information for the research team. Respondents were asked to provide information such as: type of employment (unemployed, professional, skilled labour, student, customer service, government, self-employed, etc.); age; gender; sexual orientation (LG); geographic location; race; and marital status. As it was not known how many respondents there would be, both the advertisements as well as the initial conversation with the researcher included a statement that we were seeking a variety of participant experiences and therefore they may not be selected to be interviewed if there were a large number of respondents. Selection was based on attempts to include at least one lesbian, and one gay participant; a mix of cultural backgrounds; age range; types of work, etc. In the event that there were people with the same locations and attributes, the first to contact the researchers was selected. Although the initial plan was to interview six participants, we accepted an additional participant who showed interest after the initial six were selected. In total ten potential participants expressed an interest in the research of which seven were selected to participate. Three participants were not available during the timeframe we allocated to conduct interviews. Although we were flexible with our time and approach, a suitable arrangement could not be met so they were unable to participate.
Availability of participants

The commitment required by participants included an initial one hour interview with the researchers to discuss the study, answer questions, address any concerns, and complete paperwork (including consent to record the sessions, limits to confidentiality, and a schedule of the interviews). Due to the nature of narrative interviewing we wanted this time in the beginning to build a relationship with the participants. We provided an opportunity for them to ask questions and get comfortable talking with us. This initial meeting was followed by two one hour interviews with each participant. Six participants opted to have the two one hour interviews combined into a two hour interview. One participant decided to have two separate one hour interviews.

In terms of working through the many stages of our research, we referred to the work of Heather Fraser (2004) who provided an easy to understand and comprehensive overview of working with narrative research. We followed the seven step process which she described in Doing Narrative Research: Analysing Personal Stories Line by Line, as the foundation for our project. However, we felt that this is not a lock step process and as such we referred to other examples during the course of our work. The seven stages that guided our work were: Phase 1. Hearing stories, experiencing emotions; Phase 2. Transcribing the material; Phase 3. Interpreting transcripts; Phase 4. Exploring experiences of narrators; Phase 5. Personal and political aspects of stories; Phase 6. Similarities and differences in stories; Phase 7. Writing the research report.

Below we provide a description of how each of the seven phases guided our research process.
Phase 1. Hearing stories, experiencing emotions.

During this phase we heard stories of participants, recorded and took journal notes to capture and process emotions and feelings that were described during each interview. This initial analysis provided an opportunity for the researchers to dig deeper and gain perspective of the story being told and reflect on times the person being interviewed and the researcher agreed, and disagreed, and why this may have occurred. Fraser (2004) offers the following questions as points to consider during this phase:

- How are emotions experienced during and after the interview?
- How curious do you feel when listening to the narrators?
- And, how open are you to developing further insights about yourself, including insights that are derived from raking over past experiences that are painful? (p. 187)

As both researchers have personal and professional experiences of passing as straight, this was considered to be an important phase so that we did not allow our beliefs and values to dominate the story and that we were prepared to support one another or seek assistance of our committee if needed. Although we did not have pressing concerns during the interview process, we continued to liaise with our supervisory committee for guidance and support.

The total meeting time per participant was three hours, which included one hour for the initial meeting and two hours for interviews. Participants also spent time after the interviews to review their portions of the transcripts for accuracy. During the initial conversation with the researchers, participants had the opportunity to discuss any special needs they had such as accessibility issues, child care costs, or transportation to the interviews. Although funding for such supports was available, none of the participants requested funding nor did they communicate special needs. We were flexible with time
limits as we didn’t want to end anyone’s story prematurely. We wanted to encourage talking with few restrictions or interruptions to open up space for sharing.

Conversational style individual interviews were employed which is congruent with the aim of being empowering as well as flexible (Adams & Dell, 2008). A conversational style approach was particularly useful as it allowed us to understand the meaning LG employees placed on their experiences and how they tell their story, not just what they say.

The researchers used open ended questions or statements to generate discussion focusing on experiences of being a LG worker, with little parameters around it. For example, “tell me what it’s like to be an LG employee at your workplace”. To get the conversation going if needed, the researcher asked; was there a time when you were assumed to be straight? Where were you? Who made the assumption? How did you handle it? Why do you think you chose to handle it this way? How did this make you feel? Would you do the same thing now if it happened again? It is emphasized these were only guides to the conversation and did not need to be adhered to. Most importantly, we wanted to avoid “mining” the participants for information or cross examining them, as Fraser cautions (2004, p.184). We wanted them to tell their stories in their own way without interference. Our questions were a way of setting the stage for our conversation but not getting in the way of the storytelling. Silences and pauses were respected as positive spaces of reflection, not “air to fill”. Additional sample questions can be found in Annex A.

Before the narrative interview we asked that the participant think about situations in which they may find themselves in over the next week, or situations from their pasts,
where it was assumed they were a heterosexual worker. Situations may include filling out forms, attending a meeting, conversations with co-workers, etc.

Procedure – Participants were provided with a wide range of venues for the interview and each participant decided on the location they felt most comfortable with. One interview took place at a participants’ home, three at participants’ place of employment, one at a government office conference room and two at a hotel conference room. Each venue was a welcoming space that allowed for anonymity and refreshments and juice/water was provided. Interviews took place over a 250 km radius and on each occasion the researchers travelled to participants in order not to inconvenience them or incur costs of travel. Interviews were recorded on a mini-disc recorder with the participant’s permission and transcribed by a transcription service following each interview.

Phase 2. Transcribing the material.

Given the personal nature of the stories shared by our participants, we sought their permission to have the interviews transcribed using a service (Fox Transcribe) based out of the United States (a company that has a confidentiality policy and a history of providing services for legal and medical clients that have sensitive issues). Upon completion of the transcription, copies were provided to each participant and they were asked to check for accuracy, if they wished to do so. Six participants opted to review the transcripts and provide feedback. One participant decided not to review the transcript, but advised us to proceed with the research using the information she had provided during her interviews. Recognizing some stories are painful to share, we respected her
wishes and accepted the transcribed notes verbatim. All information collected on disk, transcriptions, demographic information and researcher notes were kept in a locked cabinet at the researcher’s office.

**Phase 3. Interpreting transcripts.**

During this phase the researchers interpreted the stories told by narrators as well as journal entries in order to identify themes or contradictions within individual and then collective interviews. Recognizing there were several themes within each narrative; we provided each theme with a title and assigned a color to each separate theme for ease of tracking themes across the seven transcripts. It is important to note that it was not a determining factor for a theme to occur in each of the participant interviews, as in some cases a theme developed as a result of one particular story. For example, based on an analysis of the seven interviews, initially there were ten reoccurring stories which were titled and coded as:

- Sexuality as a component in academic and career choices (lime green),
- sexuality as limiting (blue),
- importance of role models within the organization (yellow),
- new generations mean increased safety and support for LG workers (pink),
- importance of being known for work performance before sexuality (red),
- populations and people we work with influence our passing - don't want to offend anyone - don't want to be accused of wrongdoing (grey),
- fears...benefits and negative effects of passing (burgundy),
• limits of workplace inclusion efforts - important points about programming and onus on the LG person to educate and enforce (forest green),

• passing privilege as oppressive versus positive and control factors (purple),

and

• Ways we pass (light blue).

After further analysis of each of the narratives, we decided that some themes could be consolidated as they were similar in some respects and yet unique in their own right, accordingly they were renamed as:

• Sexuality as a component in academic and career choices /context and environment (line green)

• importance of role models within the organization/other people, positive and negative experiences (yellow)

• new generations mean increased safety and support for LG workers/hope (purple)

• importance of being known for work performance before sexuality/personal versus professional (red)

• populations and people we work with influence our passing - don't want to offend anyone, don't want to be accused of wrongdoing/ Sexuality as limiting (grey)

• fears...benefits and negative effects of passing/harassment/Passing privilege as oppressive versus positive and control factor (brown)
• limits of workplace inclusion efforts, Important points about programming
    and onus on the LG person to educate and enforce/initiatives, (forest green),
    and
• ways we pass/ways of passing (light blue).

It is important to note that each story was considered for its own merit and it was not necessary for a theme to be present in other narratives. Rather, if a particular topic was of importance to one participant, it was included as a theme. While all aspects of the narratives were interesting, important, and informative, we simply could not include everything. We were asked by participants not to use deeply personal information. Other aspects of the stories were used to put situations in context, but were not considered directly applicable to the research project. For example, participants often spoke of passing as straight with family and friends in early life, or they shared their first experience of coming out, but since these were not directly related to passing in the workplace, they were not included as individual themes.

Each color coded theme was used as a basis for further analyzing each narrative. Numbers were allocated each time a theme occurred in individual narratives. This was not a quantitative measure but rather a means of quickly identifying specific parts of a narrative so that they could be used in the write up accordingly. Examples of questions that we considered when coding included: “What are common themes in each transcript? What words are chosen? How are they emphasized? And what contradictions emerge?” (Fraser, p. 187).

It was very interesting to explore how the narratives emerged and the creation of themes and at the same time how each individual story varied and sometimes
complimented or conversely contradicted the stories of other participants. The diversity was welcomed and we found it fascinating that each time that we reviewed the transcripts we picked up on something different. During the analysis phase it was important for us not to fall into the trap of generalizing, and accordingly we reviewed each transcript and each theme several times, and finally decided to consolidate eight themes into five as follows:

- Experiences of othering (green and brown combined),
- Factors which lead to passing (blue),
- Dominant discourses impacting the LG worker (Grey and yellow),
- What does an LG welcoming workplace look like (forest green, red combined), and
- Hope for the future (Pink).

During the write up phase, and based on feedback from our supervisory committee, it was decided to rename the themes with titles that better reflected the participants’ stories. Accordingly the themes that emerged in chapter four: findings are:

- Identity Management,
- Under Surveillance,
- Silencing Lesbian and Gay Sexual Orientation,
- Ways we Pass, and
- Mental Health and well-Being.
Phase 4. Exploring experiences of narrators.

As both researchers have lived professional and personal experience as passing as well as identifying as being gay or lesbian in the workplace, we were constantly challenged to ensure that our personal experiences did not dominate what we expected other research participants to say. Also, the literature review lends itself to the belief that the experiences of LG people in the workplace are predominantly negative in nature, and as such we were very interested to learn of the many positive stories that people shared. Fraser (2004) suggests that there is a tendency for researchers to fix on one dimension (for example individual thoughts, versus interaction with another person, or interaction with a large group, or entire culture) or experience over another which can be problematic as it may result in focusing too much on one area at the expense of another dimension. As we were interested in capturing as many experiences as possible, we explored intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural and structural aspects as each story of passing touched on many if not all of these dimensions. Fraser (2004) provides interesting questions to challenge us throughout this phase, including “Are social structures – institutionalized or otherwise – present? If so how do they appear and what is being said; and, which parts of stories relate to interpersonal relationships and interactions? How do they relate to other aspects of the stories” (p. 192)?

As researchers we handled this challenge in a variety of ways. By choosing to have our interviews unstructured so participants could share what was important to them we were able to see what events were significant points around passing for the individual. The question guide was created purposefully to allow for the sharing of both positive and negative experiences around passing and workplace stories. Throughout the interviews
the researchers used clarifying questions to ensure we were not making assumptions and
to gather the multiple dimensions within a story. During the analysis of the findings we
looked at themes which emerged around interpersonal interactions, organizational
structures and how the participant’s stories reflected the changes over time and in
different places. We feel this approach helped us to see the stories as multidimensional
and capture the important points within stories from a variety of perspectives.

**Phase 5. Personal and political aspects of stories.**

As we spoke with research participants and learned from their views, ideas,
beliefs and personal stories of passing, we also had the opportunity to explore the politics
of how and why people pass in the workplace. Despite the very political nature of
legislation, policies, procedures and programs (diversity for example) that apply to
workplaces and are meant to offer some sort of protection to LG staff, we do know based
on our literature review and personal experiences, that many workplaces are dominated
by heteronormative beliefs and practices.

During this phase, we paid particular attention to language and how people weave
in-and-out of passing and disclosing their sexual orientation. For example, the term
“passing” itself was relatively new to both researchers, so we had to wonder what it
meant to participants? Some identified with the word and others used phrases such as “in
the closet” or “coming out”. While the LG community may have shared language, it was
important not to assume that we understand certain words and phrases or the context in
which they are used. As we had seven participants, it was important to have their stories
and the themes that emerged from each story represented. We focussed on the very
personal and very political aspects of passing (or not) and we respected differences and ensured they are represented in this research report. Fraser (2004) offers questions for researchers to think about when analyzing stories, such as: “what might other social theorists say about the interpretations you have made, and Have you clearly distinguished participants’ accounts from your own? Or are their accounts becoming too subsumed by your analysis?” (p. 193). It was very interesting to have our ideas on passing challenged and also to learn of the many perspectives based on lived experience and varying places of employment. Some of the narratives were complimentary to one another and others were completely different, yet each very important.

**Phase 6. Similarities and differences in stories.**

After the stories were transcribed, color coded, and numerically coded, the analyses began. We looked for similarities and differences amongst the participant stories to help with a more detailed analysis. For example, under a general category of “importance of role models within the organization/other people, positive and negative experiences” we had several sub-categories such as: “passing to supervisors” versus “passing to colleagues”; or “supervisors setting the example to embrace diversity” versus “supervisors sending the message to the straight party line or leave”. As we had participants with a vast array or personal attributes based on age, gender, class, culture and sexual orientation, it was wonderful to experience the commonalities and differences within each story. For example, the experiences of a 60 year old lesbian woman who has worked for four different employers in different domains (such as front line, management, government, and private sector) may have both similarities and differences
when compared to a 23 year old male who has been with one employer (such as social services policy analyst). All of the various components that make up each situation and experience were important factors in the analysis. Fraser (2004) provides examples questions for us to consider during this phase, including: “how are the experiences mediated by the material conditions in which narrators are living” and “are stories that challenge the views on which the research is predicated given sufficient analytical attention, if not, how is this rationalized” (p.195)?

**Phase 7. Writing the research report.**

One of our initial reasons for choosing a narrative analysis methodology to explore the topic of passing in the workplace was to provide an opportunity for us to learn from other marginalized people and at the same time provide space for these important stories to be told. As we worked through the research process, we recognized the tremendous possibility of stories being misinterpreted or important details missed. We didn’t want the personal and professional bias of the researchers to dominate the final report. We wanted multiple truths of the participants to be represented in the report, even if individual stories contradicted researcher views and the views of other participants. To help with this real possibility, research participants were engaged throughout the entire process. They had the opportunity to edit, provide additional details, or amend portions of the text meant to represent their lived experiences and stories. To assist with the writing of the report, Fraser (2004) provides the following questions to consider: “Do your analyses maintain a respectful tone towards participants. If not, how do you justify
“this?” and “are your analyses relevant to your research questions? If not, should the discussion or research questions be altered to reflect the new foci?” (p. 196)

The use of a narrative analysis as a methodology presented the wonderful opportunity for us to learn from the rich stories and experiences of seven participants. At the same time the methodology presented challenges in terms of maintaining the scope of the research topic. At the beginning of each interview, we discussed the research question with participants and provided them with a set of guiding questions which could be answered, or not, based on the comfort level of each participant. Interestingly enough, at the beginning of the interviews each participant reviewed the questions then set the question sheet aside and began telling their story. Inevitably each participant started their story with a situation they experienced concerning their sexual orientation as a youth or young adult, primarily providing examples of positive and negative experiences during interactions with family members, friends or during school or university. For us this was an excellent way to start the conversation which quickly evolved into a chronology of events. Participants told us of many occasions where they passed as straight or disclosed their sexual orientation as lesbian or gay within their workplaces, both past and present.

Once the stories were transcribed, and the content verified by each participant, we were careful not to include any information that participants did not want us to include. During the write up phase of the research, we were respectful of how each participant was depicted. We ensured that pseudonyms were used to replace actual names and that work places were described in a generally to ensure that participants could not be identified. We continued to liaise with participants to clarify statements made during the interviews to ensure that we did not misinterpret information, and finally, we provided a
copy of the write up to each participant to ensure they agreed with what was being said about them. Participants expressed gratitude for being able to participate in the research and confirmed that they were comfortable with what was written about the stories they shared with us.

A great deal of information was shared with us, and we are appreciative of the trust and confidence that participants had in us as they shared very interesting and often deeply personal stories. With this in mind, we are comfortable that we captured the information we were looking for – the experiences of lesbian and gay people who pass as straight in the workplace. Thus, our research question or aim did not have to be amended. What we did notice, however, was that we captured a great deal of information about lesbian and gay peoples everyday life experiences – from interpersonal relationships, to the coming out process to being in the closet for example. Unfortunately we were not able to use all of this information within our research project, yet it was beneficial to place things in context to better understand our participants. All information collected on disk, transcriptions, demographic information and researcher notes were kept in a locked cabinet at the researcher’s office.

**Ethical considerations**

This section explains the ethical considerations we have identified concerning research in this area. It also details how we addressed them and worked through issues.

Doing research with individuals within the LG community is loaded with ethical and political considerations. As we worked with human subjects we made an application to the Ethics Review Board which was approved prior to commencing the research, in
keeping with University of Victoria policy. It was important for us that this research is useful and serves a purpose for progressive, anti-oppressive politics. We asked ourselves if this research is needed in the LG community, and wanted it to be reconstructive as well as deconstructive. It was important for us to not just highlight the experiences of LG individuals in the workplace and their challenges, but also explore what can be done to make the workplace welcoming for all people. From our standpoint it is ethically and morally wrong to have a workplace where some people are welcomed and others are not. Our research aims to explore and perhaps impact this reality.

We believe an important part of being ethical is coming to know ourselves as subjects and being self-reflective. We assessed the extent to which we’ve been reflexive, including our own complicity in systems of domination and subordination, highlighting our participation in the research process and our assumptions. We examined what our own effect has been on this research, making sure there is more to the research than our own perspective. Our positionality was acknowledged as it affected how we speak within, and approach this topic as members of the LG community and individuals who have passed as heterosexual in the workplace. We believe our work is not just about LG workers but for LG workers.

Looking at discourse and language within narratives, as we did, is important because both “can be used to make unbalanced power relations and portrayals of social groups appear to be common sense, normal, and natural when in fact the reality is prejudice, injustice, and inequities” (McGregor, 2003, p.2). We hope this research contributes to ethical practices by highlighting the impact a heteronormative workplace can have on encouraging LG employees to pass and how this impacts the individual, the
LG community, and creates workplaces that are not inclusive and welcoming to all people. We hope this research disrupts the images some people have of what a welcoming work environment looks like and highlights heteronormative practices that welcome some employees while excluding others. In this way, we hope that we have conveyed the ethical and moral necessity of making workplaces welcoming for all employees, not just heterosexual workers.

To further consider ethics in our research we used a strategy suggested by Strega in course postings (SW 516, March 2012) by encouraging research participants not to trust our positions as researchers. We told them to be cautious, suspicious, and critically aware. We feel that this helped us produce a more beneficial body of research particularly when we analyzed the narratives. To do a truly ethical job we avoided reducing the participants to discursive subjects but let their voices and experiences stand as truth and knowledge. When participants were engaging in what we have produced from their interviews we wanted them to feel we had captured their experiences and that it was being conveyed authentically to those who will read it.

Esterberg (2002) discusses the ways in which information can be gathered during interviews to construct meaning from another person’s point of view. The data can be richly descriptive and very personal which we value as researchers. To make the participant more comfortable sharing with us, we discussed confidentiality and how we would be handling the information we collected during our interviews. We invited the participants to create a pseudonym which was used when identifying them in the write up as they did not wish to be identified by their real name. It was also important to not identify the specific company or workplace within which the participants worked. We
therefore identified the type of work done, or the participants field of employment, (i.e. Jane is employed in the healthcare field, as a public relations specialist, etc.). We asked their permission and had them sign an acknowledgement stating that we would audio tape the interviews and then transcribe them. We sent the tapes for transcription and invited the participants to review our write up to check for accuracy and authenticity of how we’ve understood and captured their story. All documentation and recordings were stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s office and will be destroyed 6 months after the completion of the final research report.

Researcher reflexivity

I, Dale, am a 40-year-old gay male who has a history of trying (successfully and unsuccessfully) to pass as a straight male. At 17 years old, I joined the military during a time when it was prohibited for people who identified as homosexual from serving in the military. During the first few years of employment, although I suspected I was gay as I had a physical attraction to men, I had not acted on those feelings. For formal purposes such as recruiting interviews, security clearance and relationship status, I identified as a single heterosexual male. As I matured and started to date men, I consciously decided to keep this part of my life a secret from my family, colleagues and most friends – knowing that they could or would be subject to questions about my life during frequent security clearance checks which were necessary for my employment.

After the policy which prohibited homosexuals from serving in the military was lifted, I did not immediately feel safe enough to reveal my sexual orientation to my employer, although I did come out to my family and friends. Eventually, and cautiously,
I decided to disclose my sexual orientation as a gay male to some colleagues, but certainly not all. This decision was based on trust, the perception they would respect me and not pose a threat to my employment. For the past 23 years this trend has continued – disclosing my sexual orientation to some, but not all in the workplace. This has had both advantages and disadvantages. Some of the advantages of disclosing my sexual orientation have been that I could be my true self even in my workplace and receive the same benefits that heterosexual partners receive. Additionally, my partner could be included in social events and reference could be made about him at work. Some of the disadvantages of disclosing my sexual orientation are that I have been subject to inappropriate “jokes” and passed over for deployments to certain countries where homosexuality is illegal.

I, Deana, am a 40 year old lesbian mother of three children. I was married to my children’s father until 2006. I have only been out, and have been with my current partner since that time. When my ex-husband found out I was with a woman he reacted with a lot of anger. He told everyone connected with me including my parents, children, co-workers, friends, church community, and acquaintances before I had a chance to. He did this either in person or through telephone calls and emails. So, coming out at my workplace was not really a process for me in the beginning. I had been with the department for four years so most people knew me and my co-workers were very supportive. I consider myself very lucky to be working with people who are accepting of me and my partner and I have never felt isolated from them or excluded from activities. I am faced with coming out to new staff, clients or colleagues from different agencies and this is something I consider on a case by case basis after getting to know them.
I think because of the way things happened for me with my ex-partner disclosing that I was a lesbian, I was more focused on the effects on my children and family so I did not worry about the effects at work as much. Being in a unionized environment, I did not worry that I would lose my position. I felt a sense of security. This was probably naïve as I know legal protections do not necessarily mean my workplace would be accepting of me; however, I was so worried about my family situation that it left little time to worry about work.

Being a lesbian at my workplace has meant I have formed friendships and connections with people I may not have otherwise. There are four other people from the LGB community who work with me and we have done things socially outside of work like suppers, going to dances, and meeting to attend the Pride parade together. It has made me more aware of the need to have a welcoming workplace everywhere, as we spend so much time working as adults. I have become more conscious of the fact that there are no pictures in my office of same sex couples, or families with same sex parents. There is nothing to indicate it is a safe space for LG workers or clients. I wonder if I was just starting to work there if I would feel comfortable to come out.

**Researchers working together – working through challenges**

As new researchers, we have embarked on this journey as equals and over the past year have developed a close working relationship and friendship which is based on trust, respect and frank and frequent communication. For the purposes of this research project, we divided the workload in an equitable manner so that both of us gained experience throughout all areas of the research – writing the proposal, the interview process, writing the results and defending our research. Collaborative writing has worked well during the
writing of the proposal and research report and while we have worked through confusing concepts, we have not experienced power imbalances, conflict or the necessity to work through conflict. Although we did not anticipate this to be a problem, we recognized that it is very important to identify ways to not only prevent power imbalances which can lead to conflict, but ways to address conflict and work through difference should the need arise.

We had agreed to meet on a regular basis (three to four times a week) to identify and set milestones and expectations of ourselves and each other, and support one another as we progressed through the research process. As we are both new to this aspect of social work, we agreed to work in collaboration and our work was reviewed by one another prior to being sent for evaluation or comment by our supervisor or committee, and the same holds true with information sent to or that needs to be discussed with participants. In the event that we were not able to agree on content of our work, we would have reached out to our supervisor and or committee for assistance in working through the issue. We are pleased to have maintained an excellent working relationship and happy that we learned with and from one another. With this said, it was understood that we had the right to go directly to our supervisor with any legal issues, ethical concerns or personal matters that could not be resolved together.

While we have described the ideal situation of always getting along and agreeing, we recognized that this was a stressful process and that we had commitments aside from university that sometimes conflicted and took precedence. This temporarily had an impact on our work together. To help prevent these stresses from becoming problematic, we were drawn to Flanagan and Runde’s (2009) *How teams can capitalize on conflict,*
where they describe conditions and individual exercises that can aid in preventing conflict and if necessary, restore working relationships after conflict. The conditions for a healthy and productive working environment include trust, collaboration, managing emotions and providing constructive rather than destructive feedback when working as a team. We had fully engaged and respected these principles and relied on them as guiding principles throughout our research.

Flanagan and Runde also recommend individual exercises such as improving self-awareness; delaying responding; increasing reflective thinking; and increasing perspective taking as a means to contributing to a positive work environment, where difference is embraced and all perspectives and ideas are considered as important and relevant. We embarked on this process as individuals, through the use of a research journal as suggested by our supervisor, Susan Strega. While the journals were predominantly used for making notes on ideas, discussions or on articles, we expanded this to include a section on self-awareness. For example, what “pushes our buttons” (p.22) or what brings us tranquility within this research and working together? Although there were always timelines to follow, we recognized that they were not so rigid that if we were working through complex issues – it was ok to defer a discussion or decision until another day which allowed for time to reflect on the situation and come back to it, perhaps with a new perspective, or at least with a controlled approach.

Finally, we recognized and respected that there are many ways of knowing, interpreting and understanding events and situations. We are only experts of our own lives – not of each other or the other research participants. Therefore we listened, respected and were open to learning from and with one another in order for this project to
be meaningful and successful in contributing to social justice for LG peoples in the workplace.
Chapter Four: The Findings

We are grateful to each of the seven research participants who provided a wide variety of stories concerning the ways and reasons for passing as straight in the workplace. Each participant acknowledged that this research marked the first opportunity they had to express these experiences and like us, most had not considered to what extent they passed as straight until they began thinking about the topic and telling their stories. From these rich, detailed, emotional and inspiring stories, five main themes emerged as follows: Identity Management; Under Surveillance; Silencing Lesbian and Gay Sexual Orientation; Ways we Pass; and, Mental Health and Well-Being.

Participant profiles

The seven individuals we interviewed shared a wealth of experience in the helping professions. Their ages ranged from their 20’s to 60’s and they were employed in a variety of places such in Northern Canada, Ontario, British Columbia, and the United States prior to coming to work in Nova Scotia. In order to give a better understanding of our participants, we have provided short biographies of the participants in this section.

Brenda is currently working in law enforcement but started her career as a teacher in Northern Canada. She enjoys her work and sees opportunity for advancement in her career. After considering this research she reflected on the ways in which she passes as straight and is also out at her workplace. Different situations require her to assess whether to disclose her sexual orientation as a lesbian, or pass as straight. She feels that as time has passed she is less likely to pass but sees many situations where this
is still necessary for her. She also highlighted the different experiences of lesbians versus gay men that happen within law enforcement which was interesting.

Adam has held a variety of positions over his career and began in an organization which was very involved in the lesbian/gay community. He offered a unique perspective on passing at work because he started in an agency where he was very open about his sexuality and this was an integral part of the service. Then he moved to a job where he passed with both clients and coworkers and expressed to us that he did not really consider himself to be passing now because he is out to his coworkers. However, when he started to think about things he realized he continues to pass in various situations in his current workplace.

When Jane responded to our ad for research participants, she questioned whether or not she was a candidate because she was out to the people she worked with. She told us that the more she thought about it, and was conscious of it; she realized how often she still passes at work either intentionally or unintentionally. Working within the health field presents particular challenges that she shared with us. She has seen differences in her passing experiences with each new job, relationships with coworkers, and as time progresses and she gains more life experience. She was amazed at how complex the experience of passing is when she stopped to consider it.

Christopher has had a wide variety of experience in the social service sector, working as a teacher, as a therapist in a hospital and as a counselor for a not-for-profit organization. Early in his career he also worked for a power utility company. He has worked in the United States as well as in three Canadian provinces and it was very interesting to hear his stories and how he navigated coming out as a gay man, or passing
as straight, in various situations based on the geographic location within which he was working, “politics” (union versus non-union), and what he describes as “being comfortable with myself and others”. Although not mandated as a condition of his current employment as a counselor, he provides important perspectives on lesbian and gay relationship issues which resulted in policy reform and enhanced/new programs. Prior to his starting at the agency, programs were only available to people who identify as straight, and his work has ensured that people from every sexual orientation can receive service and support.

Michael has had two places of employment where he has experienced passing as straight as well as disclosing his sexual orientation as a gay man to people he trusts. In his current position, Michael is very aware of all rights that are afforded to employees, including lesbian and gay employees; however he points out that while policies exist they cannot change attitudes and beliefs of people in the workplace. As a matter of principle he generally does not discuss his sexual orientation at work, or he tries to avoid doing so, as he has had embarrassing situations in the past where people “crossed the line” in terms of asking inappropriate questions about gay sex. Michael said that if asked he would disclose his sexual orientation but does not feel it is an important issue to be discussed at work, even if in general discussion.

Brandon has experience in working for the private sector and government as an accountant. He told us stories where he was harassed at work and, due to his sexual orientation, was fired. Now, with a change in employers, he feels safe and secure and is very active promoting lesbian and gay initiatives in his workplace and for the government. Interestingly, he also said that he passes as straight more than he thought
and the research process has allowed him to challenge the occasions when he passes without even recognizing he is doing so.

Anne has a wide variety of experience both in the private not-for-profit sector as well as working for the government in the social service sector. She is now retired and would like to work part-time or casual; however, she is not able to do so because she cannot find work. She attributes this to her disclosing her sexual orientation at work, for which she received negative feedback from management, although her experiences with colleagues have been very positive. Anne said that she has not really thought about many of the issues that are relevant to this research in a long time, and that this brought back a lot of unpleasant memories. Still she feels optimistic that situations are improving for lesbian and gay employees.

Identity Management

This section describes the various factors our research participants highlighted as reasons they sometimes were forced or chose to pass at work and the affect that has had on them. Feeling like the “other” means they are excluded or their perspectives are ignored or not valued. The process often happens when coworkers are not aware of heteronormative social rules that may require the LG worker to pass as straight. The following two sections outline experiences where our research participants felt they should pass in order to be included and fit in with their work environment.

In the first section, participants said they would choose to pass so that other people were more comfortable, or to make things less awkward for them, their colleagues and clients. They were also concerned that their sexual orientation may negatively impact
the company due to homophobic clients so they would pass to protect the organization.

The second section focuses on the importance of being social at work and wanting to be part of the socializing that happens amongst workers. These sections not only indicate the ways in which LG employees are impacted by othering and have to manage their identities, but also provide some insight into motivations for passing behaviour.

**For the benefit of others**

Interviewing our participants, we found that passing as straight was often done by our in order to make the situation more comfortable for someone else. Some examples included passing so that their family members did not find out they were gay or lesbian and made to feel uncomfortable, or passing because they thought that clients of the organization were homophobic and they did not want to jeopardize funding and support. Jane spoke of passing as straight at her previous employment because she did not feel it was right to discuss her sexual orientation with certain groups of people. In her example, senior citizens and donors, so instead she bore the brunt of uncomfortable situations. She said:

For example, at my previous job, this is a perfect example, I worked for an organization that required lots of public support and funding and I often had to entertain our donors and things after events. It became very uncomfortable quickly because even though everyone in the office knew I was gay, I wasn’t comfortable being completely out of the closet with these senior citizens or senior professional members of the community and when the topic turned to children and wives and families and husbands and kids, I was often…well, first of all, I was just annoyed. Because I’m like, “What in the hell does this have to do with my job? I don’t care to talk about this. I don’t have anything in common with you.” The other part was I just didn’t feel like disclosing. I didn’t want to be judged by people I hardly knew and had no impact on and I just didn’t want to deal with any of that potential stigma or any of the potential acceptance. (Jane)
Other participants had similar examples, where they would pass as straight in order to make things more comfortable for clients, patients or colleagues. Michael expressed concern about how his co-worker would perceive his passing. “She’d never not like me, nothing like that. She’d be hurt that I haven’t told her. She would take it personally”. He discussed that he was passing for the sake of not outing his partner and being respectful of him.

My relationship that I had, he wasn’t out. I had to protect him. I didn’t volunteer a lot of information at first. I did have that aspect as part of it. It was to protect him. I didn’t care, but in respect to my partner I would not bring that up in case there was an association. Because we had common friends…Having ties and having things that could get back…it wasn’t because I was hiding myself. It was, I’m protecting my partner who’s not out and I have to respect that because it’s his story to come out. It’s his choice to come out. I wouldn’t force him out. (Michael)

James had an experience where he was really excited about a project at work and wanted to take on the challenge; however, this meant that he would have to report to a client who is publicly known to be homophobic – yet he accepted the project in order to minimize the potential loss of a client.

**Prepare to (Dis)engage…the social side of work**

The social side of work is very important to workplace engagement. Workers spend a good part of their lives at work and if they are not happy it makes for a difficult time. Getting to know coworkers is part of what develops a teamwork approach and knowing about their lives outside of work is naturally a part of this. Being open at work does not mean you share intimate details of your life it just means you can speak freely about what you want to share about yourself. This conscious decision making day-in-
day-out can be taxing and have a negative impact on relationships at work, as well as one’s ability to completely be oneself at work.

Michael talked about the need to be guarded about certain conversations he had at work and who was nearby because he was not out to everyone. He explained:

…anybody could come in and you can’t control that because you’re in an environment where you’re not private really. Again, you lose control and you start talking about things that you might … there might be people that you just … that you’re not ready to say things to.

Several participants echoed the experience of distancing themselves from coworkers. However, some were able to eventually break down the barriers and disclose their sexual orientation, allowing them to have a more relaxed, supportive and yet professional work environment.

Jane talked to us about how she tried to keep her distance from coworkers when she started a new position, but they would not let her. They were genuinely interested in getting to know her more and including her in their conversations and social get-togethers. She is glad they were so persistent because it made her feel welcomed and she developed friendships she would have missed.

Continuing to pass can be challenging. Our research showed that factors such as the size of the workplace and the community influence the level of difficulty. Lesbian and gay people can be less anonymous in a small city or town and are more likely to see colleagues outside of work. All of our participants spoke about how much better they feel when they can talk openly about their partners and life outside of work. This does not mean they tell people everything, it just gives them a level of comfort when they do not have to be guarded about what they say and if they use the right pronoun when talking about something. Participants explained appreciating having their partners
welcomed to attend work functions. They mentioned becoming friends with many other couples as a result that they may not have had the chance to meet. Brandon said that while this was not always the case, for example at the accounting firm, he now enjoys a more open and accepting environment where he can be himself and include his friends or partner in social activities.

**Under Surveillance**

The following parts of this chapter focus on the different factors which contribute to the LG workers’ decision to pass as straight at work. When we began to think about doing our research in this area we did not realize to what extent we passed at work and even in our social lives. It had become natural for us to start out trying to pass as heterosexual and then look for cues to see if we could be our authentic selves in new situations. It was not until we became conscious about it that we realized how often these new situations come along at work. With each new person or when switching jobs we (researchers and participants alike) had a tendency to go in and out of the closet at work. There are also dealings with clients, colleagues from other offices, casual workers, and meetings with people outside of our organizations that are not new, but that require we pass even if we are out to coworkers.

Looking at passing practices for LG individuals in the workplace was interesting for us because it involved examining the creation of the subject – the LG worker. Initially, way we all tended to approach our work environments passing as heterosexual individuals. Similarly, we all decided what and when to share about our real selves. This was really about how discourses in those environments made it possible, or not, to be an
LG person at work. The five themes which emerged around this topic included: working for LG agencies; internal and external pressures to pass; mirroring and modeling attitudes and behaviours by management; organizational culture which put pressures on the LG worker, and avoiding stigma.

**LG Agency Work**

Adam spoke about starting his career in a non-profit organization which served a predominantly LG population. Adam shared with us how much his work at that time shaped his identity and way of living. He explained that working at this particular organization was, in retrospect, a very different experience than working elsewhere, as it was expected you were “out at work. His colleagues were from the LG community, as were his clients. For the majority of his time Adam was not passing. He said:

The gay revolution was happening in the ’60s through ’70s; it wasn't happening where I was living and it wasn't happening for kids my age. I think that had a real influence in terms of what kind of jobs I expected I'd get and what kind of jobs I went after. I don't think it was as bad as I just thought I could only be a hairdresser, but I knew that I had to find work that would be supportive of who I was. Growing up in that environment I didn't ever want to live closeted or not be able to articulate my sexuality.

When I came out when I was 18, I was out. Everybody knew. All the work, all the employment opportunities kind of flowed from that and academic choices. After kind of bumping around I think I did three or four degrees but did not complete any of them.

Those were friendly environments in which to be open with my sexuality. Graduating with … or going to school for social work, really I thought I'd work as a social worker, I'd help other people who were gay and lesbian and were struggling, so I really wanted to make that a core component of my working environment. (Adam)

It is interesting how Adam was influenced to work at a gay-friendly agency as it matched his lifestyle and identity. However, he explained that it “got to be too much” for him. He said he became tired of always being in the position of fighting for rights,
fighting against discrimination, fighting to be recognized. Even though he was offered a similar position later which would have been a very good fit for him, he chose to not take it, recognizing his need to expand beyond an identity based only on his sexual orientation. He is happy he made the decision and related wanting to be recognized first as a valued and respected employee who is also gay. “My whole identity, all my friends were gay, my work environment was gay, very sex positive, very sex assertive, really interesting work, but that became really limiting as well. I was so out, but I actually wanted to step back from that work” (Adam).

The pressure to pass

When looking at what contributes to an LG person’s decision to pass or not at work, context was an important factor. Every situation differed, and if a variable changed, it impacted everything. For example, some of our participants spoke about being out with all of their coworkers but passing when at an off-site training where they didn’t know other people well enough.

Even to this day I still don’t tell people. When we go on a conference, I don’t feel the need to stand up and say, “I’m a lesbian.” If there’s 30 people on the course, by the end of the week, if I interact with them and engage with them and go out for supper and want to tell them then I’ll tell them. If I’m interested in carrying on a conversation with them then I wouldn’t purposely hide it. But to get up, I just have no need or desire to get up and say, “I’m a lesbian.” That, to this day, still happens. (Brenda)

The type of program they were in may encourage passing as well. For Jane the competitive nature of her program encouraged passing because:

you didn’t identify differences with people. There was more social pressure to pass there and I often did just by evading all of my personal life… I’d have social invitations for things that I would just avoid because I didn’t know how to fake it, or I was just tired of doing it, or I was worried I would slip up. (Jane)
Within law enforcement, the experiences can be very different for a gay man versus a lesbian woman. One example comes from our interview with Brenda who said that within her organization lesbians are treated better than gay men. She said camaraderie exists between her and the straight men she works with that does not exist between them and gay men. She said they still use derogatory remarks such as “fag” in conversation and she can see that it would not be a welcoming environment for a gay man. This difference in experiences was not discussed in other interviews but we suggest it shows the type of profession can have an impact on the experiences of lesbian versus gay workers.

Another experience which highlights the importance of context was related by Adam. He was required within his position to collaborate with a key stakeholder in his community who was openly homophobic. This man had made remarks in the local newspaper and was publicly against LG events such as Pride Week. It presented a great challenge for Adam because the work was very important to him and would have a great impact in the community. In this case, Adam made the decision to pass because he did not want his sexual orientation to jeopardize the work getting done and become an issue between them.

Union protections also made a difference in choosing to be out at work. Although there are laws which protect everybody against discrimination and harassment, people we interviewed who were unionized workers indicated it made a difference because they would have somebody to fight for them. As Adam stated, “I know if anything happened, they’d have my back”.
When Anne worked for a period of time for a non-profit organization which was run by a volunteer board of directors, she faced discrimination and bullying as some members were homophobic. This caused her tremendous stress and she eventually left the organization. She suggests that boards should have a policy where they interview potential members about their views on diversity before letting them join, as their worldviews impact the functioning of the organization. When she began working in a unionized position again she felt relief. Anne explained:

I know my rights. I was able to know that they couldn’t do anything especially because I got back into the union. That’s good protection because if you’re not in the union they can get rid of you on any excuse. (Anne)

Another unfortunate consequence of this is that it means management, who do not have union protection, may feel they cannot be out at work. Several participants related the importance of having role models in management who are out.

**Mirroring and Modeling**

Some participants indicated that there are different expectations surrounding workplaces depending upon the profession you are in. For example, government offices, helping professions like social work, and places where employees are highly educated, are generally thought to be welcoming of diversity and would likely be supportive of workers being out at work. During interviews respondents said they would be “shocked” if coworkers were not supportive of LG workers because they were helping professionals. For example, Christopher said:

It was a fairly accepting environment because I was working with very fairly well-educated people - special educators, people with Master’s degrees, psychologists, social workers, speech pathologists. Along with education sometimes comes a bit more acceptance…I do remember being kind of paranoid
and actually, with the supervising teacher, I remember being a little bit paranoid that he would think I was gay. But I was also in a big American city and I had memories of the whole Anita Bryant thing… I do remember being a little more hypersensitive so I was wearing a suit every day and very conservative colors. So I remember at that point making sure they didn’t find out by the clothes I wore … whether it was that overt or not but I just remember thinking it will be better if they don’t know that I’m gay type of thing and especially with the students there was this need to keep that separate. (Christopher)

When Brandon worked at a major accounting firm his experiences were much different than working within the same profession but in a government position. When asked about what he thought contributed to the differences in his treatment and comfort level at work, he proposed it had more to do with the management in his first position and that it was a very small office which was located in a rural community. Middle management were not monitored by the head office for compliance with policies and workplace initiatives. This was an important fact for us as it showed organizations can have policy, offer training, and create initiatives; however, if they do not monitor how it is operating at the front line, they will not be effective.

Workers look to managers for direction and guidance. If managers are not welcoming of LG individuals or understanding of issues faced by LG employees, then their staff probably won’t be either. Managers “set the tone” within offices and are important guides, setting limits about what is and is not acceptable. Anne notes:

My supervisor was very intelligent and she was very open and not prejudiced about anything. She came to work one day and her daughter was going on her first date, and her other daughter said, "Oh, are you going with a girl or a boy?" She and her husband had gay friends and they were all social workers. That was so funny that this 11-year-old said, "Are you going with a girl or a boy?" It didn't matter. (Anne)

We feel this makes it important to ensure managers/supervisors are well informed about diversity initiatives and trained on how to handle situations where workers behave
inappropriately, making homophobic remarks or insensitive comments. Something that emerged from our research was that the LG person does not want to always be the one who manages education and complies with policies. They do not want a “big deal” to be made when people are being introduced to the concept of heteronormativity. There requires a period of time for education and awareness around appropriate and considerate behaviour. LG workers are often looking to be understood and increase awareness of heterocentricity. They want to know that there are clear procedures in place for dealing with harassment and discrimination at work. Furthermore, there should be training for managers to handle situations in which insensitive comments are made to prevent further harassment.

**Organizational culture**

We found the work environment to be a factor contributing to our participant’s decision to pass or not. Included in their comments were references to the overall atmosphere of the workplaces as well as the culture that is expressed in the policies and practices of the organization.

As Brandon stated about his position with a large firm, “The workplace was very hetero, very masculine. If you didn’t play golf with the partners your career was going nowhere. The “old boys club” still exists and does not include gay men – not ones who are out anyway!” (Brandon).

In Brenda’s workplace, she feels people censor what they say depending upon who is in the room. However, they have not stopped using inappropriate references about sexual orientation all together.
I think people are less apt to do it when they know their audience. If they know there’s a lesbian or a gay male there, they would be less apt to do it; but when they don’t know, if someone doesn’t, in their eyes look gay, then there is no filter, there is no filter whatsoever. That’s even from presenters on courses, on conferences. You’ll have them saying stuff that is totally inappropriate still. (Brenda)

When Brandon was working at an accounting firm which was very conservative he wore a pink tie one day. He told us one of the partners commented about the tie and then asked “where’s your hand lotion?” while laughing. Brandon said “I was taken aback by the comment and started to notice more clues that some people did not like the fact that I was gay”.

Anne related to us about the negative work atmosphere created by the board of directors at a non-profit organization she was working for. She explained:

The board tolerated us but they were extremely open about what they had to say about us. We put the pride sticker on the door. They ripped it off. We put it up again. This one woman was telling us that she was okay with lesbians but she said, “We really can’t allow that sticker to be on the door.” I said, “Why not? That just means it’s gay friendly and if some woman out there is gay and wants to come and talk to someone, she knows this is a safe place”…The director said, “we really can’t do this. I don’t want to make a big deal about this. If you would go around and find me four other non-profits that have the gay sticker on the door then we’ll let you keep it. (Anne)

Clearly, improvements need to be made in respectful workplace training and the appropriateness of language used between co-workers. It also shows the level of resistance some people experience when it comes to changes at work.

**Avoiding Stigma**

Our findings indicate that Stigma affects an LG person’s decision to pass at work. We spoke with Anne who worked within the same department for a number years but moved to different locations. She had a very negative experience where a manager
bullied her after finding out she was a lesbian. Her advancement in the organization was halted and her manager would talk negatively about her to other workers, even in different offices. Anne noted:

In the early ‘90s I was a social worker but somehow got pushed into management. The sky was the limit. They were offering jobs all the time. I went very quickly, within five years, into management. The sky was the limit. Everything was offered. The minute that I, they noticed that I was with a woman...everything just hit the fan. Absolutely that moment as soon as everybody found out, that was the end of my career. (Anne)

Anne also related an experience where she was working with youth and when the group of young people decided to do artwork related to LGBT pride, the director would not let them put the art work on display. The youth were not all LGBT but wanted to show their support for the community and celebrate pride week. Anne explained:

Some of the kids did art, rainbow things. Oh I know. That was when the Gay Pride Parade ... There was a problem with it. The person running that said, "No. We don't align with any group." They had to take their pictures down, their rainbows and things. That was kids. It was that stupid argument that you're making them seem different, instead of acknowledging them. (Anne)

This sent a message not only to the young people who were residents there, but also to any staff who were LG that LGBT issues were not to be discussed there.

When Anne moved to a different office years later things improved and she related this to having a supervisor who was very open to diversity and created a welcoming environment. Both Anne and Christopher discussed the differences in workplaces over time. As Anne stated “working in the 80’s was much different. You didn’t see yourself at work even if there were other gay people. Nobody talked about it”. Christopher said that while he was not always able to disclose his sexual orientation, he is able to do so now and attributes this to his work environment,
Right now I’m in a very accepting environment here with a bunch of mental health workers. If counselors can’t be non-judgmental and open then we’re really in serious trouble. The fact that the Executive Director is a social worker and is coming from a social justice perspective, it’s like if we can’t be open and accepting of diversity and variance then we really better go back to the drawing board. (Christopher)

The type of job also played a factor in terms of the stigma attached to being lesbian or gay in that role. For example, when Brenda was a teacher, she would never have even thought to be out at work because she would not just have the other teachers judging her, but also the students and their parents. It would have left her open to a lot of criticism. This affects workers who deal with vulnerable populations like children. If the job is in a small community this also encourages passing in your life outside of work because of fear someone will find out. Brenda explained:

…especially teaching up North. I think even if I was still a teacher and I was teaching here, I would have a lot of fear about that for sure I think with the students, and staff, and then the parents. I think just people being naïve and perhaps never having a friend that was ever gay or lesbian and then especially dealing with children and assuming that you're a child molester or that you're queer or you're … (Brenda)

Having LG workers who are very flamboyant also affected some research participants’ decisions to pass. If other LG workers were perceived negatively because they were out it influenced the person’s decision to pass because they did not want to be seen as being “like them” and therefore stigmatized. This sort of surveillance is effective at controlling the LG subject as they have certain parameters about what is acceptable.

A good example is an employee who says “I have no problem with what they do in their private lives but I shouldn’t have to hear about it in the lunchroom”. This was the experience of Christopher who said:

there were some more rampant or strident religious types working on that unit. There was more sort of a sense of, “I know you’re gay, it’s kind of okay, but don’t
throw it in my face.” This was maybe an experience where I began to realize, around this particular employee, I need to be different. (Christopher)

Messages like this serve to limit what the LG worker will share and encourages them to pass in order to be accepted.

**Silencing LG Sexual Orientation**

Our research participants identified different ways they were impacted by the discourses present at work. They fell into two main categories outlined below. The first involved not wanting to be seen as a troublemaker. Participants explained receiving messages from co-workers, and practices within organizations which let workers know it is not good to be someone who “rocks the boat”. People who tended to be vocal about their rights and quick to point out wrongdoing are often given negative messages about this and seen by co-workers and management as trying to cause trouble.

The second theme that emerged was that minorities should try to fit in with the dominant majority in order to be accepted. Our participants often took it for granted that things operate on the basis of heteronormativity. Examples or how participants found themselves adapting to heteronormativity are provided in the following sections: Not Rocking the Boat and Maneuvering in a Strait Work Environment.

**Not Rocking the Boat**

Avoiding drama was one of the reasons participants gave to why they would pass in many situations. They did not want to be that person in the workplace who created turmoil or caused conflict. They described experiences where coworkers rolled their eyes at them behind their back or talked about them because they were thought to be “pot
stirrers”. Nobody wants to be the topic of workplace gossip and some participants felt that if they were out at work, it would be the next big topic of conversation in the lunchroom. As Anne said “sometimes it’s not that you’re hiding it, but you just don’t want people talking about you. You don’t want to be the subject of gossip”. This speaks to why LG research participants wanted things dealt with informally regarding some comments made at work. Participants wanted to avoid the drama that accompanies formal complaints.

Some people interviewed had experiences where there were LG people who were out at the workplace that people did not like and who were considered “flamboyant”. This encouraged those workers to pass as they did not want to be seen as “being like them”. For example, Christopher made reference to people that may be considered flamboyant, when he explained: “the subtle messages we get about this person acting or behaving too differently because they’re across the line a little bit. Yes, in the psych unit there was one guy who was very flamboyant, whatever that means, stereotypically gay… and it was noted that this was not a great quality, certainly one to be avoided”.

**Maneuvering in a Straight Work Environment**

LG workers are not seeking tolerance; they want to feel accepted, valued, and welcomed as members of the workplace. An LG employee has the same needs as other employee, to feel they are contributing and that their contributions are valued by the organization. Often times LG employees pass at work because they feel they want to be known and judged based on their quality of work and performance and they think that they need to hide their sexual orientation in order to have this.
…if you don’t know the people then you lose control because you don’t know what those people will do or react or who would they tell or what kind of things or misconceptions or lies, things like that, because I find that a person’s sexuality is an intimate detail that you have to expose if you’re out as a gay person. It’s just assumed if you’re straight. (Michael)

As mentioned above, LG employees spend a great deal of time looking for cues that they are in a safe space and being guarded about their personal life until they can determine whether or not they can be open with other staff. This usually translates into at least a period of time that they pass. Having other employees out at work is generally helpful but Brenda notes:

I think I’d be happy that I would have someone to confide in but yet I would want to play the middle field in that until I get in there and knew everyone because I don’t really know how these straight people feel about them. I want to play both sides of it. I want to be accepted here but I also want to be accepted over there. I think if I had a straight manager, if they came in and they automatically didn’t say the word “husband” or assume stuff or if they used the word “partner” then that would put me more at ease, and coworkers for that as well. I’d definitely feel more comfortable if I knew that someone on staff was gay but I would still make my own assessments. (Brenda)

Michael said that “having other lesbian and gay people in the building that were out and comfortable made it easier. It kind of let me know that everybody is okay with it in my workplace. There was nobody that had any issue- that I’m aware of anyway”. This gave him the cue that the workplace was welcoming.

If attitudes and atmospheres in workplaces were welcoming and respectful of diversity this would mean less time that the LG person felt pressure to pass and would increase their engagement and connection to the organization. In turn, this would make the location more welcoming to diverse clients and future staff as well.
Ways We Pass

A common theme that emerged throughout each interview was a general unawareness of the magnitude to which participants passed and the ways of passing in everyday life, specifically in the workplace. Some participants mentioned they originally did not consider they passed and wondered if they even qualified to participate in our research. For example when enquiring about the research, Christopher said,

I work in the counseling field, but am out in my current workplace. As well, in my past social services work, I have been out. So I am not sure if you are looking for people who remain closeted to pass, or just evince few cues that would cause colleagues to question one’s affectional/sexual orientation. (Christopher)

Throughout the interview he discussed many ways in which he passes at the workplace without really noticing he was doing so. Towards the end of his interview he said “...it’s been interesting since our first email I’ve come up with several examples where I’m still processing how I pass, or feel the need to change how I react to certain situations”.

Both Jane and Adam also commented on the overall impact the research process has had on their lives in such a short time ... the awareness that sexual orientation in the workplace has a much greater impact that they had previously thought. At the end of Adam’s interview, he provided feedback on the process, and stated that he felt narrative analysis as a methodology allowed him to tell his story as he wanted. He explained feeling at liberty to say what he wanted, and not constrained to certain questions or ideas that need to be discovered. He also felt that:

it would be interesting to revisit the research in a few months just to see. I don’t know, it’s not part of your project, but it would be interesting if this conversation
does have an impact. Because in some ways it won’t at all, I’ll still know when and when not to pass. I’m going to be a lot more conscious about this for a while, because you bury it. I was really conscious when I first started here because it’s a health authority, it’s a union position, like professional. (Adam)

As each interview progressed, participants were amazed at the frequency with which they passed and the high number of times they are put in positions where they must decide whether to pass or not. We, as researchers also became more aware of our own situations of passing and how they impacted us. Reviewing of our journal entries and reflecting on our conversations together, we discovered that although we are both “out” at work, we are not “out” across the board and like many of the research participants, we weave in-and-out of being out and passing as straight for a multitude of reasons.

Interestingly enough, as I (Dale) was applying for funding to go to Nova Scotia to meet with research participants, I purposefully left the title of the research off the application for fear that I would be “outed” to a bureaucrat in Ottawa that I had never met, or even worse, that he would not receive funding due to the nature of the research. Over the course of the year’s research, our personal definitions of passing changed as did the way we viewed our interactions with people (straight, gay, lesbian) within a heteronormative world. All of our participant interviews contained discussions about the ways in which they attempted to pass as straight at work. Four common strategies included: using personal pronouns when discussing personal life; dressing in certain ways; and the topics they choose to talk about or avoid; and the management of physical workspace.
Playing the Pronoun Game

Many participants provided examples of when, on several occasions, they used a general pronoun such as “they” instead of “he” or “she” to avoid disclosing their partner’s gender. This was often done as a way of passing as it avoided clarification of their sexual orientation.

I would be very careful if I was talking about activities for example, maybe I went to the movies with my partner but instead of saying my partner or something I would say, oh yes, I went to the movies last night or I’d say “we” or “they” or I would use very unisex words. I would never start by saying my partner because even then that may distinguish that it’s a same sex relationship. (Brandon)

Alternatively, Jane used pronouns as a way to indicate she was in a same sex relationship to people in conversation, particularly when they made the assumption she was heterosexual by what they were saying. She would clarify by using the pronoun “she”. Jane described:

I explained that I was moving to town because my partner lived there and worked there. I always use the term partner but I will clarify it’s a female if I have to… I often say “she” because they say “he” and I have to reiterate “she” (Jane).

Christopher made a great point during his interview about being careful how pronouns are used so as to not make assumptions as a counselor towards clients or colleagues. He explained:

I’m very aware when I’m counseling about wanting to use gender neutral language. So we’re already kind of playing with the pronouns and stuff. For instance if I’m talking with a client, I don’t presume that they haven’t had a same sex relationship, it could be that they’re currently in a heterosexual relationship. It doesn’t mean that they haven’t had same-sex experiences. I don’t presume anything about how they would describe their affectional orientation or sexual orientation because we just don’t know, just because the guy is dating a woman now doesn’t mean that he hasn’t dated a guy or had a same sex relationship in the past. (Christopher)
By using gender specific pronouns during interviews or even in day-to-day conversation, we run the risk of putting the person in the position of having to clarify or correct you. Pronouns can be very limiting as it does not allow the space for there to be something different aside from “him” and “her”. This was particularly important in the context of relationship counseling, where he would avoid making the assumption that just because someone discloses that they are currently in a straight relationship, this may not have been the case in the past, nor may it be true in the future. General pronouns allow for increased openness about different lifestyles.

**Straight Style**

One of the most common strategies of passing that was discussed was the choice of what clothes to wear. This included colors of clothing, style of clothing, accessories (including rings) and even hair styles. For both women and men interviewed, the choice of clothing was an important consideration if the intent was to pass or not to pass. Some examples come from Christopher who wondered if his patterned socks and pointy shoes looked gay and if so, what would be the overall impact this would have on the relationship between him and his clients:

I bought these shoes [pointing to the current shoes he is wearing] and I bought another pair of shoes which are the really long ones, more modern looking… I remember I wore those shoes and I was sitting here thinking, “I wonder what my clients are thinking about my shoes,” so there’s an example of how what we wear can make us wonder if we are outing ourselves, or if we are being overly flamboyant…(Christopher)

Most often Christopher would decide not to wear colorful socks or pointy shoes as he felt it would be distracting for him to constantly wonder what the client thought. He felt that this distraction could be detrimental to the counseling session, so he avoided
this type of situation. Ironically, in the past while working in a physical labour type of employment. Christopher:

made a conscious effort to make sure I was towing the party line (meaning conforming to the social norms of the work environment), that’s how I say it, making sure there is nothing out of place in terms of eating the right type of sandwich, that my lunch box is the right colour. (Christopher)

Clearly, conforming to norms was very important to Christopher, particularly in a manual labour environment. Other participants spoke of similar themes. Brandon was teased at work for by a senior partner for wearing a pink tie and Jane discussed the stereotypes of lesbians wearing only comfortable shoes and plaid, while Brenda indicated concern over the length of her hair as a very short cut looked “butchy”.

Wearing a wedding type ring was important for two participants and presented different issues around passing. Anne said that a ring on her left hand made others assume they were in a straight relationship and therefore avoided some discussions about boyfriends/girlfriends, being single, etc. Some people asked if she was married, to which she replied yes. Immediately following her response they would ask questions about her husband when in fact she was married a woman. Not wanting to disclose her sexual orientation at the time, she would just make something up.

Adam said that for him, wearing a ring was also a symbol of commitment which was important to him as he wanted people to know he was in a serious relationship. Wearing a ring resulted in a lengthy conversation between Adam and his partner, as they had very different views on the ring as a symbol:

It is weird how a little thing can mean so much and how, not only to yourself, but to the culture and how you put yourself out there. We just exchanged rings a couple of years ago. My partner didn't want the ring at all. He was dead set against it. I'm like, "No, I need a ring. I need one, I want one." I think part of it was because I want to fit in at work. I want to be one of the people with the rings.
It's one of those normative things in the culture. It's really very leveling to do it. When I wear this, I do feel a little bit like I'm actively passing because a lot of conversations don't come up now or a lot of awkwardness doesn't come up.

(Adam)

Having a ring also encouraged discussions in some situations as people were curious about wedding plans, dates, etc. This was an invitation to pass as in some cases the speaker assumed it was a heterosexual relationship. Sometimes the lesbian or gay person clarified but often they just let the person believe what they assumed. Things which influenced whether or not the person passed included location of the conversation, relationship with the speaker, and length of time to converse.

Conversely, people wondered if presenting as straight limited their opportunities to meet other lesbian and gay people as they were passing most of the time. Both Christopher and Jane stated that since they spend a considerable amount of time at work, and it is well known that many relationships develop at work, or at least through contacts at work, that passing as straight could be detrimental to possibilities to meet lesbian or gay friends or partners. Christopher said:

That’s why I think coming out is really a process because it’s always the next step and that’s why I was initially confused. I’m like, “No I’m out” but then I realized there are some things where you’re making a decision based on a perception that doing something different could be a bad or a good thing. In my case it could be good to wear a pink triangle to some events because you’re making yourself known. Because I think my gaydar has been disconnected, it’s just like ridiculous.

The other thing that’s interesting about passing is I want to make sure that should there be somebody that’s gay in the environment that I’m sending out subtle enough or overt enough cues because it’s really hard to meet people here. So it is this thing about, Okay, so I’m going to an event maybe there are eligible men there. How do I best play my cards that somebody might know that I’m gay.

(Christopher)
Conversation Filters

Straight people do not have to filter their conversations in the same way as lesbian and gay people – they are free to speak about their partners, children, trips and plans for the future. Discussions that occur in the margins – for example at the water cooler, are an important part of workplace culture. It’s where we get to learn more about our coworkers and get a glimpse into their personal lives. This creates a feeling of friendship and camaraderie between coworkers. Although not essential, having these opportunities make employees feel more connected, supported and happy.

In one example the LG employee was out at work but his coworkers were apparently not comfortable with this, so they would ask other people what they did on the weekend but not him. At a previous job at an investment firm, Brandon was hoping he would be included in conversations about their social time because he was happy and excited to share the weekend activities he had with his partner. Yet he said nobody at work would ask him despite them asking others. This indicated to him that they were either uncomfortable hearing about what he did with his partner and wanted to avoid the situation, or they were trying to respect his privacy and they didn’t know how to broach the topic.

It is important to recognize that it is not always the gay or lesbian person that initiates conversation about sexual orientation. Quite often colleagues will ask either out of sincere interest or as a means of satisfying passive curiosities. Michael felt strongly that he did not disclose his sexual orientation at work because he had a previous experience where he was asked by a colleague to discuss sexual behaviours and activities
of gay men. Clearly personal boundaries were not respected. This was inappropriate and uncomfortable so he tended to avoid discussions at work about his personal life:

Sometimes at work, but you don’t want it to be at work. I don’t want it to be at work, so I don’t want it to come up or steer the conversation to make it about me and about my sexuality and put me on the spot and ask me drilling questions. You know what I mean? It’s not that I’m ashamed or trying to avoid it. It’s that I don’t want that. I think anytime that it happens, it’s always innocent. I don’t think that it’s ever been like malicious or like … It’s just like curiosity has taken over. It’s highly sexual. Everything is … I don’t know. It’s highly sexualized. People’s thoughts, because I know what I was thinking when I wasn’t out, it’s like, “Oh, you sleep with men,” or, “You sleep with women.” You know what I mean? (Michael)

For some participants, being able to be open in conversations about themselves at work made for a welcoming and friendly work environment. In situations where participants indicated they spoke with coworkers about their personal lives freely, they said it made them feel good and supported. They indicated an increase in camaraderie and a positive atmosphere in the workplace. This of course was never truly an open and free conversation, it was guarded in terms of who was present, who could overhear the conversation and how much the lesbian or gay employee trusted those present during the conversation. Christopher stated that he enjoys conversing with colleagues about day-to-day life including his sexual orientation, and about past relationships or dates that he has been on. He explained several situations where the content of the discussion and the language used would change depending on who was present. With gay or lesbian colleagues he could be more free and “camp” whereas with straight colleagues he could still speak about his sexual orientation, but ensured the conversation was office appropriate and professional. Christopher explained:

I would say it’s like on the level of … so one of the nurses there was gay and one of my colleagues, another psychiatric technician, psychiatric technicians they called us, we were gay. So when the three of us got together or when a group of
us got together - of the more liberal thinking people - then there was probably a little bit more camp, a little more of that stuff that we do as gay people. We do have certain ways of referring to things and we were working in a very intense environment on the psychiatric unit so that was a pressure relief. Using some of that pronoun shifting and certain verbalizations that we use. That was fine in that environment but around some of the other people it was like you didn’t do that so there was a shift, it was like we can’t be so camp now. Not that we are purposely throwing it in people’s faces, but when you get a group of gay people together maybe more often than not there’s certain mannerisms, there’s certain verbalizations that come out.

With my straight colleagues now, if I had been on a date, I think I would certainly feel comfortable discussing that. It hasn’t happened, it’s eventually going to happen one of these days, probably when I move to Toronto. Anyway, I would feel totally comfortable because they would notice it. They’d be like, “Oh, you’re kind of giggly today,” and it’s like, “Yeah, I went on a date for the first time in like eight years and he wasn’t an asshole,” so I would feel totally comfortable sharing that. (Laughing). (Christopher)

**Visual Cues**

In our research we found that visual cues about employees’ private lives are everywhere in the work place. If we think about what is on the desk of many employees - there are family photos of trips, kids, weddings, and other special social events. People also get flowers delivered to work and have partners drop them off at the office or stop in for something. For some of our participants this was an area in which they chose to pass because having things out of their desk meant they were not in control of all the people who may see it and therefore know their sexual orientation. Brandon shared a situation where there was a distinct difference amongst the ways gay and straight people represent loved ones in the workplace:

The biggest cue for me which I noticed is that the accounting firm, for example, you walk in and there’s a picture. There are family pictures, there are kids, the wife ... the pictures are everywhere. Interestingly enough, this only applies to straight people while anyone who I know that is gay doesn’t have pictures ... I’ve
been to Nancy’s office a hundred times; and I’ve never seen a picture of her partner. (Brandon)

When asked if he would put a picture of his partner on his desk, Brandon said “If I was with someone long enough, I don’t know. I still like to keep things a little private”. This is at his current work environment where he is out to supervisors and colleagues.

Jane and Brandon both commented on being dropped off at work, or having their same sex partners visit them or call them at work. Each situation presented itself in different ways and the questions in the back of their minds were: do I embrace my partner with a hug or kiss in front of my work place today? who is nearby and who may witness this? This lived reality presents a choice each and every time, to embrace and potentially show people that may not be close colleagues that you are gay or lesbian, or to avoid the possible negative outcomes by just getting out of the car without a sign of affection. This decision process each and every day is testament that being “out” and passing are very much intertwined.

Not only do private offices and work spaces send messages of what’s acceptable and what isn’t, but common areas such as lunch rooms, reception areas and hallways typically have posters, magazines, brochures and memorabilia which speaks to the beliefs, values and mission of the organization. In the offices that we visited during our research, the offices had pictures up of heterosexual couples only, and no information was visible concerning same sex relationships, although some posters did depict other minority groups, such as black people or people with physical disabilities, who were shown in wheel chairs. All of these visual cues, present or absent, can influence employee and the client’s decisions to pass. When physical workplaces have cues such as rainbow stickers or flags, it indicates the possibility of openness and makes the LG
worker feel less like they need to pass. It also indicates to the public that this space is a positive space and likely respectful of diversity.

**Mental health and well-being**

Making workplaces welcoming and safe is important for the mental health and safety of all employees. When a person feels isolated, bullied and unwanted at work, this can contribute to feelings of depression and loneliness. Many of our research participants spoke of how emotionally draining it is to live two separate lives and be vigilant at all times to maintain a false story, use gender non-specific references to partners, or not engage with people at work for fear they will discover you are lesbian or gay.

Brandon spoke with us about how great it felt to be out at his current workplace after going through a bad experience in a previous job. He said it feels good to get to know coworkers better and to share parts of his family life with them. He knows his partner is welcome at work functions and people are genuinely interested in hearing about things they do. He relates that this feeling of openness, comfort and being welcomed at work has led to better physical and mental health and has motivated him to remain with his employer long term. Brenda spoke about feelings of guilt at not being truthful and authentic both to their coworkers and her partner and some participants were motivated to come out at work because they could not handle the pressure and guilt associated with the dual identities. And the stress involved can repeat itself as situations or work environments change:

It’s just awkward I think at work. I always have anxiety. Now I’m starting a new job in April so then it’s all over again. Right now, everyone at work knows and most of them have met my partner but … yes, it’s just, it will be all over again, wondering, okay, what will they think, and it’s just stress, a lot of stress. (Brenda)
People spoke about how they can feel free to be out when not at work but very closeted during the day. They surround themselves outside of work with very open and supportive people but do not get to choose who to work with. On the topic of management Anne said: “… they would have preferred that I keep my mouth shut. Don’t come as a lesbian … just don’t put the sticker up. If you pass, basically, if you pass you’ll get along fine? It will be completely neutral”. Participants spoke about constantly being “on guard”, scanning for cues, watching their speech, etc. This takes a large amount of energy and mental alertness added to an LG person’s work responsibilities. Jane jokingly said “Imagine what we could do if we didn’t have to use all of that energy on that! We’d be amazing!” Although she was joking, Jane makes a valid point that heterosexuals do not have to use energy on this sort of surveillance, and it is unfortunate that LG workers must.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusions

In our final chapter we discuss the experiences of our participants in relation to the literature review noting common experiences as well as new information that emerged based on participants sharing their stories. The themes that we discuss are: identity management; the LG worker being under surveillance; silencing the LG sexual orientation; ways we pass; mental health; and well-being, and hope for future progress. In addition we acknowledge the importance of including a social justice section as is one of the primary reasons that we chose this area of study.

Identity Management

Sameness is the idea that we seek out characteristics, qualities, beliefs and values in other people that we exhibit in ourselves or that we experience in everyday life. In terms of advancement in one’s occupation, management in organizations tends to promote individuals who possess qualities and values that are similar to their own. As discussed by Barbosa and Cabral-Cardoso (2007) in their research on organizational culture “Selection decisions tend to favour familiar applicants in order to avoid the uncertainty associated with “unknown” or “different” candidates, thus leading to “homosocial reproduction” (p. 156). This means there is an advantage to being like your supervisor and would encourage a worker to pass if their manager was straight, if they were hoping to advance in the organization.

In our research project, we found several examples where sameness was beneficial in terms of developing relationships. However, five of the participants stated that sameness was not an overall factor in terms of opportunities to advance within their
current places of employment. In fact, Christopher stated that the perspectives he brings to his organization as a gay male are welcomed and appreciated, and his employer is grateful for the positive changes he implemented to program delivery. Unfortunately, the idea of sameness was problematic for two participants, Brandon and Anne, who both lost their jobs based on identifying as gay and lesbian employees.

Bergstrom and Knights (2006) examined the impact of organizational discourse on subjectivity. They paid particular attention to subjectification during the recruitment process and found that having a “cultural match” was significant. They note that “Cultural match signifies a merger between organizational discourses and individual subjectivities” (p. 357). So during the recruitment process a great deal of time was spent conveying what the culture of the company was and then asking questions to see if the individual fit within that culture. One recruitment manager in the study stated:

the most important thing is …we have such a strong culture in this company that there must be a match – a cultural match- in order to be able to work here. It’s as simple as that. Otherwise you are pushed out” (p.357).

Having a cultural match is an important factor for workers when choosing a place of employment as well. For example prior to accepting her current position, Jane researched her organization and was excited to find they had comprehensive diversity policies and programs, which included a video on LGBTI network. This made her feel encouraged, hopeful and that she would be welcomed and supported within the organization.

The messages here are important and really sum up what an LG person does every day. Participants look for cues within organizations and people that tell them whether it is safe for them to be their authentic selves. This is why it is important that organizations
make it clear that their culture is one of respect for diversity including sexual orientation, and welcoming of LG workers.

**Under Surveillance**

In a survey conducted by Silva and Warren (2009), respondents reported incidents of homophobia, inappropriate behaviors, and exclusion from important connections inside and outside the workplace. The situations discussed in our findings, are not isolated. For example, Dyson’s (2009) study of the experiences of lesbians in the workplace showed that “thoughtless words and immature teasing were most powerful in regulating their behaviors and suppressing their subjectivities (p.147).

By placing the LG worker in the position of doing the surveillance it allows some employees to suggest they are being too sensitive, overreacting or they are just being emotional. They are unfairly accused of taking things too seriously. It is important that supervisors and managers receive training on how to deal with issues of workplace harassment and homophobia so that issues are dealt with in a timely manner and appropriately. For example, it would be inappropriate to say “come on now, don’t say things like that! (insert name of LG person) is right here”! Such comments should not be tolerated and should be addressed regardless of who was present. In our research we learned that this is not always the case, which proved to be damaging as it placed the onus on the LG employee to either deal with the situation or leave the work environment.

In our research we heard many positive stories from LG employees of situations where they felt comfortable, safe, respected and supported in the workplace. We noted in our findings their hope for the future and included recommendations for the improvement
of workplace conditions. However, this was not the reality for all of our participants. For example, both Anne and Brandon were fired or pushed out of their work environments based on their sexual orientation. There exist many documented cases outside of our study also that show gay and lesbian employees being fired, harassed, or made to leave their work. For example, Captain Michelle Douglas was fired for being a lesbian woman in the Canadian Forces in the early 1990’s (MacKenzie, 2002). Twenty years later, in 2012, Warrant Officer Andrew McLean was harassed and received death threats based on his sexual orientation. The problem was individualized and the victim blamed. Rather than the system rising to the occasion to address the issue, McLean retired and he continues to advocate for lesbian and gay issues (CBC, 30 January 2013).

In 1979, the Canadian Human Rights Commission first recommended that sexual orientation be prohibited as grounds for discrimination under the *Canadian Human Rights Act*. Despite the subsequent introduction of protection against discrimination and harassment under the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and under provincial legislations, many homosexual people still perceive coming out as a threat to their careers. This perception is supported by reports by Buddel (2011), Dyson (2209) and Schwartz (2012) which state that discrimination persists in many workplaces and can negatively affect advancement and workplace opportunities. It is critical that we communicate “the impact of the fact that nearly 10% of the workforce (by many estimates) is not ‘bringing their whole selves to work’ on a daily basis” (Brown, 2010, p. 29). This suggests that formal legislation and policy can only go so far to make the workplace a comfortable and safe environment for LG people. Employers have a huge role in ensuring the health, safety, well-being of lesbian and gay employees.
Many workplaces have expanded the scope of their diversity policies to include sexuality and gender identity issues. However, a study by Out Now (2011) on LGBT diversity and inclusion, found that a gap still exists between policy and practice. Johnson (2011) reflects that:

One of the starkest findings of the LGBT 2010 research is the extent to which, in each of the countries tested, there exists a ‘gap’ between the introduction of increasingly sophisticated policies of diversity and inclusion and the actual day-to-day workplace experiences of LGBT people. (p. 2)

This represents a significant finding for our research. It speaks to the lived experiences of LG workers within organizations that, while they may be following policy and legislation, have not necessarily created a workplace atmosphere that is welcoming and accepting enough of LG employees. All participants stated that at various times they passed as straight within their organizations because they were not comfortable to be out.

**Onus should not be on the LG individual to ensure compliance and educate**

Overwhelmingly participants said the onus should not be on the LG worker to monitor compliance with diversity programs or to provide surveillance of coworkers regarding homophobic comments. Language is important in the workplace, and words should be chosen carefully and mindfully. If someone is making inappropriate remarks or being insensitive that should be an issue addressed by anyone hearing it but especially supervisors or management. Brenda brought the issue of language sensitivity in the workplace forward when she explained the following scenario:

Last week, I was sitting in our office with this guy who claims that he didn’t know that I was gay until the last month, within the last month or something. Another male came in, and this guy, they were joking around. Then he’s like, “Oh, come on, you faggot.” This is in our office. I’m sitting there and two of the other people in the room definitely know that I’m gay. The other guy, we just had
a conversation the day before because he asked what my partner did and how long we were together the day before this. Then he said it and so I didn’t say anything. Then it was really bothering me. I thought, “You are such an idiot. We’ve just had this conversation yesterday.” I sat down and I typed him an email and then I closed it out because I don’t like confrontation. (Brenda)

Brenda eventually did confront her co-worker on what he said because it was not being addressed by the supervisor. She said she did it because it was really upsetting her but also because she felt if he was not called on his behavior he could get in to trouble in the future.

Because I don’t like confrontation, I can’t stand it. Yet, I was just brewing inside of me. Then he comes back after lunch and it’s just him and I in the office. I just said to him, “You know what, you said something earlier that really bothered me.” Then he turned bright red and he said, “You know what, I knew it as soon as I hear it.” I’m like, “No, listen, just hear me out. I’ve been in seven and a half years now and I’ve heard a lot of stuff and I’m probably the most easy-going and I can joke about anything, but I really thought “faggot” was inappropriate in a workplace and just overall inappropriate.” He said, “No, no, I thought about it after I said it and, you know, I didn’t realize you were here. “And I said to him, “You know what, my hope is that, whether I was here or not, that you wouldn’t say that. Don’t not say it just because I’m sitting here. (Brenda)

There was a senior person in the office who should have dealt with it according to Brenda.

On top of the fact that I was in the room and to me that’s on the (supervisor), I think that puts more of an onus on him to say something and he didn’t and still hasn’t. No one has. The other two people that were in the room other than the guy that I approached, they don’t know that I ever said anything. (Brenda)

While all too often it is expected that the lesbian or gay employee will be able to deal with the tasteless jokes or name calling, this is easier said than done. In Brenda’s situation, this caused her grief, embarrassment and a sense of fear and it was a strong message to encourage passing. She was forced out of her comfort zone to have to deal with the inappropriate remark herself.
All of our research participants had experiences at work where they heard inappropriate remarks about someone’s sexual orientation, were teased, were put in positions where they had to address the inappropriate comments, or even worse, left jobs due to homophobic senior leadership. Jane provided one example where she had to address workers who were using the phrase “that’s so gay” in her office, and while it was not directed towards her, she felt it was her responsibility to stick up for other colleagues, especially in times where bullying and harassment are common in many work environments.

Brandon was bullied out of his job before his probation period was up after being subjected to teasing and homophobic remarks from company executives. Although his case was difficult to prove, he sought the services and supports of a lawyer and the provincial Human Rights Commission, where he was able to provide evidence of individual and systemic harassment based on sexual orientation. Despite senior partners and human resources being aware of the situations he was experiencing, they did nothing to address the issue, forcing him to take matters in his own hands. This situation not only cost him his job, but was a significant source of stress emotionally and financially.

This speaks well to the next point that any programs or education that are organized should be aimed at everyone, focus on multiple workplace diversity issues and be about making workplaces welcoming of all people and not just focused on LG employees.
Silencing LG Sexual Orientation

Our literature review suggested that lesbian and gay employees are very limited in what types of things they can discuss, what is acceptable and what isn’t ... in other words what is professional and what is private information. Walters (2012) suggests that anything but silence is considered flaunting their sexuality, and if they discuss their “private lives” or relationships, this could be construed as causing trouble or stirring the pot. The tone of conversations and what was possible to be discussed was a common occurrence with the research participants. Each stated that they would judge their audience before disclosing their sexual orientation or look for cues that it was safe and acceptable to disclose their sexual orientation. Although there was evidence of heteronormativity within each participant’s place of employment, each of them expressed a sense of comfort and belonging after building trust with their colleagues.

There were dual impacts on the workplace when LG employees felt comfortable being out at work. Firstly, the LG employee could be more relaxed at work and be open with day-to-day conversations which inevitably increased productivity and a sense of belonging. Secondly, colleagues were impacted as they learned that they were perpetuating heterosexist beliefs and values and most often they were challenged to disrupt these practices. This occurred through the creation of an environment where LG employees could be themselves, but equally important, it effected change to program delivery and diversity programs.
**Ways We Pass**

It was very interesting that participants did not fully realize the extent to which they pass as straight at the workplace and in everyday life. Participants commented on the overall impact this had on their lives such as missing out on social relationships at work, stress of being outed before they are ready and the energy of being in-and-out throughout the day was stressful. Although ways of passing, including the physical appearance of LG employees, the topics of conversation, use of personal pronouns and physical workspaces were not primary topics within our literature review, they were certainly topics which prominent within our interviews. These techniques of passing were common regardless of age, identifying as lesbian or gay and across a wide variety of work environments.

**Mental Health and Well-being**

Harmful effects of toxic work environments towards gay and lesbian employees are well documented, (Johnson, 2011; Hewlett et al 2011; Balay, 2011) and we were certainly provided with numerous examples of similar environments throughout the conduct of this research.

Hewlett and Sumberg (2011) state that “closeted workers suffer anxiety about how colleagues and managers might judge them and expend enormous efforts concealing their orientation, which leaves them less energy for actual work” (p. 28). This was true, particularly in new situations, for example when changing jobs or new employees world arrive, or when clients were of concern - however participants said that their ability to build trust inevitably improved their situation and the undue stress subsided. This really
spoke to the issue that coming out is a constant process where each interaction with a new person or situation presents a decision, or requirement, to pass as straight or disclose ones sexual orientation.

**Welcoming Workplaces**

As we predicted, participants shared many important points about ways workplaces could become more welcoming towards LG individuals. Welcoming environments encourage workers to remain with the company long term and contributes to an overall feeling of positivity towards the organization. By showing ways they are respecting diversity and welcoming a diverse population into the workplace, the public and other companies are able to see this as a valuable and important part of working there.

Jane shared her experience of watching a video which presented the LGBTI network that was part of the organization she was applying to work for. This had a positive impact on her, as she described feeling welcomed, safe and respected. Jane explained:

Even in the health environment, seeing that video and seeing a CEO of a health organization and a bunch of employees, who I would say probably some of them pass, some of them don’t. I reflected…I start to reflect with these people. I felt safer in my workplace, which was not even connected to this video. I felt…even though I’ve been welcomed and embraced it was nice to know that we had gay VPs so I was very comfortable and very open right up to the CEO with my sexuality and my lifestyle. It was especially important because I was in a bad relationship that I needed…I need a little bit of support at work, but seeing that video made a big difference and now I work for the organization that made that video and I don’t think twice. Certainly the video would have probably made me feel totally comfortable to say, “I’m moving back here to be with my partner,” in an interview. (Jane)
Brandon provided a similar example to Jane. He explained being involved in a mentorship program that was introduced to new employees during orientation. The program was more than a paper based set of expectations and rules that people were expected to follow. It was a series of face-to-face meetings, where new employees would “buddy up” with senior or more experienced employees, and workplace policies. Issues were discussed and supporting relationships developed. His example was based on a model used by the B.C. government; however, he was discussing with his current employer to bring the program to Nova Scotia. Brandon explained:

I think what made it comfortable within the BC government is a very, very strict orientation project that they have and the orientation project, when you go there, you literally go to a whole day session. You sign an oath, "I swear I'm going to be a good employee to the BC government". Immediately you know that your organization is going to be backing you 100%. That if you had any kind of harassment based on your sexual orientation, that's in your rights as an employee not to be harassed. We have the human rights but it's very strict within their policies and it’s great to know that your employer takes those right very seriously. (Brandon)

Jane emphasised the importance of human rights in the workplace also. She explained that workplaces have to have programs in place to demonstrate a commitment to diversity, including sexual orientation. Perhaps more important is knowing that senior leadership believes in the initiatives and incorporates them into their day-to-day work and interaction with employees. About the video mentioned above, Jane said:

Knowing the video was there has been beneficial for me. That was all I needed and probably more than I needed. But it certainly has to be a part of an entire package because to be fair if they had a video and then my boss was an asshole and talked about gay people and how those freaking faggots or whatever else, like I wouldn’t give a shit about the video would I? (Jane)
Consistency in messaging and behaviour is important, as Jane noted. Inconsistencies may be quickly picked up on by the LG worker who are often more alert to cues around safety and acceptance at work.

**Hope for the Future**

Every participant in our research expressed that they recognized things were changing for the better for LG employees in the workplace. They expressed hope for further future improvements. This theme in no way indicates LG workers do not still face bullying or discrimination in some workplaces, it is just important to note that all of our participants were hopeful that workplaces would become more comfortable and welcoming of LG workers.

Since all of the LG workers interviewed for this research project had been employed for a number of years, they spoke about the changes they have seen over time as views and opinions changed in society along with workplace protections. They also expressed the differences they saw in younger generations and the different experiences they have had being out at much younger ages. Having support in schools like gay-straight alliances and anti-bullying policies means that the next generation of workers will expect to have similar supports in the workplace and it is important organizations prepare for this. Participants’ concerns regarding these issues fell into four different subthemes outlined below.
Times are Changing

The LG people we spoke with were encouraged and hopeful for improvement. They looked at the way things have progressed within society and workplaces over the last 10 years. Participants spoke of the number of youth who are out at school. Jane talked about her sister who is only three years younger than her being out at school and knowing other LG youth who were also out. This was in contrast to her experience of not having anyone out at her school and going through her whole education passing as straight. She assumed other youth also felt they needed to pass at school.

Anne stated: “I think people under 30 have been…they’re much more sensitive to gay and lesbian issues. I don’t know if they were taught that or whether they learned it on their own because it’s often not taught.” Anne explained witnessing changes over her 30 year career when she noted:

A lot of people that were in management in …the 80’s and 90’s did not go to university. Values, when you talk about values, they come from your family and all this. If you go to school you may learn different values, but they came with those values and they kept them and they projected them on everyone that was in the workplace, even clients.

By the time ’95 came around there wasn’t much they could do about it like overtly. Just make things uncomfortable, whisper and that sort of thing. On the whole I had worked there 20 years so my co-workers were fairly supportive. They had their own thoughts about it. (Anne)

Michael discussed feeling that gay culture has become more normalized. It is getting more common to see gay couples on television, have people being out and proud, and to read articles about gay people in magazines or newspapers. This means more stereotypes are being challenged and more often people have someone in their family or who is a friend that is gay or lesbian. This increased level of understanding and
acceptance is translating into better and more welcoming workplaces. Michael explained:

I just think that gay culture is becoming more normalized. It’s becoming more a part of everyday activity. You see gay couples on television now, you see more gay literature, you see articles on papers, people coming out. You’re seeing … Gay culture is becoming more mainstream instead of the underground type of, you sweep it under the carpet type of thing, and a lot of stereotypes are being pushed away. You see the general populous is becoming more comfortable. (Michael)

It used to be the case that LG workers were hoping for tolerance in the workplace; that people would ‘overlook’ their sexual orientation or that the topic would be ignored. Now LG workers are looking to feel accepted and valued. Steven highlighted the difference that makes in terms of how you feel as an employee. In order for workplaces to be welcoming to LG workers the attitude needs to be one of accepting and valuing difference not of tolerating difference.

**Generational Differences**

Adam spoke to us about the admiration his generation has for those youth who are coming out in high school. Coming out at school takes bravery and strength and it is important we make sure they continue to feel supported and encouraged when entering the work world. He said it would be discouraging for them to achieve so much in their younger years and then be faced with homophobic or unwelcoming workplaces.

According to Adam, his generation was really not supportive of him. Growing up, the gay role models were generally “over the top”, flamboyant, and extreme. This encouraged him to pass as he grew up and did expect things to be different when he entered the workforce. When he works with young people now and they are out at school
he describes it as “mind-blowing”. It is hard for him to believe that 20 years ago, coming out seemed an impossibility. He said it took a while for him to rise above the script that ran through his mind which said he “couldn’t do this” or “didn’t deserve that”. Growing up he was given messages that if you were a gay man you could be a hairdresser but not a blue collar worker. This was similar for two other participants, Christopher and Steven. They explained:

The gay revolution was happening in the 70’s but it wasn’t happening where I was living and it wasn’t happening with my generation. I think that had a real influence in terms of what kind of jobs I expected I’d get and what kind of jobs I went after. (Steven)

There was no way I could come out. It felt like a totally hands-tied experience because even to this day, the worst thing you can call somebody on the playground is faggot or fag. In the 70’s and 80’s, coming through public school, it was like so very loud and clear…the message was, don’t do that. Don’t do that. Don’t be that. (Christopher)

Our research participants felt younger generations were not influenced in the same way as they were. They see more possibilities for career options and a variety of gay and lesbian role models following different career paths. Overall, most participants expressed hope for the future that workplaces and communities are going to become more welcoming and comfortable places for all people.

**Increase Scope of Diversity Training**

Participants indicated they felt there should be training on LG issues in the workplace and heteronormativity. Participants felt that education efforts should be part of existing diversity training in their workplaces, which currently focuses on racial, gender and disability diversity while falling short on providing meaningful discussion on lesbian and gay issues. This training could be part of *Respectful Workplace* training in
terms of building a safe space for workers of different sexual orientations and highlighting the importance of language to contribute to positive environments.

It’s that making a commitment to inclusion by making sure that we’re considering that there isn’t tacit or underlying message of, “Yes, we’ll kind of tolerate you but don’t bring it up at lunchtime” type of stuff. Just making sure that an inclusion attitude is throughout the organization, and then that extends to hiring practices, right? So if we begin to hire people, it is about what is their world view in terms of diversity issues. Because I’m not going to go anywhere just because they hire somebody new who doesn’t want to work with a fag. So “can you work with diversity?” needs to be asked. (Christopher)

Anne took diversity training as part of her position within government and suggests:

In Nova Scotia the diversity training, when I took it, focused a lot on African-Americans, like that was what we were there for and there was nothing else. They called it diversity. I guess I'm saying is that if people left they probably wouldn't be educated on any respect on sexuality or sexual orientation. None at all. (Anne)

Brenda suggested a separate program not be created as people may just “roll their eyes” at it. She felt it would be best received as part of existing training on inclusive and diverse workplaces as employees have to attend a lot of training already.

**The Next Generation**

The next generation of workers have been in schools with Gay/Straight Alliances. They have had friends who have been out since junior high, and have received support from family and adults to be free to be who they are. This is not to deny the problems that still exist and issues faced by those LG youth who are not comfortable being out in their communities, but there have been many positive improvements. Jane told us she feels this will create a shift in workplaces when this generation comes in. Jane said: “Where’s my alliance program? How is my uniqueness recognized?”, because they would have always had it. In 2012, the Department of Education issued a directive to all
Nova Scotia schools that they must respond affirmatively to all reasonable student requests to start Gay/Straight Alliances (Youth Project, 2012). This is a big step in making those spaces more welcoming and accepting of LG students.

If workplaces do not start looking at ways to build this same sort of support system they could be left scrambling to satisfy LG employees. Language is different than when 30-60 year olds were in the school system. Many would not recognize words like intersex, heteronormative, two spirited, or GSA’s. Educating current workers on use of language that is respectful of diversity and inclusive of all lifestyles will help create a welcome atmosphere and increase understanding of ways to contribute to a healthy and comfortable work environment.

Social Justice

In this section we outline why passing at work is a social justice issue which needs attention. We hope to contribute to efforts for change in this area. Not only do we feel compelled to work towards social justice due to our ethical responsibilities as members of the social work profession, but also as members of the LG community.

Although all Canadians are afforded the right to protection against discrimination by law and policy such as *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and federal and provincial *Human Rights Acts*, minority groups, including LG peoples still face discrimination, oppression and harassment. Interestingly and problematic, very few provinces provide specific reference to LG issues and sexual orientation within policy documents. This can give rise to many problems, specifically in the workplace. For
example, it in some people feeling pressure to pass as heterosexual for fear of experiencing negative consequences of disclosing their sexual orientation.

In an effort to contribute to social justice and create safe and accepting work environments, the end result of our research project was the development of an information presentation which clearly illustrates that LG people, either out in the workplace or those who pass as heterosexual, face discrimination. Based on the feedback from participants, we have provided concrete examples of what general changes or best practices (not specific to any one workplace) can be adopted to make improvements in the workplace. We envisioned that the presentations will be available to Diversity Champions, Employee Assistance Program Staff and education coordinators. At a minimum, the presentations will be given to all research participants and they can provide hard copies to their employers if they deem it appropriate. We will also offer the presentation to organizations such as The Province of Nova Scotia LGBTI Network (advocates who are dedicated to creating safe and equitable workplaces for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender and intersex people).

It is our desire to provide as much information and education as possible to employers in hopes they will implement recommendations in the work environment. Such recommendations, we anticipate, could improve the workplace for homosexual and heterosexual employees alike.

**Conclusion**

From our standpoint, it is ethically and morally wrong for workplaces to welcome some and exclude others. Our research aims to make an impact on this. We
hope that this research contributes to more ethical practices by highlighting the effect that a heteronormative workplace can have on encouraging LG employees to pass. Passing as straight in the workplace impacts the individual and the LG community, and it creates workplaces that are not inclusive and welcoming. We feel it is important to note that although diversity programming and anti-discrimination policies often go hand in hand in terms of providing education and behavioral boundaries, they may fail to recognize the political dimensions of problems. For example, a diversity training program may highlight the benefits of having a variety of different people in the organization and may discuss the laws and policies against discrimination of people based on sexuality and what constitutes discriminatory behavior. However, that does not help a worker to understand the “why”. Such trainings often do not include education about heteronormativity, the history of LG struggles for fair treatment, or LG cultural perspectives.

Programs, in our experience, have told workers what not to do and to be accepting of “diversity” but have not worked towards an increased understanding of effects of heteronormativity on LG people. Programs have not focused on the real dangers and threats that exist in society today for LG individuals. It is more palatable to configure anti-discrimination issues under diversity headings as people can agree that “everyone is different” and that is acceptable. The political issues about marriage rights, serving in the military, being physically attacked because you are gay, not being able to adopt, and other inequalities, would not typically be addressed in diversity programs. It is less palatable to address the harassment, inequities, teasing, exclusion, bullying, threats, and other discriminating behavior that continues to exist for LG
workers and what needs to happen in society for them to stop.

We hope this research will challenge conventional images of what a welcoming work environment looks like and that it might highlight the heteronormative practices that exclude LG employees. In this way, we hope to convey the ethical and moral necessity of making workplaces welcoming for all employees, regardless of sexual orientation.
References


CBC news (30 January 2012). Retrieved from,


http://www.sagepub.com/books/Book232757/toc#tabview=title


Annex A

A conversational style interviewing approach will be employed; however, we have prepared certain prompts and open ended questions to generate and guide discussion. Examples include:

~ Tell us about your work history and what your experiences are around passing at work.

~ What were some things happening in the work environment that influenced your decision to pass or not?

~ Tell us about the affects this had on you as a worker and in your personal relationships.

~ Was your decision to leave or stay working there related to certain things within the work environment?

~ How did you typically handle situations which invited you to pass at work?

~ Did you notice any differences between different types of work you’ve done such as unionized versus non-unionized, over many years, various managers/supervisors?

~ What specifically do you think makes a workplace welcoming and safe for LGB employees?
Annex B

“Understanding LGB Passing in the Workplace” Project

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a study entitled “Understanding LGB Passing in the Workplace” that is being conducted by two researchers in Ontario and Nova Scotia. Dale Vincent is the researcher from Ontario and Deana MacDonald is the researcher from Nova Scotia. They are both Master of Social Work students at the University of Victoria. They may be contacted if you have further questions at any time by calling Dale at 613-888-8658, or Deana at 902-440-0262 or by e-mailing them at d_a_vincent@hotmail.com or kermitde@hotmail.com

The study aims to find out about LGB individuals experiences of passing in the workplace. This project provides opportunities for LGB people to tell what it’s like to pass as heterosexual while at work, explore ways they are encouraged to do this, the effect this has on them, and what changes could be made that would make the workplace a more welcoming place for LGB workers.

Any LGB person who is employed, or has been employed, and has passed as heterosexual at work is eligible to participate in this project. We are especially interested in participants who have worked in multiple settings and have been employed within helping professions, for example, teachers, social workers, lawyers, nurses, etc.

A potential benefit of you taking part in this research is the opportunity to tell your story and reflect on ways to address your issues and needs as an LGB employee. Also, your participation in this project may benefit employees in similar situations by contributing to a greater understanding of the experiences, roles, and supports needed to help workplaces be more welcoming and comfortable for LGB workers. We also recognize that talking about these issues may be distressing. If you feel any discomfort because of issues that may come up in the interview, a referral to an appropriate community-based support agency will be provided by the interviewer.

If you choose to participate in this project, you will be asked to take part in an initial interview about the project and complete paperwork, plus two face-to-face interviews about your personal experiences and opinions about passing as straight at work.

As a way to make your participation more accessible the researchers will compensate you for travel and/or child care expenses incurred and details will be discussed during the initial interview. As well, location and time of the interviews may be determined based on needs of the participant ie. Close to home, after work hours, etc.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. Your work/employers will not have access to any of the data collected in this project. If you provide information to the researchers alleging child abuse or neglect, the researchers are obligated by law to provide this information to the appropriate child protection agency in your community.

If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question, without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study, we would request use of the information you have provided us to the point of your withdrawal, with your consent. However, it is completely your choice whether we use this information or not.
In order to ensure the accuracy of the information collected, your interview will be audiotaped. If you do not want your interview to be audiotaped, you can refuse to do so. All data collected through the project will remain confidential. Interview results will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in a locked room, and only the researchers will know your name. Your name will not appear in any transcript, project report, write-up or presentation, and your anonymity will be protected by using pseudonyms to identify the information obtained from individual participants. The raw data (the audiotapes and the transcripts of these interviews) will be erased or shredded at the end of the project and no later than December 2013.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others through articles and presentations at conferences. Many participants in research like to see what “happens” with the research or how it gets written up. If you are interested, we’d like you to receive a copy of the project findings; for this reason, we’d like to have your mailing and/or e-mail address, so we can share the findings with you as they are available. If you did not want to receive this information or have us keep your contact information for this purpose, that is perfectly alright.

In addition to being able to contact the researchers, Dale Vincent at 613-888-8658, and Deana MacDonald at 902-440-0262, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting our supervisor, Susan Strega, Associate Professor School of Social Work at (250-721-8333).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

Name of Participant  Signature  Date

In addition, your signature below indicates that you give your permission to allow the researchers to use the information they have collected from you, if you withdraw from the study. Please do not sign this following section unless and until you have reached the decision to withdraw from the study.

Name of Participant  Signature  Date

A copy of this consent form will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.
Dear potential research participant;

There is exciting research being conducted in Halifax & surrounding areas by two Master of Social Work students from the University of Victoria which may be of interest to you!

We, Dale Vincent and Deana MacDonald, who are members of the lesbian and gay community, are undertaking research on the topic of lesbian or gay passing in the workplace. If you are a lesbian or gay individual 19 years old or older, who has worked within the social service field and who has passed as straight at your workplace, we would like to speak with you. A social service field may include lawyers, teachers, social workers, health care workers, support workers, advocates, etc.

We want to hear from men and women who pass, or have passed, as straight in the workplace (present or past employment) in hopes of learning more about what influences decisions to pass and what affect this has on you as a lesbian or gay person. We are also interested in hearing how workplaces can become more welcoming to lesbian and gay employees.

Participating in this research project is voluntary and the information you provide will be kept confidential and anonymous. Please consider sharing your story and contribute to this research.

If you have any questions, or to get further information please contact us at LGpassing@hotmail.com

Thanks for considering this opportunity.

Deana & Dale
Are you a Lesbian or Gay individual 19 years old or older who has worked within the social service field and who has passed as straight at your workplace (past or present)? A social service field may include lawyers, teachers, social workers, health care workers, support workers, advocates, etc.

We want to hear from men and women in Halifax & surrounding areas who pass, or have passed, as straight at work. We hope to learn what influences decisions to pass and what affect this has on you as a lesbian or gay person. We are also interested in hearing how workplaces can become more welcoming to lesbian and gay employees.

Participating in this project is voluntary and the information you provide will be kept confidential and anonymous.

- Both members of the research team are part of the lesbian and gay community
- Reasonable compensation for child care and/or local transportation costs
- Study approved by the Univ of Victoria Ethics Board

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO PARTICIPATE OR ASK QUESTIONS, PLEASE CONTACT DEANA OR DALE AT: LGPASSING@HOTMAIL.COM
For the Benefit of Others: Lesbian and Gay (LG) People Passing as Straight in the Workplace

Dale Vincent & Deana MacDonald
MSW Research Report,
University of Victoria, 2013

Introductions
Why this topic?

- The concept of “Passing” was introduced to us during a course in support of the MSW program at the University of Victoria.
- Both of us identified as being lesbian/gay ... and we felt we were “out” to family, friends and colleagues so we didn’t ‘pass’
- We had not considered that we intentionally and unintentionally pass as straight in the workplace, almost on a daily basis.

The purpose of our project was to explore the ways that LG employees make sense of their decisions to pass - or not - and how these choices are linked to their subjectivities.

Passing

- The pressure to produce a socially sanctioned subjectivity often puts added stress on the LG employee—a fact that has significant implications for their social and psychological wellbeing (Luhtanen, 2003; Dyson, 2009; Bouzianis, Malcolm, & Hallab, 2008). If an LG employee fears stigmatization and reprisal in the workplace, they will likely hide their sexual orientation and let people believe that they are heterosexual. This process is often known as “passing.”
- In order to avoid the stigma which may accompany being part of a sexual minority, LG people may choose not to reveal their true sexual orientation or “pass” as heterosexual (Goffman, 1963).
Methodology

- Narrative Analysis: Capturing stories to learn about the many ways and reasons for passing as straight in the workplace

- “Stories and narratives are processes for sense-making; stories, as they are the preferred sense-making currency in human relationships, have become an important symbolic form, through which meanings in organizations are constructed and shared”. Brown (2003:97)

- Accessing stories of lesbian and gay employees has not always been possible ... Research in this area is very limited

Participants

- Recruitment
- Selection
Literature Review

• General overview
  • Creation of the LG person as “the other”
  • Flaunting sexual orientation
  • Silencing of the LG employee
  • Private life versus professional life
  • The idea of the workplace being heteronormative

• Limitations of the literature
  • Very little research on this topic, and what exists is primarily based on European examples.

Findings & Discussion
Identity Management

• For the benefit of others
  • Not wanting to offend anyone
  • People sometimes find discussing sexual orientation awkward
• Implications of the company of organization
• Fear of clients being offended

Under Surveillance

• The pressure to pass
• Mirroring and modelling
• Organizational culture
• Avoiding stigma
Onus on LG Workers to Educate

• Management and Supervisors need to take responsibility
• Collective issue of the workplace
• Puts the LG in a bad spot
• Programs –
  • Universal
  • Broad diversity scope
  • All people welcome versus LG welcome

Silencing LG Sexual Orientation

• Not rocking the boat
• Avoiding drama
• Maneuvering in a heteronormative environment
• Wanting to be seen for work performance
Ways We Pass

• The pronoun game
• Straight style
• Conversation filters
• Visual cues

Mental Health and Well-being

• Mentally draining to lead two lives

• Keeping secrets contributes to feelings of guilt, shame

• Always ‘on guard’

• Constant surveillance of self and surroundings
Welcoming Workplaces

- Overall positive feeling
- Retains employees
- Creates sense of belonging
- Highlights organizational values and commitment
- Senior leadership sets the stage

Hope for the future

- Times, they are changing
- Generational differences
- Increase scope of diversity training
- The next generation of workers
Social Justice

• Role as Social Workers & members of the LGBTI community

• Purpose and scope of this presentation

• Available to research participants, diversity champions, networks, employers

Resources

• Echelon magazine
  http://echelonmagazine.com/index.php

• Catalyst
  http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/topics/lgbt-lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender

• Pride at Work Canada
  http://prideatwork.ca/

• PFLAG Canada
Recommendations

• Further research in the area
• Ensure current diversity programming includes sexual orientation
• Have senior leadership show support for staff membership in LGBTI initiatives
• Increase education in workplaces around heteronormative practices
• Make resources accessible to managers and workers to increase understanding and support

Thank You!