

# QUEER(Y)ING CONSTRUCTION: EXPLORING SEXUALITY AND MASCULINITY IN CONSTRUCTION

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The macho image of the construction industry often denotes negative aspects of male dominance and female subordination. These have been used to explain the problem of gender imbalance in construction. Proponents of the diversity agenda have sought to tackle structural characteristics of the industry by embracing perspectives of visible minorities in the industry such as women. Thus, the macho image is usually treated as a problem, and rarely problematised. To better understand what the macho image of the industry really entails, there is a need to divert attention away from gendered perspectives of construction towards understanding sexuality as a means of reproducing social relations at the construction workplace. Through life stories of two homosexual men engaging in construction work, hegemonic masculinity and misogyny are explored. Preliminary analysis suggests the potential for a more inclusive notion of masculinity in construction, and a research agenda to rethink gender categories in construction employment.

Keywords: equality and diversity, gender, queer theory, sexuality, social relations.

## INTRODUCTION

For the last two decades, the construction industry - at least in the UK - has come to a gradual acceptance of the rhetoric of diversity and equal opportunities at the workplace (see Ness, forthcoming). Following the economic boom that led to a surge in construction activity at the turn of the new millennium, women were recognised as an especially untapped resource that could help solve the problem of skills shortages (e.g. Fielden *et al.*, 2000; Agapiou, 2002). This development launched new lines of scholarly inquiry to examine how women confronted increasing (opportunities of) participation as non-traditional recruits within a male dominated industry. Moreover, initiatives to embrace the agenda of promoting more women to work in the construction industry also grew, ranging from working groups to tackle the business case of diversity and equality (e.g. Construction Industry Board, 1996; Respect for People Working Group, 2000), to the flourishing of the Women in Science, Engineering and Construction (WISE; see [www.wisecampaign.org.uk](http://www.wisecampaign.org.uk)) Campaign. However, despite progress made to encourage more women to work in the construction industry, the reality remains stark. The number of women employed in the construction industry is stubbornly low (see Chan and McCabe, 2010), and women continue to be employed in low wage, low status occupations in construction (see Byrne *et al.*, 2005; Potter and Hill, 2009).

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Failure to improve the number of women in construction is typically attributed to the macho image of the industry, often described as being hostile to the entry of women into construction occupations (see e.g. Devine, 1992; Gale, 1994). In the quest to rebalance gender relations in the industry, advocates of the diversity and equal opportunities agenda have called for a critical mass to be formed (see e.g. Greed, 2000). In this article, it is argued that such a gendered (and feminist) perspective is partially to be blamed for the lack of diversity in the construction industry. Fighting the gender cause simply reinforces distinctions and social divisions (see Richardson *et al.*, 2006). In order to tackle the problems of diversity in construction, a case is made to consider a sexuality (and queer) perspective in organisations. Such a viewpoint serves to disrupt gender categories and emphasise the performative aspects of social relations between men and women (Butler, 1990; see also Richardson *et al.*, 2006; Hakim, 2010).

The article is organised in four main sections. Firstly, a brief overview of the central debates surrounding gender relations in construction is presented. This outlines key matters of concern, including the challenges faced by women negotiating masculine construction, the need to redress structural characteristics of the industry to make construction work more appealing and accessible to women, and the cause of asserting women's experiences at the construction workplace. Secondly, a critical view of the gendered perspective is offered, which urges a shift away from feminist positions of the organisation of production towards a sexuality perspective to understand the reproduction of social relations in organisations. The argument put forward here is that one must reject the essential, binary view of gender and deconstruct its performative aspects through understanding sexuality if one were to study the depths of gender relations in construction. Thirdly, preliminary observations from ongoing work to distil sexuality at the construction workplace are presented, through the portrayal of the life stories of two homosexual men - one a craftsman and the other a professional. The experiences of these invisible minorities reveal important dynamics of sexuality that illustrate what masculinity entails for these men involved in construction work. From these representations, the 'macho' image of the industry is not simply one that enforces misogyny as the dominant view found in the gendered perspective of women in construction, but one that can potentially be more inclusive (see Anderson, 2009). As far as it is known, sexuality in construction has never been brought to the fore in the construction management literature. And so, finally, the contribution of this article are discussed, including the implications in the way one considers gender categories in construction employment, and the manner in which personal and public spaces are delineated in construction work.

## **CHEQUERED PAST OF GENDER RELATIONS IN CONSTRUCTION: IS BEING MACHO TO BLAME?**

“In an industry with a long history of male social closure, there is evidence to suggest that employers, including those known for their good practice, remain hostile to women (Devine, 1992: 571).” Indeed, Gale (1994), in an effort to explore the role of women in non-traditional occupations, came across a male informant who considered women to be fundamentally "cheap, docile, unionized labour (p. 8)." Such antagonistic view of gender relations certainly inspired research over the last two decades to articulate the experiences of women in construction, with a view to improve female participation in the construction labour market. Often, the object is to challenge the dominant male standpoint that prevails in the construction industry, in an attempt to lend a voice to women fighting stigmatisation from their male

counterparts. In this section, the chequered past of gender relations in construction is traced by first discussing the key matters of concern by researchers engaged in this endeavour. These concerns were underpinned by calls to reform the structure of the industry in order to smash the barriers of entry for women to partake in construction work. Next, to problematise gender relations in construction, researchers have sought to recover the voice of women extracting and asserting the experiences of women in the construction industry through their methodological choices. Thirdly, this section closes with a critical take on the madness of the cause. It is suggested that gendered perspectives of construction have only further reinforced social divisiveness in a sector already struggling with a perceived gender imbalance.

### **Matters of concern**

The continued marginalisation of women at the construction workplace is a critical feature of research on gender issues in construction. In male dominated environments, it is accepted wisdom that men tend to maintain power over their female counterparts by expressing their sexual identity at the workplace through such means as swearing, pornographic imagery and making inappropriate sexual comments or even advances (see Collinson and Collinson, 1989; Gale, 1994; Whittock, 2002; Watts, 2007). The macho image of the industry is seen to be characterised by the hatred of women (misogyny), horseplay, alcohol consumption and excessive risk taking on occupational health and safety (Iacuone, 2005). Although increased female participation in construction can potentially challenge the orthodoxy of male (sexual) behaviours and attitudes at the workplace (Arriola, 1990), women (and men) often have to cope with this dominant view of 'macho-ness' when assimilating into the 'culture' of construction (see e.g. Whittock, 2002; Watts, 2007).

Construction work, typified by its long working hours and physical labour, is also a major impediment for the integration of women. Women have to work much harder at gaining recognition for their abilities at the workplace; otherwise, a woman's commitment to construction work is questioned, or in a worst-case scenario, a woman might face humiliation (see e.g. Poggio, 2000; Watts, 2009). Women also face segregation at the workplace, often assuming lower status, lower paid occupations such as administrative positions (see e.g. Loosemore and Waters, 2004; Lingard and Francis, 2004). Tokenism (see Kanter, 1977) have certainly accounted for heightened job dissatisfaction, greater propensity of leaving the industry altogether, and lower levels of helping others succeed (King *et al.*, 2009). There is some evidence that women in senior positions then assume a 'male' identity to prevent other women from making career advancements (see Powell *et al.*, 2006, 2009; see also Mavin, 2008). All odds are also stacked against women in construction in their personal lives. In Watts' (2007) study of women's coping strategies, one interviewee suggests that women who have caring responsibilities at home have to work hard at juggling between their work commitments and family life, whereas "when [men] get home their dinner is in the oven (p. 310)." Indeed, such inequity has led a number of scholars to call for reforms to the structure of the industry, with a view to rethink the culture of long working hours and job insecurity, the possibility of flexible working, and a move away from using informal, male-oriented networks for recruiting into the industry (see e.g. Clarke and Gribbling, 2008).

### **Methods of recovering the voice of women**

Research on gender relations in construction has often (and rightly) privileged the voice of women in asserting their often-negative experiences of working in the

construction industry (Ness, forthcoming). For example, Whittock (2002) drew on interviews and observations of a sample of 35 'token' women, as she reported the regular incidence of "dangerous pranks" imposed on female trainees. Her analysis emphasised the risks and harassment associated with the behaviour of male colleagues. Powell's *et al.* (2006; 2009) investigation of 52 women engineering students perspective of engineering work helped identify ways in which women cope with entering a masculine profession for the first time. Watts (2007) also analysed the experiences of 31 women working civil engineering to explain strategies used by women to establish presence in a male-dominated environment. Participant observations have also been used, usually by women researchers, to make sense of gender relations in the construction industry; this typically re-asserts the barriers and marginalisation encountered by women in construction (see Greed, 2000; Ness, 2011).

Where men have been involved in gender-related studies in construction, these have been designed on the premise that differences should exist between men and women. So, Loosemore and Waters (2004) distinguished between male and female experiences of occupational stress in construction. Lingard and Francis (2004) surveyed employees of a large Australian construction company to determine if there were differences in the way men and women treated work-life balance in construction. Poggio (2000) interviewed 34 pairs of workers to provide a textured analysis of gender cultures in a range of industries including construction. Her study reaffirmed differences between the perspectives of men and women in construction, and the ambivalence of men towards the struggles of women in the industry. Similarly, Dainty *et al.* (2000) undertook 41 pairs of ethnographic interviews to explore women's career development in construction. He concluded that the competitive and discriminatory nature of the industry serve to reinforce resentment against women, which in turn explains women's underachievement in the construction industry.

### **Madness of cause**

Without a doubt, research on women's experiences in the construction industry has been extremely valuable in offering perspectives of an often-ignored group. Researchers have toiled to examine how gendered identities are created and performed in construction, and the consequences of a male-dominated gendered identity. The conclusions tend to be rather bleak in that men are to be blamed for the exclusion of, and troubles imposed on, women working in the industry. Yet, in the pursuit of more equal opportunities for men and women in construction, such 'them' and 'us' distinctions are not very helpful. After all, in Whittock's (2002) study, "dangerous pranks" are probably played on male trainees as much as they occur on female trainees. Indeed, despite searching for gender differences in the way work-life balance is conceptualised, Lingard and Francis's (2004) study yielded no significant differences between men and women.

The business case for greater diversity (e.g. Construction Industry Board, 1996) is also largely rhetorical (see Ness, forthcoming). Notwithstanding the moral case against the exclusion of female participation in the labour market, the empirical evidence of the benefits of diversity remains inconclusive. Novarra (1980), writing about the ambivalence of equality, observed that "[...] in the literature on women in employment, there is much emphasis on women's ability to perform to male standards and expectations. What is lacking is any systematic examination of the contribution women may have to make as women in the world of paid employment (p. 43)." Indeed, Powell's *et al.* (2006) findings seem to reinforce the inevitability of the forces

of hegemonic masculinity (Cornell, 1995) in order for women to survive in a male-dominated environment. Ironically, adopting a gendered lens - socially constructed or otherwise - has done little to enhance diversity in the construction industry. Instead, such a perspective, following feminist traditions, has sought to reinforce gender categories and social divisions at the expense of genuine assimilation and integration (see e.g. Richardson *et al.*, 2006, and; Hakim, 2010). As Stein and Plummer (1994) observed, "[feminist sociology] assumes that studying and theorizing from the perspective of those who have been systematically denied access to power will inform our knowledge of the center. Yet, the center has hardly budged (p. 180)." From a numerical standpoint, it is noted that the employment of women in the construction industry remains doggedly low (Chan and McCabe, 2010).

### **PROBLEMATISING MASCULINITY IN CONSTRUCTION: CAN QUEER THEORY HELP?**

In the debates surrounding gender relations in construction, the macho image of the industry have often been treated as a problem, and rarely problematised. To be macho in construction, one tends to associate with the problematic traits of female subordination, violence and bullying, and risky working practices. In so doing, there is a tight coupling between masculinity and male-ness in the construction industry. Yet, as Navarro (1980) warned, "There is a dangerously thin line here between the uncritical adoption of stereotypes, and a genuine, but unarticulated perception of a difference between the sexes. Some people find that, while they have dismissed the crude stereotypes, they can still half believe that there are attitudes, or bundles of attitudes, towards employment and the way work is done, which are more likely to be held by members of one sex. (p. 42)."

To move away from gender divisions and problematise masculinity in construction, it is argued, requires a perspective devoid of gender. It is here that sexuality and the deployment of queer theoretical lens offers immense possibilities. As Stein and Plummer (1994) defined, sexuality constitutes power relations unlike those of gender in that membership in a group is fluctuating and largely invisible. Put another way, sexuality is a fluid concept; the purpose of queer theory lies not in the social construction of identities, but the deconstruction of sexual subjects (Green, 2007). Rather than locking the analysis of social relations in stable and static gendered categories (i.e. men and women), the study of sexuality through a queer theoretical lens disrupts categories (see e.g. Butler, 1990) and seeks to provide deeper scrutiny of the social practices that help produce and reproduce the structure of social relations (see e.g. Gamson and Moon, 2004; Richardson *et al.*, 2006; Bendl *et al.*, 2008).

Queer theory originated from lesbian and gay studies and has renewed the study of sexuality, in light of AIDS activism, by encouraging more critical ways of thinking about social categories and what these mean for power relations (see e.g. Gamson and Moon, 2004, and; Green, 2007). After all, it is what one does with social categories that matters a great deal. As Foucault (1990), in the *History of Sexuality*, aptly pointed out, "For a rule of conduct is one thing; the conduct that may be measured by this rule is another. But another thing still is the manner in which one ought to 'conduct oneself' – that is, the manner in which one ought to form oneself as an ethical subject acting in reference to the prescriptive elements that make up the code (p. 26)."

Yet, the study of sexuality is relatively under-explored in the realm of organisational studies; and, as far as it is known, systematic examination of sexuality escapes the attention of construction management researchers. There is a long tradition for treating

contemporary organisations as sexless (Hall, 1989), and recognition that sexuality is distinct from the "orderly conduct of everyday life (Bhattacharyya, 2002: 148)." Furthermore, sexuality is often perceived to be a private matter that is seldom disclosed in the public sphere of organisational life (Hakim, 2010). Still, in order to transcend social divisions afforded by gendered perspectives of equality and diversity in construction, there is much to profit from an examination of sexuality dynamics to distil the performance of social relations at the workplace (see e.g. Bendl *et al.*, 2008). This should help refine our understanding of how masculinity in construction is constituted, and the ways in which it plays out to exclude certain groups.

## **LIFE HISTORIES OF TWO HOMOSEXUAL MEN WORKING IN CONSTRUCTION**

Efforts to improve the equality and diversity record of the construction industry have hitherto emphasised the accounts of visible minorities, e.g. women. There is an implicit assumption that differences exist between gender categories of male and female. To investigate sexuality dynamics in construction, the present study sought to analyse perspectives of invisible minorities working in the construction industry, i.e. homosexual men. This deliberate choice of research participants would enable explicit articulation of men's views about gender relations in construction hitherto marginalised (see Connell, 2009), and allow the tapping of knowledge of informants who would have critically grappled with their (sexualised) identities for a long time (Rahman and Jackson, 2010).

Gaining access to such informants was certainly challenging, in part because of difficulties in tracking down willing participants open about their sexuality (at least to the researcher). Furthermore, initial contact made with UK construction trade unions (e.g. UCATT and UNITE) indicated that matters associated with sexual orientation were not represented. Attempts to gain access through local lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) organisations to homosexual men working in the construction industry yielded little success as well. Personal links were eventually made with a number of homosexual men working in construction. This took up to a few months per interviewee because of sensitivities around disclosure of the participant's sexual orientation. Interview questions were designed to avoid leading respondents to discussing experiences of construction work as a minority in terms of sexual orientation. Instead, a life history method was adopted to explore each participant's personal, education and career history so that richer accounts of their social (and sexual) relations in their private and public lives can be gathered (see Connell, 2009). The life histories of two participants - Brian and Tony (names changed to protect their identities) - will be re-presented in this section by discussing key aspects of their childhood experience, their transition into construction work, the way they deal with their personal lives, and moments of controversy.

### *Childhood experiences*

Brian is a surveyor in his mid 30s and Tony is a joiner in his mid 40s. Brian comes from South East Asia and is from a traditional Buddhist background, and Tony grew up in the North East of England and born into a family with a strict Irish Catholic upbringing. Both men identified themselves as homosexuals, even though they both had girlfriends in their teenage years. Brian is now in a civil partnership with Andrew, a librarian six years younger; and Tony is single. Both Brian and Tony had contemplated marrying a woman in their early adulthood because "it seemed like the

right thing to do by [their families]", and Tony was indeed married to a woman for a year. Brian is not out to his family, whilst Tony came out to his parents in his 30s.

Tony's earliest memory of his childhood was accompanying his father on trips to ferry building materials from Newcastle to Birmingham. Tony's father was also a joiner. When asked to describe those memories, Tony remarked that he felt "extremely carefree and enjoyed the travelling." He also remembered his mother working extremely hard as a seamstress supplementing income by working late at night in his bedroom. Brian, on the other hand, remembered a close female friend from school who suggested that he should accompany her to pursue studies in quantity surveying. Not knowing what to do with his career, he did just that.

*Making the transition into construction work*

Brian achieved a degree in quantity surveying in Scotland, and Tony served an apprenticeship at a large construction company after leaving school. Both expressed a lot of passion for the work they do, and what mattered was their ability to be recognised for "good work." Endorsement of proficiency by their immediate (male) bosses was considered crucial. For Brian, this was evidenced by his performance appraisals and ability to get promoted in a short span of time after graduation. Tony's desire to be praised for his workmanship also extended to his home, as he recounted how proud he was to be introduced by his step-dad (also a joiner) to family friends as: "This is Tony, and he did up the kitchen for the family home."

Both Brian and Tony are physically stocky, and they described themselves as "not your typical, camp gay men." Both have chosen not to disclose their sexuality at work. For them, this was not an issue as the most fundamental concern was to be recognised for the "hard work" they put in. In a sense, this is somewhat similar to the experiences of women in construction depicted in the literature, who were often re-presented as feeling to need to earn respect at the workplace. In other words, the need to establish their presence and be acknowledged for what they can do potentially applies to men as well, as seen in the cases of Brian and Tony.

When asked about women in construction, both men considered this to be less of an issue, even though they conceded a lack of critical mass in the industry. Brian noted that it was his female friend who introduced him to quantity surveying, a career path that he was not aware of previously. Tony, on the other hand, reported a slight sense of jealousy as the craftswomen he has come across in his working life have been "far better than the men." This, he suggests, possibly explains male insecurity at the construction workplace. That said, Tony did make a comment about lesbian builders being "more acceptable than a gay man" in the construction site.

*Delineating between personal (private) and organisational (public) space*

Both men do not talk about their sexual lives at the workplace, even though their remarks of their (male) colleagues' sexual encounters were a common feature. Both expressed slight envy of women in this respect. Brian reported incidences of female colleagues who got promoted by developing sexual relationships with his boss; and Tony considered it to be easier for a woman to gain acceptance by male colleagues in a social context. In Brian's case, his sexual outlet was through visiting gay bars after work only to realise that he cannot relate to the gay people he interacted with. This caused him to doubt his (homo)sexuality. Tony's story is more telling. He reports avoiding gay bars in case he got caught by colleagues. Instead, he frequented gay sex clubs, and claimed that "travelling was certainly a perk of the job because he could develop such carefree sexual relations." Notably, Tony's choice of the word "carefree"

was repeated three times during the interview, to describe the fondest memory of his father, his enjoyment of construction work, and his best sexual encounter.

The stories of Brian and Tony's sexual encounters demonstrate, to some extent, the separation between the personal (private) space of sexual intimacy and the organisational (public) space of employment. Yet, these are interconnected in the way they perceive, and interact with, their colleagues, men and women alike. In a sense, the label of being man or woman, heterosexual or homosexual, remains relatively insignificant. However, the stories paint a rich picture of the social relations in and out of the work environment. It must be added that Tony once met a former heterosexual work colleague in a gay bar. The former colleague could not believe that Tony is gay, but stayed on to share a couple of drinks together, thereby challenging the belief that the macho image of the industry is necessarily connected with homophobia.

#### *A moment of controversy*

Brian eventually met his current partner through a social networking website. In, 2006, Brian's company organised a social event and partners were invited. Because his relationship with Andrew was very stable, Brian did not think twice about bringing Andrew along to this event. He recounted the look on his colleagues' faces when he introduced Andrew as his partner. Following the incident, his boss started a smear campaign to undermine the quality of his work, which in turn led to his summary dismissal. When asked why he did not consider taking legal action against the dismissal - this was after discrimination against sexual orientation was outlawed in the UK - Brian's response was one of anger against his boss for questioning his ability. Moreover, he was not aware of legal recourse on grounds of sexual orientation, as he asserted that his sexuality was not what defines him. Indeed, whilst Tony did not report any work-related controversy, he maintained that this is the reason why he is not out at the workplace. This was not because of fear of reprisals, but rather the fear of colleagues undermining his "work and productivity."

## **CLOSING THOUGHTS**

Research promoting women in construction has emphasised gendered ideas about diversity, resulting in the acknowledgement of the 'macho' problem afflicting the image of the industry. Notwithstanding the small sample of life stories presented here, the depth of Brian and Tony's stories indicates the existence of overlaps between the experiences of men and women in construction. There is a sense that good work matters and that recognition of this by peers and superiors is important. Yet, there is also a sense of subversion of their sexual, rather than gendered, identities. There is a clear separation between the privacy of sexual desires and the disclosure of sexual relations at the workplace. However, the public sphere of organisational life is not without sexual references; from the perspectives of Brian and Tony, women stand to benefit from sexual indiscretions at the workplace probably as much as men think of sex. At the same time, labels carry much less weight in defining social relations at the workplace. Instead, it is the way sexual subjects, men and women, interact with one another that shapes outcomes. Masculinity is perhaps not unproblematic, but the brief outline of Brian and Tony's life stories suggest a more inclusive masculinity than conventionally accepted.

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