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GENDERED HOMOPHOBIA AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION FOR WOMEN IN THE BUILDING TRADES

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Drawing on 63 interviews with a diverse sample of tradeswomen, this article examines how the cultural meanings of sexual orientation—as well as gender presentation, race, and body size—shapes the constraints that women face in the construction industry and the specific resistance strategies they develop. We argue that women’s presence in these male-dominated jobs threatens (1) notions of the work as inherently masculine and (2) a gender order that presumes the sexual subordination of women. Tradesmen neutralize the first threat by labeling tradeswomen as lesbians—and therefore not “real” women—and respond to the second by sexualizing straight and lesbian tradeswomen alike. In turn, tradeswomen develop individual resistance strategies, which are shaped by the intersections of their sexual identity, gender presentation, race, and body size. Finally, we show how tradesmen deploy homophobia to stymie collective action and solidarity by tradeswomen, gay or straight.

Keywords: *gender; sexuality; work; discrimination; social change*

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The effects of double binds, in which femininity and competence are seen as mutually exclusive, are well documented in male-dominated workplaces (Jamieson 1995; Valian 1998). Previous research shows that women resist double binds in part by “finding a variety of ways to do gender” (Pierce 1995, 13-14) that trouble boundaries of gender difference. Women may directly challenge gender dualities by, for instance, demanding respectful recognition as women while performing masculinity (Denissen 2010b). They may also invoke shared identities based on race, class, occupational hierarchy, or culture to deemphasize gender difference (Denissen 2010b; Janssens, Cappellen, and Zanoni 2006). Women workers thereby participate in “gender maneuvering” (Schippers 2002; see also Finley 2010), or the manipulation of gender rules to redefine the relationship between femininity and masculinity.

We still know very little, however, about how sexual identity and gender presentation—such as femme, gender-blenders/blending (Devor 1987; Moore 2011), and butch/dyke—shape how dominant groups seek to control women and how the latter respond. Kazyak’s (2012) work suggests that gender presentation—and gender more broadly—shapes the experiences of lesbians and heterosexual women alike. And yet, the gender literature is characterized by an undertheorization of “the relationship between heterosexuality and gender oppression” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009, 441), or what Chrys Ingraham calls heterogender (Ingraham 1994). Following Valentine’s (2007) critique of the fusing of gender and sexual categories (e.g., conflating homosexuality and gender variance), as well as attempts to ontologically separate these categories, we conceptualize gender and sexuality as co-constructed and relational features of social organization whose meanings vary across time and context.

Drawing on interviews with a diverse sample of lesbian and straight women in the construction trades, such as electricians and sheet metal workers, of which women comprise less than 2 percent of the workforce nationwide (Bilginsoy 2009), this article extends our understanding of gender maneuvering by exploring how the meaning of race, body size, and seniority impact the constraints tradeswomen face and the cultural resources available to them for resisting gender boundaries. We argue that the presence of women in male-dominated jobs threatens the perception of this work as inherently masculine (Collinson 2010; Epstein 1992; Paap 2006). We further argue that branding all tradeswomen lesbians, and thus—in the popular imagination—as not fully women, can partly be understood as an attempt to neutralize this threat. While the lesbian label (whether or not women personally identify as such) offers some degree of acceptance and freedom from performing emphasized femininity, it can

place demands on tradeswomen to perform a subordinate blue-collar masculinity that may include participating in a misogynistic work culture (Connell 1987; West and Zimmerman 1987).

Moreover, the presence of lesbians (and sexually autonomous straight women whose sexuality is not directed toward tradesmen) threatens heteronormativity and men's sexual subordination of women, or what Ingraham calls "patriarchal heterosexuality" (Ingraham 1994). By sexually objectifying tradeswomen, tradesmen, in effect, attempt to neutralize this threat. While tradeswomen, in turn, are sometimes able to deploy femininity to manage men's conduct and gain some measure of acceptance as women, it often comes at the cost of their perceived professional competence and sexual autonomy and—in the case of lesbians—sexual identity.

Those who refuse to be sexually objectified may subsequently find themselves the target of open hostility. Certain women—including lesbians and those who present as butch, large, or black—may be less able to access emphasized femininity as a resource and thus more subject to open hostility. We show that tradeswomen navigate among imperfect strategies and engage in complex risk assessments (McDermott 2006). Extending Denissen (2010b), we highlight how tradeswomen reflexively manipulate gender meanings, adding a new emphasis on the intersection between sexuality, gender representation, race, and body size. Ultimately, however, we argue that individual strategies are insufficient and show how tradesmen deploy the stigma of lesbianism to discourage solidarity and collective action among tradeswomen. We consider the implications of these findings within the larger debate about the efficacy of interactional forms of resistance for challenging patriarchy and the dominant gender order.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN MALE-DOMINATED OCCUPATIONS

Previous work shows that men working in male-dominated blue-collar occupations accentuate their manliness by distinguishing their work from women's work (Epstein 1992; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009) and how managers manipulate gender ideology to control workers (Collinson 2010; Epstein 1992; Paap 2006). For instance, in a coal miner's protest about being asked to lift too much weight, the foreman asked, "What's the matter? Aren't you man enough?" (Epstein 1992, 243). By encouraging workers to identify with their gender and, also, their race, national, and class identities, employers divide workers and distract them from working

conditions in order to enhance labor control (Hossfeld 1990). Generalizing from Ramirez (2010), many “macho” masculinities can be understood as working-class men’s “compensatory reactions” to subordination when other sources of masculine identity are blocked (Zinn 1982) or become insecure because of declining wages, job security, union power, and social regard (Paap 2006). When men derive psychic and social rewards and managers derive economic benefits from these identifications, both groups can be expected to resist the entrance of women workers, which undermines the sense that it is, in fact, “men’s work” (Epstein 1992).

In addition, tradeswomen are at a structural disadvantage as tokens (Kanter 1977) in “doubly male dominated” workgroups that “create a work culture that is an extension of male culture” and where the “numerical dominance of the workplace by men heightens the visibility of, and hostility toward, women workers” (Gruber 1998, 303). Institutional factors further intensify tradeswomen’s visibility and vulnerability. For instance, the decentralization of production in the construction industry means that workers regularly change job sites, entering into new work relationships. As a result, tradeswomen prove themselves without the full benefit of their prior accomplishments. When a tradeswoman’s reputation precedes her, it is often a liability, as in the case of tradeswomen managing the “sexual harassment lady” (Denissen 2010a) or “looking for a lawsuit” (Paap 2006) label that is sometimes attached to women who complain.

Moreover, despite the autonomy that construction workers enjoy (Applebaum 1999), tradeswomen’s success and safety requires good relations with tradesmen because (1) the apprentice model creates dependence on journeymen for training, (2) the work requires the cooperation of various trades to achieve tasks, and (3) workers must rely on each other for their physical safety (Applebaum 1999). While tradeswomen often emphasize the crucial role that supportive tradesmen play in their careers, their dependence on tradesmen also presents challenges.

Male homosexuality is also widely viewed as a threat to masculinity. It is common, in the male-dominated trades and elsewhere, for men to distance themselves—through homophobic jokes and the use of derogatory terms like “gay” and “faggot”—from homosexuality as a way of affirming their masculinity (Seidman 2010). C. J. Pascoe describes as “gendered homophobia” high school boys’ use of the terms “gay” and especially “fag” to police behavior considered insufficiently masculine on the part of other boys (Pascoe 2005). Pascoe argues that fag discourse is targeted specifically at boys, rather than girls, and is as much about policing masculinity as sexuality (Pascoe 2005).

Yet, research suggests that, in male-dominated occupations, both men and women—straight and gay—are targets of sexist and anti-gay harassment (Paap 2006). Men tease other men who exhibit behavior deemed feminine and tell their female coworkers to eschew makeup and to work “like a man” (Denissen 2010b, 1056). In male-dominated contexts, where simply occupying a trade as a woman is associated with other forms of perceived gender inversion, including same-sex desire (Paap 2006), men direct anti-gay harassment at straight women and lesbians alike (Frank 2001). In fact, in this context, the presumption of heterosexuality, or heteronormativity (Ingraham 1994), may be suspended.

Indeed, to the extent to which lesbians are perceived as not fully women, their presence may be less threatening, than that of straight women, to the idea of male-dominated occupations as “men’s work” (Paap 2006). Moreover, lesbians are positioned differently than are gay men within the hierarchical gender system that privileges both masculinity and heterosexuality (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Whereas gay men are devalued both because of their sexuality and because they are perceived as feminine, lesbians (and those perceived as lesbians) may derive benefits in some contexts from their perceived masculinity, while having to negotiate a devalued sexual identity.

This insight helps make sense of studies showing that open lesbians are sometimes more accepted as coworkers in male-dominated work contexts, compared to straight women (Miller, Forest, and Jurik 2003; Myers, Forest, and Miller 2004; Paap 2006). For example, studies find that male police officers better accept lesbian, compared to gay men, coworkers (Miller, Forest, and Jurik 2003, 369), and that lesbians’ sexual orientation offers a waiver from social pressures to enact emphasized femininity (Burke 1994). In some cases, heterosexual men’s interest in lesbian sexuality may facilitate lesbians’ inclusion in workplace banter (Frank 2001).

The experiences of butch, gender-blending women, and transmen further suggest that people may not always be censured for adopting the socially respected traits of masculinity (Devor 1987; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). We use the term “butch/dyke” to refer to performances of masculinity by women, what Halberstam (1998) calls “female masculinities.” We use the term “gender-blending” to refer to women who combine interactional strategies that are alternatively coded as feminine or masculine (Devor 1987; Lucal 1999; Moore 2011). Butch and gender-blending women may be lesbian or straight and may sometimes be taken for men, but—unlike transmen—they do not identify as men.

Schilt and Westbrook find that, in nonsexual interactions, transmen are able to establish a male gender identity on the basis of gendered appearance and demeanor, even when they do not possess male genitalia (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Male coworkers accept transmen—or at least tall, white transmen—as “just one of the guys,” based on visible cues of masculinity (e.g., facial hair), even when they know that they were formerly women (Schilt 2011). Yet, transmen who have not had hormonal therapy and therefore do not appear to be men do not receive such social advantages (Schilt 2011).

Women who do “female masculinities” (Halberstam 1998) may similarly receive some forms of patriarchal dividends. For example, Kazyak’s (2012) study of rural gays and lesbians shows that female masculinity may be normative in rural settings. However, to the extent that women clearly identify as women, they are unlikely to be granted the full status of “honorary men” (Schilt 2011). Moreover, they may find that inclusion prompts subjection to the rough and demeaning talk that characterizes many male interactions (Denissen 2010b).

If lesbians are perceived as less threatening to notions of “men’s work,” their visibility threatens the dictates of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1993) and, more broadly, the subordination of women’s sexuality to men’s desire (MacKinnon 1982; Pateman 1988). Men’s efforts to sexually objectify women coworkers can be understood as an attempt to restore this gender-sexual order. In response, women skillfully mix performances of femininity and masculinity to resist being depicted as occupationally incompetent or sexually deviant and to assert their sexual autonomy (Denissen 2010b). Yet, resistance to sexual objectification may elicit more overt hostility from male coworkers.

In response to homophobia, lesbian tradeswomen engage in interactional strategies that vary by perceived risk and other contextual factors. These fall along a continuum from “passing” (Goffman 1963) or “playing it straight” (Sullivan 2001), in which they conceal their sexual orientation, and “covering,” in which they prevent this identity from “looming large” (Goffman 1963) to fully “coming out” or “telling it like it is” (Sullivan 2001). Most engage in hybrid strategies, such as “speaking half-truths to power” or adopting an “open closet door policy” (Reimann 2001), in which they carefully manage disclosure by selectively revealing their sexual orientation based on specific context. In addition to sexual orientation, we expect that race, gender presentation, and body size inform which interactional strategies are both possible and preferred (Crenshaw 1989; Fikkan and Rothblum 2011; Moore 2011; Saguy 2012).

DATA AND METHODS

We draw on in-depth interviews the first author conducted with 63 tradeswomen and apprentices. We used purposive and snowball sampling and drew from members in joint (union and employer) apprenticeship programs and in a support and advocacy group for women in construction, and from attendees at a tradeswomen conference; one interview was conducted with a personal acquaintance. The overwhelming majority of the interviews are with tradeswomen who work primarily in the union sector, making unfeasible a comparison between union and non-union workers. The interviewees are diverse in terms of age, tenure in construction, construction trade, sexual orientation, and race and ethnicity. Among the interviewees, 35 identified as straight and 28 as lesbian, queer, or dyke; 34 are white, 13 African American, eight Latina, six Asian American, one Jewish, and one Native American. They range in age from 18 to 65, with most between 20 and 40 years of age. There are 26 electricians, six surveyors, six sheet metal workers, six carpenters, four painters, three ironworkers, three operating engineers, three laborers, and a single person in each of the following occupational categories: pipefitter, mason, taper, cabinet maker, elevator constructor, and tradeshow installer. Women's tenure in a trade ranges from one to 21 years. Two respondents own construction businesses.

The interviews were semifocused and open-ended, including questions about previous work, finding construction jobs, relations with coworkers and supervisors, descriptions of training, work processes, and job tasks, and demography. With one exception, all of the tradeswomen were interviewed away from the job site (at parks or restaurants). The interviews range in length from one to four hours, with most between 70 and 90 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed. The interview excerpts have been lightly edited for readability.

FINDINGS

We analytically disentangle two related threats that arise when women work on job sites: the masculine definition of the building trades as "men's work" and individual tradesmen's heteromascularity. In the first instance, we show how tradesmen reinforce the idea of the construction trades as men's work by assuming that tradeswomen must be lesbians. Thus, the lesbian label offers some freedom from gender expectations.

However, we show how the presence of lesbians violates the dictates of compulsory heterosexuality. The idea of an autonomous female sexuality that is not directed at men also undermines understandings of masculinity as involving sexual control over women. In an attempt to neutralize this threat, some men sexualize lesbians and straight tradeswomen, especially if they are more feminine in their presentation. While providing some degree of integration, such objectification can be unpleasant and even dangerous and reaffirms tradeswomen's femininity over their competence. Those tradeswomen whose threat to masculinity is not so easily neutralized by heterosexualization, including many lesbians, may avoid the traps of objectification only to find themselves the objects of direct hostility. We discuss how tradeswomen respond to these constraints, often in creative and artful ways, and how their strategies are constrained and enabled by sexual orientation, gender presentation, body size, and race. We then discuss how tradesmen deploy homophobia to stymie the expression of solidarity among women, gay or straight.

NEGOTIATING THREATS TO THE MASCULINE DEFINITION OF THE WORK

Tradeswomen report that homophobic comments, jokes, and graffiti are pervasive and that tradesmen regularly use terms like "gay" and "faggot" to publicly establish hetero-masculine identities and to reinforce the masculine definition of the work. For example, Monique says her male coworkers "pick on each other, [saying things] like: 'The electricians are faggots,' 'The carpenters are faggots,' 'Because he walks a certain way, he's gay.'" In this example, tradesmen use homophobic comments to assert dominance over "rival" groups of men (such as men from other trades) and to regulate the gender and sexual behavior of men. Yet, unlike the high school boys studied by Pascoe who claim not to direct fag discourse at boys known to be gay (Pascoe 2005), tradesmen unapologetically use homophobic slurs to repudiate both homosexuality and femininity (in men). This was not lost on the tradeswomen interviewed, who attributed the fact that they did not know any openly gay men to their sense that the trades are dangerous for openly gay men.

Similarly, the presence of women on job sites threatens the definition of the construction trades as "men's work." One way that tradesmen make sense of tradeswomen's presence and neutralize this threat is to label them lesbians or likely lesbians. Lynne, an Asian American lesbian, explains, "People think if you're a tradeswoman, you're a lesbian. You want to do

a man's job, so you want to be a man, so you're a lesbian." Stephanie, a straight white woman, says, "People think I'm gay a lot of the time because . . . I don't look real feminine." Holly, another straight white woman, says a fellow apprentice "never discussed her love life at work, and she [then] mentioned having a boyfriend. Everybody looked at her like 'You have a boyfriend?' They thought she was gay." Imagining tradeswomen as lesbians, that is, not fully female, preserves the idea of the trades as "men's work."

This opens up the possibility that straight tradeswomen may be perceived as more of a threat to the masculine definition of the work than lesbian tradeswomen. Indeed, Loretta, a black lesbian, says that her male coworkers do not "want any women at all," but that "somebody like me is safer for them because they can ignore me like a guy they don't like":

They're, like, "There's a chick here, but there's not really a chick here. It's Loretta, she's not really a chick." But [with] a chick, they're hitting on them, they're getting in trouble. They've got to be a little bit more on the Ps and Qs about what they say and the way they act. They can be a little freer [with me] because I'm not going to beat them up about their language and scratching their balls and acting like assholes.

Loretta notes that while some tradesmen resent the presence of all women in the trades, straight or lesbian, that she, as a lesbian, is "not really a chick" and her presence does not limit tradesmen's freedom to perform masculinity as they please. This may be especially true for lesbians like Loretta who present as butch. Indeed, Vicky, a lesbian tradeswoman who describes herself as "a bit girlier" notes that tradesmen are more likely to treat a woman who "doesn't look as feminine on the outside" as "one of the guys," while they are more likely to "watch their potty mouth" around more "girly"-presenting lesbians. We also find some evidence that butch lesbians are somewhat less likely to be targeted by sexual advances.

A few tradeswomen claim that, as lesbians, they are fully accepted as "one of the guys." For example, Toni, a white lesbian, who describes herself as someone who "used to be extremely feminine" but no longer bothers because "it required too much maintenance," describes how she is incorporated into the men's sex talk:

[My coworker] tells his girlfriend, "She's like one of the guys, you know, I can tell her anything." That's how most of the guys think of me anyways. They just talk about whatever they want to. It's, like, [I'll tell the men,] "You should do this [sexual maneuver] or you should try that [sexual

position].” [And, later they’ll tell me.] “Oh, that worked! Thanks a lot, Toni.” So it’s all good.

For Toni, offering advice on women’s sexuality is a “good” form of inclusion because it takes place within a supportive working relationship with coworkers.

At the same time, finding acceptance as “one of the guys” can be fraught with danger. Lori, the Jewish butch lesbian introduced earlier, describes a lunchtime interaction she had as an apprentice, when she was especially vulnerable:

They’re sitting around talking about the Mike Tyson case when he sexually assaulted this woman. For me, rape is no joking matter. So here’s nine of ’em, a foreman, journeymen, apprentices, and one shop steward, and I’m the only woman in this discussion. They’re all sitting there talking about it and joking about it, and I’m, like, “Whoa. I’m feeling really, really violent.” So I said, “The next person who says anything, I’m gonna get really violent.” They all shut the fuck up. Then there was another situation where they were talking about wife beating. I got mad, but sometimes it’s not worth it ’cause it’s, like, “Oh, she’s got no sense of humor.” So then I just don’t eat lunch with them anymore.

As her words illustrate, being “one of the guys” may involve participating in a misogynistic work culture. Lori tells of not being able to tolerate such expectations, becoming angry and removing herself from the work group. She explains how she censured her own responses out of fear that resistance to the sexist work culture would jeopardize her insider status by stigmatizing her as lacking a “sense of humor.” Several of the tradeswomen, including Lori, say that, after completing apprenticeships and becoming certified, they felt less at risk and, as a result, used more assertive and visible—as opposed to accommodative or subtle—strategies.

While lesbians may be more likely than straight women to be accepted as “one of the guys,” and while this can provide some camaraderie and acceptance as a serious worker, they rarely experience full acceptance. Rather, tradeswomen typically emphasize that acceptance as one of the guys is incomplete and conditional. Many tradeswomen say their male coworkers hold them to an exaggerated standard of masculinity, making them carry heavier materials and do dirtier and more dangerous work, in order to prove they can work “like a guy.” Further, as we discuss ahead, acceptance as one of the guys in some contexts does not exempt them from the ideals of emphasized femininity in others.

Managing Perceived Threats to the Heterogendered Order

While the presumption that tradeswomen are likely lesbians neutralizes threats to the masculine definition of the work, it threatens heteronormativity and the sexual and economic subordination of women to men. In response, tradesmen sometimes direct gendered homophobic comments at lesbian tradeswomen. In other instances, they sexually objectify (lesbian and straight) tradeswomen. We examine tradeswomen's accounts of this behavior and how they respond to it.

Keeping Them Guessing, Keeping It Private, and Other Responses to Gendered Homophobia. Just as they use fag discourse to police gender nonconformity among men, so tradesmen use the lesbian label to control the gendered conduct of tradeswomen. For example, Elena (a Latina heterosexual) says tradesmen single out lesbian tradeswomen as deviant "freaks": "The guys talk about them really bad, like, she's trying to play a man role, she likes it rough, men can't satisfy her, she must be freaky and have freaky needs." Lauren, a white lesbian who describes herself as tomboyish but not butch, says that she has heard her coworkers make disparaging comments about "hardcore dyke lesbians." She recounts how one tradesman exclaimed, "Damn, I'm working with this guy and next thing I know she turns around and, shit, she's got tits!" When Lauren asked him if she was a good worker, he responded, "I don't know, I couldn't work with her."

Racial minority status and body size can intersect with sexual identity and gender presentation to heighten stigmatization and otherness. Loretta, the black butch lesbian, is large and has a shaved head. An electrician, a trade that historically has had among the lowest number of minority workers (Bilginsoy 2005), Loretta describes job sites as "bastions of white male supremacy." She notes that, in recent years, an influx of Latino workers has heightened racial tensions and that the prevailing message conveyed to women, "queers," and people of color is "You shouldn't be here." She tells of hearing tradesmen say, "Now they're letting animals in the trade." When asked to whom they were referring, Loretta exclaims, "Me! Or my crew-member who [was] a person of color." Loretta speaks of how she is threatening, not just as a woman, but as a large, black, butch lesbian woman with an aggressive personality, a composite that, "messes with the whole expectation of what your gender, what your behavior's supposed to be."

Loretta says that tradesmen sometimes "picked on" her about her large size, saying things like, "You're fat" or that her size "ain't cool for

chicks.” Similarly, Lori, who describes herself as a “big butch dyke” (a “three-part package”), says that her coworkers’ negative comments about her size are gendered: “They’ll accommodate a big guy where they won’t accommodate a big woman.”

Sometimes the label “lesbian” is decoupled from women’s own sexual identity, as when tradesmen target tradeswomen for gendered homophobia because their appearance or behavior does not conform to tradesmen’s gender expectations. For instance, Cheryl, a white heterosexual, explains how one of her coworkers “was mad because I’d showed him up that day,” performing better than he in a workplace task. He asked her, “What’s the matter with you? Are you one of those lesbian women, you know, and you’re not interested in me?” In this example, Cheryl’s coworker accuses her of being a lesbian, and thus unfeminine, because she outperforms him. He thereby conflates her occupational competence and sexual orientation, considering both as signs of gender nonconformity.

In response to gendered homophobia, lesbian tradeswomen engage in complex risk assessments and employ a variety of disclosure options. For example, Anna, a Latina lesbian who describes herself as tomboyish and “not real girly but not real butchy,” remarks about a coworker, “I’ve heard him make comments about fags and queers and I didn’t want to go there. When he said, ‘Are you married?’ I said, ‘No’ and I didn’t say I have a partner.” Here, Anna speaks a “half-truth to power” (Sullivan 2001). It is true that she is not married, but she conceals the full truth—that she has a same-sex romantic partner—from this coworker because his homophobic comments make that revelation feel unsafe. Further, Anna says that in situations that feel safer, she selectively discloses her sexual identity:

I don’t totally come out and say, “Okay, I’m gay.” I just ease into it, kind of feel it out. . . . They say, “What’s your boyfriend do?” I’ll say, “I don’t have a boyfriend.” If it’s somebody that I know that I can trust I’ll say, “I’ve got a girlfriend.” As long as I think that it wouldn’t be a bad situation. It’s a judgment call.

Racial minority status often heightens othering and perceived risk, further limiting tradeswomen’s disclosure options. For example, Lori, a self-described Jewish butch lesbian, says she did not disclose her sexual orientation on one job site early in her career because she had heard “a bunch of sexist, racist, and homophobic speech” that made disclosure feel unsafe. While her coworkers were specifically “targeting the Hispanics,” their behavior “really frightened” her “because they had swastikas and Nazi and KKK-type talk.” Yet, later in her career and on less racist job

sites, she developed a strategy of singling out one man with whom she would be more open:

What I do generally is I'd make allies with one dude who I felt was more open-minded or we have a connection. I would be honest with him about who I was. As long as I had one person I could be myself with, then I felt okay. Now I'm pretty much out. I decided that I'm out in the union as a whole, but I pick and choose how much I say.

Several of the respondents similarly spoke about becoming more open, but still guarded, regarding their sexuality as they gained more occupational seniority.

Sometimes tradeswomen conceal their sexual identity not simply out of fear of retaliation but also to resist the salience of their sexual identity in workplace interactions. We call this strategy "keeping it private." Vanesa, a white lesbian, explains that she brought her best friend, rather than her girlfriend, to union picnics both because she wants to keep her "personal life private" and also because she hopes to "keep away from the stigma" and does not "want a guy not to teach me because of who I am." Anita, a Native American lesbian, similarly evokes a concern with both privacy and homophobia, explaining that she was not initially out because "it's nobody's business, and then going into a man's field I figured it's probably not a good idea to advertise." Yet, she says that "if it came up, I didn't deny it," akin to what others have labeled an "open closet door policy" (Reimann 2001). Similarly, Lauren, a white lesbian, says, "There's some guys that don't know. Maybe that's my way of blending in without any confrontation. I like to get in there, get my job done, and get out. I've had a couple of guys ask me, and if they got the balls to ask me, I'll tell them."

Gina, a large, black, straight, married woman, evokes a "keep them guessing" strategy that entails sending mixed messages about sexual identity as part of an attempt to "break that stereotype":

I had them so fooled there were people that didn't have any idea what my sexual orientation was. If somebody questioned me, [I'd say,] "I'm gay, leave me alone, I'm a lesbian." Or [I'd say,] "I'm single," or "I have two kids," or "I have a husband." People would be running around, [saying,] "No, she told me she was gay." Or "Gina, you're not gay, I met your husband." So you'd keep them guessing because the point was that your sexual orientation didn't matter.

While keeping the men guessing may function partially as an expression of solidarity with lesbian tradeswomen, a sort of reverse passing intended

to challenge stereotypes about lesbians, Gina herself says it is also a way of resisting the salience of women's sexual identities at work.

Similarly, Alex, a white lesbian, talks about mixing displays of subordinated feminine heterosexuality with more stereotypically masculine behavior in order to resist homophobia and sexism. She explains that while she used to be mistaken for a man because she "looked completely androgynous," she has grown her hair since joining the trades because short hair "would be such a red flag" that she is a "dyke" or is "so manly":

I'd rather act feminine and friendly and cute than get harassed, ignored, or treated worse. But at the same time it's like I have to be careful that I don't act overly feminine because they'll think I can't work. Sometimes I'll say something that will totally throw them for a spin [or] make them raise an eyebrow because I'll say it in a masculine way. I'll say something that's really clear, concise, and to the point, and they don't expect that of me. They think I'm a bubbly person; they stereotype me as a female.

Alex is managing a classic double bind where she is held accountable to conflicting expectations for gendered conduct. She is aware that her coworkers may mark (raised eyebrow) and sanction (harassment, isolation) masculine conduct. Alex says she flirts with men and acts "feminine" in an effort to forestall certain forms of harassment and exclusion, but fears that overdoing it may detract from her perceived competence. She performs an intricate gender maneuvering in trying to strike a balance by varying heterofeminine displays with more assertive (masculine) actions to transgress dualistic sexual and gender boundaries. While white respondents, straight and gay, were more likely to speak of incorporating displays of emphasized femininity into their gender maneuvering, black, butch, and large tradeswomen were more likely to emphasize their ability to "hold their own" with the heaviest, dirtiest, and most dangerous tasks.

Turning the Tables: Resistance to Compulsory Heterosexuality. Another way that tradesmen neutralize the threat of lesbian/female autonomy is by recasting them as objects of men's sexual desire. Some lesbian tradeswomen say tradesmen embrace them through the heterosexual male fantasy of having "fancy sex" with multiple women. For instance, when asked if she ever was directly targeted by homophobia, Anna, the Latina lesbian introduced earlier, responds, "No, because I'm a female. Some guys say, 'I don't care about the women. I think that's great! That's fancy for me! I just can't stand the guys.'" Yet, Toni, a white lesbian, suggests that this form of acceptance has its costs: "They'll make innuendos like 'You

should hook up with her and then hook up with me later.' They know I'm not interested in them. They just continue to do it because they know it bugs me." In this instance, Toni's coworkers impose heterosexual expectations and meanings onto her and intentionally "bug" her. By redefining lesbian relationships as serving male heterosexual desire, tradesmen neutralize the perceived threat of lesbian desire to heterosexism.

Out lesbian tradeswomen use various strategies to resist their coworkers' efforts to heterosexualize them and, sometimes, to reaffirm their sexual identity as lesbians. Jan, a lesbian of white and Native American descent, who is slim and has long blonde hair, and says she "doesn't go out of her way to be feminine" but "doesn't seem butch to the guys," complains about how she has to tell her coworkers that she is not "free porn." Others speak of resisting traditional gender dynamics by showing a sexually assertive interest in their coworker's women partners. Anna, the Latina lesbian, explains:

[My coworkers] accept me for who I am. [He'll say,] "That's cool, girl. Can we get some?" [laughs] I'll be, like, "Can I get some of yours? I'll let you talk to my girl if you let me talk to your wife." And he'll be, like, "Fuck you." Guys are cool with me. [They'll say,] "How's your girl? She's pretty hot." I go, "Yeah, thank you. So is your wife." [Laughs.]

While Anna describes her interactions with her coworkers as playful and respectful ("They accept me for who I am"), she also experiences counter-resistance from her coworker ("Fuck you"). Indeed, it seems that she gets respect, in large part, because she can give as good as she gets, using masculine displays of dominance to neutralize efforts to sexually dominate her. We call this strategy "turning the tables."

Similarly, Lynne, an Asian American lesbian whom we would describe as gender-blending but who is sometimes mistaken for a man, explains how she responded to a coworker who constantly asked her if he could watch her have sex with another woman:

I said, "Why don't you talk to your girlfriend about it? Bring me a picture; I want to see what she looks like." He got all defensive: "Who, wait, what'd you mean? I don't have a picture. She ain't going for that shit." He backed off that whole line of conversation after that.

Like Anna, Lynne successfully wards off her coworker's efforts to sexualize her by turning the tables and sexualizing his girlfriend. While this interaction seems to have been successful in curtailing demands to watch

Lynne have sex with other women, later in the interview Lynne says this incident led to a strained working relationship with this particular coworker.

Moreover, tradeswomen are not equally able to resist their coworker's efforts to sexualize them. Julia, a Latina lesbian apprentice who described herself as "looking like a little dude," describes an extreme case in which a coworker attempted to sexually force himself on her:

Every day he would bug me, "Hey, you should come over to my house. We should hang out and you should be my girlfriend." I'm, like, "No, dude. I don't like guys." He started telling me sexual stuff like "We should have a threesome." Every day for, like, three weeks he would tell me, "Watch, I'm going to get you. I always get what I want." I never said anything because I didn't believe he would because there were always people around. One day he started getting in my face and walking me back into a unit. He picked me up and took me in there and then, that fool, he turned me around and hugged me from the waist like [he was] kissing his girlfriend. He went down to kiss me and I was laughing because I was scared. I was, like, "Man, what's wrong with you?" And at that moment one of my coworkers was passing by and they saw each other and this guy let go. I got scared; he could have done anything, you know.

This tradesman disregards Julia's identity as a lesbian, as well as her resistance to his sexual advances, trying to force himself on her. He responds to her defiance with threats to "get her," culminating with a sexual assault on the job site. Fearing for her job, she initially refused to report the incident but ultimately did so, upon the urging of the superintendent and the coworker who witnessed the assault. Julia says she never saw the assailant again.

Other tradeswomen also report being targeted with overt hostility and violence after refusing to engage in sexual banter or feminine displays. Some of the more egregious examples include having electrical wires turned on while they were working on them, having tools dropped on them, or finding feces in their hard hat. These sorts of incidents highlight the risks and limitations of individual-level resistance.

How Gendered Homophobia Limits Collective Resistance. While individual strategies have subversive potential, successful "contestation of gender hierarchy is fundamentally a collective process" (Connell 2009, 109). With typically few allies at work, one might expect tradeswomen to seek each other out for safety and support. Yet many of our respondents

say they avoid other women both on and off the construction site. In some cases, this stems from their own homophobia, but it is more often described as an effort to protect themselves from homophobic stigma and sexist stereotypes. Vanesa, a white lesbian, explains, “Women will tell me they don’t want to be seen with other women or belonging to a women’s group because a lot of the guys say, ‘[If] you women want to be just like us men so much, then why do you have this little women’s group?’” Some tradesmen pressure her and other tradeswomen to avoid associating with other women. Vanesa further describes how tradesmen reframe women’s efforts to support each other as attempts to gain special privileges. For example, her foreman remarked, after seeing her in a tradeswomen’s convention T-shirt, “I don’t think there should be separate organizations, you guys need to be treated the same.”

Loretta, the black butch lesbian, says that she “would never hang out with the girls” and that “the girls on the crew wouldn’t want to hang out with me, because they wouldn’t want the other guys to think that they were gay. Because of that guilt by association thing it’s, like, ‘Well, if we’re nice to you, they might think we’re like you.’” Loretta’s comments speak to how lesbian stigma is attached not only to joining women’s associations but also to socializing with other women on the job. Similarly, Lori, a Jewish butch lesbian, says, “I wanted to start a lesbian tradeswomen group but not even the lesbians want to start it with me.” Moreover, she says, “Sometimes even other women in the trades are afraid to be seen with me because I’m an out lesbian. Like it’ll spill off on them and the guys will see it.” At a conference for women in the trades, the women became particularly animated when they heard that tradesmen were referring to the conference as a “big lesbian orgy” in what seemed like an attempt to discredit the conference and keep both straight and lesbian tradeswomen away.

As Lori describes it, tradesmen effectively use the specter of lesbianism to stymie gender solidarity and political activism: “Sometimes there’s solidarity, sometimes not, because the lesbians think they have to align themselves with the men for power and that means turning against other women or a more out lesbian. They’ll be more closeted or they’re afraid to be seen as lesbian whether they’re lesbian or not.” In distancing themselves from other women in order to protect themselves from the gendered homophobia of their coworkers, both straight and lesbian tradeswomen are made more vulnerable as they become isolated from each other. Yet, there is also evidence of resistance and change. For example, the tradeswomen conference has grown steadily over time from a state to an international event and

active tradeswomen's groups have formed online, demonstrating organizational success despite these challenges.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on interviews with a diverse sample of lesbian and straight women in the construction trades, this article examines how the cultural meanings of sexual identity, gender presentation, race, and, more tentatively, body size and seniority, inform how men seek to control tradeswomen and how the latter respond to these efforts. We show that labeling tradeswomen as lesbians, and thus—in the popular imagination—as not fully women, both makes sense of their presence and reaffirms the perception of the trades as “men’s work.” Some lesbian tradeswomen report being more accepted than their straight women coworkers and claim that the lesbian label offers them some freedom from performing emphasized femininity. This acceptance is limited, however, and can place them in uncomfortable situations where they are expected to perform misogynist versions of masculinity. Moreover, while lesbians may be less threatening to the notion of the trades as men’s work, their presence threatens heteronormativity and assumptions about the sexual subordination of women. We explain how tradesmen’s efforts to sexually objectify tradeswomen can be understood as attempts to neutralize threats to heteronormativity and male privilege.

We demonstrate that in response to these constraints, tradeswomen use gender maneuvering (Schipper 2002) to combine performances of femininity and masculinity, to gain some measure of acceptance as women, and to maintain their perceived competence as workers. While tradeswomen strategically draw upon multiple strategies, we further show how the meanings attributed to tradeswomen’s sexuality, gender presentation, race, body size, and seniority influence their preferred strategies. For instance, lesbian tradeswomen who are perceived as “like one of the guys” are more likely than straight tradeswomen to report using sexual banter to find commonality with their male coworkers. White respondents, straight and gay, are most likely to incorporate elements of emphasized femininity in their gender maneuvering. In contrast, black, butch, and large tradeswomen are more likely to emphasize that they can “hold their own” with the heaviest, dirtiest, and most dangerous tasks.

Straight and lesbian tradeswomen alike invoke a “keeping them guessing” strategy, which involves giving varying and contradictory cues about

sexual identity over time. This strategy is structurally equivalent to the gender maneuvering strategies of varying masculine and feminine gender displays (see also Denissen 2010b). In addition, lesbians use various strategies to manage the stigma related to their sexual orientation, including telling half-truths to power, selectively disclosing, and employing an open closet door policy (Reimann 2001; Sullivan 2001). Lesbians also invoke a strategy we call “keeping it private,” in which they conceal their sexual identity on the basis that it is not relevant. This strategy parallels tradeswomen’s efforts to suppress the salience of gender by emphasizing other commonalities such as race, class, and occupation (Denissen 2010b).

We provide evidence that experienced tradeswomen are somewhat more comfortable with assertive and visible—as opposed to deferential and covert—strategies, such as “turning the tables,” in which tradeswomen sexualize tradesmen’s girlfriends or wives. Future work should examine the extent to which tradesmen’s behavior systematically varies by their age/generation as well. One might expect younger generations to be more inclusive of women and minorities, but this merits systematic examination. More broadly, since men’s cooperation and training is crucial for women’s success in male-dominated contexts, more research that examines men’s role as allies is needed.

While individual tradeswomen are creative and sometimes successful in their efforts to resist men’s attempts to marginalize and exclude them, our study suggests that individual responses may not be enough to produce widespread or lasting change. Tradeswomen’s efforts to organize, however, are stymied by insinuations of lesbianism. Thus, gendered homophobia plays a crucial role in isolating and dividing tradeswomen, undermining their efforts to create solidarity, engage in collective resistance, and bring about institutional change. The risks of associating with lesbians and other women may be greatest for women of color and other especially vulnerable populations, a question that merits additional research.

We show how contradictions in the dominant heterogender order constrain tradeswomen, while opening up possibilities for—and even necessitating—more reflexive, varied, and strategic forms of gender and sexual practices (Denissen 2010b). Since gendered expectations of tradeswomen are intrinsically contradictory (e.g., sufficiently masculine to be deemed competent but sufficiently feminine to be socially acceptable), tradeswomen must constantly vary the way they “do gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987). Earlier work shows that exclusion of women in the building trades is reproduced despite women’s resistance at the level of

interaction and identity construction (Denissen 2010b). This article sheds light on one key mechanism whereby women's strategic agency is limited: the isolation of tradeswomen from other women. Thus, while individual tradeswomen strategically maneuver among gender and sexual meanings in ways that transgress heterogender boundaries and trouble the heterogender order, they face greater counter-resistance when they collectively organize. This study expands on previous research that documents how race, class, and gender identities can be used to divide and control workers (Hossfeld 1990) by showing how tradesmen use gendered homophobia as a means of dividing and subordinating women workers.

These findings speak to debates about the extent to which individual-level resistance disrupts patriarchy or, alternatively, unwittingly reinforces the dominant gender order (Devor 1987; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). According to Finley (2010), transformations in gender relations are more likely in women-controlled than male-dominated spaces. Finley argues that women's networks are crucial for transforming the dominant gender order and that women in male-dominated settings are too isolated from other women to be effective. Our findings regarding women's isolation from each other and limits to collective resistance are consistent with Finley's argument.

Yet, we suspect that female- and male-dominated settings each present their own set of struggles. Challenges to a large and powerful sector of the economy, such as the construction trades, are likely to meet strong resistance. Moreover, in male-dominated contexts, those who have an interest in upholding the dominant gender order have a numerical and normative advantage. In contrast, in women-centered contexts such as roller derbies (Finley 2010) or alternative hard rock scenes (Schippers 2002), women may face less resistance. However, these subcultures are themselves marginalized from sites of political and economic power, limiting the impact of women's gains. Perhaps the path toward undoing the hegemonic gender order lies in combining "micromaneuvering" and collective activism (Schippers 2002) with coalition building across contexts. The Internet offers opportunities for tradeswomen wishing to build coalitions, as exemplified by an online forum created by and for tradeswomen that announces to readers, "we encourage guys to work with us and join [name of group] to show men and women working together." Supportive women-centered spaces are important, yet working-class women and women of color also emphasize the importance of organizing alongside men. As Paap (2006) demonstrates, employers profit from "macho" masculinities at the expense of tradesmen, who work harder, faster, and more

dangerously to prove their worth, undermining working conditions for all construction workers while also marginalizing tradeswomen.

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