

## Autoethnography of Work: Challenges, Triumphs, and Queer Voice

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The purpose of this article is to explore the tensions between Queer experience and what Mizzi (2013) calls *heteroprofessionalism* within the corporate workplace. Using an analytic approach to autoethnography, this article explores a particularly tense experience between supervisor and employee, underlined by an exchange of transphobic comments. This experience begs the question: how do we engage in LGBTQ+ activism within the professional world? To answer this question, notions of Queer voice in relation to toxic workplace culture are explored. This article ultimately suggests that Queer marginalization within corporate atmospheres require a re-telling of these *alternative stories* as a method of counteracting and challenging systemic oppression.

### Autoethnography of Work: Challenges and Queer Voice

*I sat in front of my laptop for what felt like hours. I lost count how many attempts at writing were made over the last few months. It felt like writer's block—not knowing where to go next, how to move the story along. But it was quite different, actually; I was afraid of writing. I was afraid because what I wanted to write about involved a tense experience with someone who has a large presence and authority, who I will call 'The Boss'. However, I so desperately wanted to write this experience and have my experience of injustice reflected somewhere. I want people to hear that these experiences happen and are not as uncommon as some may think. And, if nothing else, so that others would understand or feel capable of doing something.*

*Even though I tried to write about my experience, I was stopped every time I tried to convey my thoughts on paper. How will people react? I asked myself over and over. Will this person find out, and if so, will they be angry? What about my current or former colleagues? Will I be treated differently? Will I not be hired in the future? All of these questions and more swirled in my head like a big angry cloud. I was unsure how to write the story, and I started experiencing a writer's block, one which would follow me for several months. Re-visiting this story after several years and the fear of what possible consequences might come of its re-telling acted as a large brick wall in my head.*

This paper is an autoethnographic account of workplace distress in a particularly tense, and transphobic atmosphere. It is particularly important to share this story as I recount the meaning of institutional and academic activism as a method of change. In discussing this experience, I will connect it with three specific themes: queer professional activism, impacts of toxic workplace culture on LGBTQ+ workers, and considerations of the experience utilizing Mizzi's (2013) concept of heteroprofessionalism. In doing so, I will underline narratives of (some) queer professionals, while discussing the complexities that are intimately linked with such narratives.

In sharing my story, I hope that this might inspire confidence in others to show up and be a part of the larger dialogue on marginalization in the 'professional' world.

### **Situating the Self**

Within feminist practice, it is necessary to position oneself within written works (England, 1994). This notion, called positionality, enables an understanding of the perspectives and frameworks that underpin the writing, and argues that no writing can be truly free from bias. In positioning myself here, the narrative presented will be given shape and meaning in lieu of culture, class, geopolitical location, and so on.

I am a young professional cisgender (my sex assigned at birth and gender identity match) queer male. I grew up in a small town in rural Newfoundland, and since coming out during my undergraduate education, I have been an active member in the local LGBTQ+ communities wherever I have lived. Because of this, I have a strong connection with other LGBTQ+ people. I also come into this writing as a (formerly) lower class person. I grew up as the middle child of three to a grade nine educated mother, and we lived on the Canadian equivalent of "welfare" for my entire life. I had been working since I was 12, at farms in the summer, to paper routes, and later to other odd jobs, wherever I could get the income. This is important to note because it interacts with the complex atmosphere of professional and corporate politics.

However, I am fortunate enough to have completed both undergraduate and graduate degrees, and I live happily with my partner of over five years and our cat. I have a family that supports me, and I am lucky to have escaped the cycle of poverty (Karp, 1990) which constantly threatens lower class families. I position myself here to help shape a complex narrative, which many who have not experienced queerness, poorness or other forms of marginalization may not understand, especially in professional spaces. Before continuing on to the narrative, what follows here is an explanation of autoethnography as a scholarly method.

### **Autoethnography: A Method to Madness**

Autoethnography as a research method comes from the tradition of ethnography in the humanities and social sciences, especially sociology and anthropology. It combines the formats of ethnography as a method with the practices of autobiography as a creative process. In doing so, it looks at the stories of individuals through the lens of a narrative to create a dialogue surrounding the issues or experiences of people (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

The ontological and epistemological practices of autoethnographers is typically post-modern, post-structuralist, feminist, social constructivist, and critical. As a method, it is inherently rooted within a belief that academic inquiry should be linguistically accessible to non-researchers and researchers alike, that it is responsive and inclusive to marginalized people, and that it is oriented to social justice (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnographers therefore typically believe that there is no one universal "truth" in human experiences. That is to say, they typically see knowledge as a subjective experience in which no one person may experience

the same phenomenon the same way (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). This is informed by a feminist subjectivity, specifically involving concepts of intersectionality. Taken together, this position suggests that, due to the variance in human identities and experiences, social knowledge must therefore be constituted as an agreed upon system of beliefs. Consequently, autoethnographers believe that through the sharing of narrative inquiries into oneself, knowledge can be expanded upon, enhanced, and shifted to include the perspectives of all people.

To conduct autoethnography, autoethnographers reflexively and retroactively approach experiences which may be constituted as evocative and meaningful (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Typical experiences that one may wish to share include personal epiphanies or profound experiences which lead to personal change or growth, although this is not a requirement. Autoethnographers may also choose to write about experiences which result from membership to a specific (sub-)culture or as a result of a cultural identity.

The goal of writing an autoethnography is to provide a thick description of the experience or event (Bochner, 1997; Ellis, 1997). To do so, autoethnographers may choose to review field notes, observations, journals, interviews, or other artifacts. Autoethnographers use several different literary techniques to make the writing engaging and accessible for a wide audience (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). For example, some may choose to use aspects of storytelling, such as character and plot development. They may choose to use aspects of “showing,” or placing the reader into the event, alongside “telling,” to provide some distance and explain the context to shift the reader to think about the events in a more abstract way. Autoethnographers may also choose to use authorial voice, or writing from first or third person perspectives, for example.

While autoethnographers seek to make their writing accessible to a wide audience, they must still write from the standards and practices of analyzing social sciences research for publishing, which ultimately differentiates it as a method rather than as a creative arts expression alone. As a result, autoethnographers often build in relevant theories and research to speak to their experiences (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The stylistic conventions of how this analysis is written is largely up to the writer. Some prefer to take an *Analytical Autoethnography* approach, which they define as one which juxtaposes creative prose with sequences of reflexive analysis (Anderson, 2006; Wall, 2008). However, Ellis and Bochner (2006), some of the founders of autoethnography, have denounced this title as redundant given the necessity to analyze theory and research with the writing as a scholarly method.

The way that I have written this piece uses all of these conventions to elaborate on the both the experience which centers this writing, as well as the utilization of a ‘queer autoethnography.’ This perspective is a necessary departure of traditional autoethnography, and I will explore this in more detail here.

### **Queer Autoethnographic Method**

Conceptualizing a queer autoethnographic method is an elusive task. It combines tenants of queer and trans experiences with queer theory, feminist theory, and autoethnography as a method. As a term, *queer* itself is often contested and temporally constituted, which makes it all the more difficult to define. For the purposes of this paper, I use Vicars (2006) conceptualization, who argues that “a queer reflexivity raises the significance of employing ontology for unsettling thinking about reality, agency and ways of being and relating” (p. 23). Queer theory, then, ultimately seeks to unsettle, problematize, and critique dominant ideologies and dominant cultural narratives. Adams and Bolen (2017) further describe queer autoethnography as a method to describe personal stories which are often infused with cultural experiences that may include taken-for-granted norms, uncomfortable emotions, practice, and affects, among other things.

My experiences that I write about here refer largely to the intersectional and contextual realities of our cultural and sub-cultural experiences. To be sure, my experiences should not be considered monolithic. I choose to explore my narrative using a queer autoethnography in order to elucidate a better knowledge of queer sensibilities within professional spaces, specifically from an outsider’s perspective. As I reveled in the paucity of research on autoethnography methods, which have blown up in the last decade, I was disappointed to find a distinct lack of queer voices being represented. It is difficult to know if this is due to the nature of the professional context of higher education itself. This may also be due to the lack of job security of non-tenured professors, the fringe method of Queer theory and autoethnography, or other factors (Ellis et al., 2008).

Queer autoethnography is an important differentiation from traditional autoethnography because it underlines the need for queer and trans voices within academic literature. Although there are similarities between queer and non-queer experiences, this story specifically involves an experience of marginalization that can only be understood as inherently queer in nature. Therefore, this paper approaches queer autoethnography as an extension of autoethnography with queer-specific experiences. With this, and with traditional autoethnography, comes ethical challenges which must be approached here.

### **Ethics of Autoethnographic Research**

Autoethnographers must confront ethical considerations similarly to any other researcher. When writing autoethnographic research, Ellis (2008) emphasizes the need to consider relational ethics. This type of ethics refers to the way that our relationships with others are implicated within our writing and the possible effects that it may have.

Some autoethnographers choose to engage in a process of participant checking, asking those implicated in the research for permission to use conversations or observations that directly involve them (Ellis et al., 2008). However, this is not always possible, particularly when the subject of our writing has caused us harm, when that person has died, or other socially complex circumstances.

I approached this issue by writing about how I felt about the situation rather than explicitly including the dialogue that was shared between myself and my boss. Like Ellis et al. (2008), I asked myself what gave me the right to talk about these people. There is a need to be cautious about using our academic credentials as a license to write about whatever we want, however we want. Some researchers choose to treat it as closely as any other research using human participants. For example, Wall (2008) approached this dilemma through their institutional ethics review board (IERB or IRB) to submit their autoethnographic works for ethical approval. However, as Wall notes, the IRB was unable to cover all of the ethical issues that they grappled with.

Although the majority of ethical concerns arising from autoethnographic work considers how our intimate relationships will be implicated, it is important to consider our own vulnerability. In exposing our experiences, which are often typified by discomfort, grief, pain or oppression, this is especially so for queer autoethnographers, who must constantly assess and reassess their situation for safety or implications of coming out. As our colleagues, future students, friends, and complete strangers may read our writing, it is unpredictable how that will impact our lives as queer people, and so we must practice an ethic of (self-)care (Ellis, 2008; Pearce, 2010; Wall, 2016). This may involve selectively choosing to report on experiences, to use literary techniques to create a critical distance, or the choice not to publish a manuscript, among many other considerations. Taken together, all these ethical considerations must be made in writing autoethnographically.

Ethics was and is a large contributor to telling my own story and the writer's block that I felt. I grappled with which aspects to write upon and how to fairly depict the situation. My biggest concern was writing with the consideration of my past employer to see this writing and not think favourably of it. I wonder if and how it will impact my ability to move forward in my career, if I will be seen as a complainer, and how my reputation may be shifted as a result of writing. I chose to think through these considerations carefully and write about my experience, without including conversations between people and without identifying anyone. In highlighting my own experience, I hope to underline the experience and its wider implications, rather than to vilify any person involved.

### **Telling a Queer Tale**

*A large conference table sits in front of you. Around it is your colleagues, squeezed together in a room that is much too small to fit everyone. These meetings don't typically hold so many people, however this time The Boss was in, so it seemed there were less no-shows than usual. There were large windows drawn open across from you, the sky dreary and overcast. As the last few people shuffle into the room, squeezing behind you to find a chair, The Boss begins to discuss the agenda for the day.*

*As usual, the topics of discussion centre around the politics of the job: lack of funding, minimal supports available, so and so is doing this, that organization doing whatever. A pretty normal meeting, all in all. The last item on the agenda revolves around avoiding the duplication of*

*services in the area. A memory flashes: your friend Myra, a trans woman, cries while she talks about nurses at the local hospital yelling at her and refusing to use her pronouns—insisting on using “the name on her birth certificate instead.” Another memory flashes across your eyes: a teenager you work with who talks about suicidality and feeling unable to use the local crisis team because the workers there refused to use their pronouns after disclosing their trans identity on two separate occasions.*

*“I know we want to avoid duplicating services, but what do we do about revictimization?” You ask, recounting your experiences to the group.*

*A big ‘pause’ button appears in front of you, freezing everyone at once.*

*“Sigh. How do I move this story along? What can I say?” I think to myself while penning this story.*

*This is about the point where I begin to take a step back from the writing process. What follows is an uncomfortable rant from The Boss about why what was asked had no merit, dismissing both you and the question, while making uncomfortable transphobic commentary on the side, spitting vitriol from their mouth.*

*I could tell you that you sit there silently for what seems like an eternity, but, in reality, it is only fifteen minutes. You sit there, staring at the conference table, noticing the chips and scratches in the fake wood, hoping that this will be over soon. It has hit you that you are a new employee and this is The Boss. There is nothing you could say to change the situation or their feelings, and at worst you could be fired—you can’t afford for that to happen. And so, you stay silent, nodding every now and then, but not looking up.*

*I could tell you about the overwhelming feeling of shame and embarrassment you feel as you sit in the proverbial hot seat, unsure what to say or do. But am I simply conveying my own bias, my own feelings without the concrete data of conversational text? The nuances of behaviour, the intonation, the overall context is lost. And so am I, lost and unsure of how to proceed.*

*“The writer’s block continues,” I miserably think to myself.*

*A ‘play’ button appears and things return to normal.*

*You leave the meeting feeling dejected and miserable. “Is this what it’s like to work in an institution? Maybe I’m not cut out for this. What did I do wrong?” You think to yourself. The experience up until this point has been largely positive. The people you work with have been supportive, and you have been encouraged to contribute in meetings despite being new. Your colleagues have been polite and open.*

*You take solace in one of your colleagues agreeing with you over coffee sometime later. They share your outrage and sadness, sympathizing with you when you talk about the helplessness*

*you feel as a new employee. They point out to you the stunned looks on the other colleague's faces as they watched the theatrics of the event. You remember that one even told you afterwards that rants like this was pretty normal for The Boss. You admit to yourself that it is nice to know that you weren't all that special, transphobic comments aside. Just naïve.*

*"Just naïve." The thought settles into your stomach. This was your first real 'professional' job. You admit that you had no idea that there was so much politics in this world. Coming from a lower-class family and spending your adolescence and working years in menial jobs—farms, warehouses, fast food places, wherever you could get the income—didn't particularly help here. This made things even messier when you consider your partner of five years—another man. Luckily, you could pass as straight in these kinds of workplace settings, staying in the closet until you could assess the 'safety' of the situation like in the past. Although some people in this boardroom knew, it wasn't obvious that you are in a relationship with another man, or that you actively engage yourself with LGBTQ+ activism. The Boss surely didn't know that you were a flaming queer when he loudly rambled on about his short-sighted thoughts on LGBTQ+ people.*

*"Perhaps this was your downfall, the crux of your naivety," you think to yourself, sighing audibly. You said something that was a particularly challenging topic for you, as you see how many people are harmed by institutional decisions not to actively include LGBTQ+ people just from your Facebook feed, let alone in your day-to-day life. You see and have first-hand experience with microaggressions and overt discrimination from service providers, like when a doctor at a local hospital made the nurses administer an HIV test before treating you. You had thought that moving into this kind of job would allow you to access an outlet to change things for the better for the community. But when your opinion was pushed back, you froze, unsure why.*

*You realized then what it meant to hold a marginalized position in the real world.*

## **Queer Perspectives**

The unquestioned authority of the moment was particularly unsettling in this experience. I held the assumption that my question would be valid and respected; instead, I was dismissed and subjected to sheer discrimination, both personally and with transphobic commentary—a feature which made this largely unfamiliar from The Boss's normal antics. This workplace marginalization made me shrink into the background with the lasting impression that my voice was not valuable. As a result, I felt, and still feel, uncomfortable in voicing my opinion or questions, instead choosing to keep my head down and maintain the status quo.

In this moment, I sat around a room full of people. These people, on contract term positions, in permanent positions, and in service and helping roles, simply gave me sympathetic looks as The Boss stepped out and comforted me after-the-fact. They acted as voyeurs, bystanders in my experience. As such, I felt a feeling of overwhelming helplessness, unsure what to do or who to talk to. Ultimately, this contributed to a silencing; my voice was silenced and my writing reflected my inability to share this experience.

Being separated as the token *Queer Professional* leads me to wonder how we create opportunities for change within corporate culture. Queer professional activism must necessarily look and feel different than outsider activism by the very nature of political game-playing that occurs in these contexts. The following sections will thus examine more closely the nature of Queer activism within institutional settings, why we need to challenge such authoritarian discrimination, and some considerations for practice.

### **The Queer Professional's Activism**

The injustice I felt from this experience revolved around my own identity as a queer professional. Although this may have been unknown to The Boss, it symbolizes a larger problem among professionals, especially within positions of authority. Namely, the dismissal of queer sensibilities and needs in accessing professional services. My experiences as a queer professional who may or may not be able to “pass” as heterosexual has allowed a certain comfort among colleagues to discuss their frustrations with “politically-correct” culture and LGBTQ+ activism. However, I try to understand that the professionals I interact with have been largely frustrated by a system which demands that their time be stretched further than it is able, with little financial resources, staffing shortages, and other problems. I argue that this has caused a culture which caters to people who are not marginalized, or those within a dominant cultural narrative, to the detriment of those people who are unable to advocate for themselves. This system is able to sustain itself because of the very nature of serving the most people, as opposed to attempting to diversify to meet the needs of everyone.

With that said, understanding the professional contexts in which injustice is able to be produced is not the same as accepting these contexts. Rather, I am suggesting here that we must approach our colleagues and work places with an empathic compassion which does not demonize or ostracize others. Within social justice praxis, this approach is considered as an alternative to “call-out” culture, a concept used to describe the public denouncing of people who cause harm to others through their actions and influences. This alternative approach is aptly called *call-in culture*, which acknowledges the ever-changing nature of knowledge production, and underlines the unintentional ignorance or mistakes that one may make, even among community members (Ahmed, 2015). This approach is useful in many of situations in which transgressions may occur without assuming that transgressors have an overarching worldview that the population under scrutiny is inherently immoral or “bad.”

This approach also acts as a necessary component of institutional activism (Pettinicchio, 2012). This is due to the highly political nature of professional contexts. In such contexts, power dynamics change constantly and despite laws, labour boards, and ethical practices, the professional space is a veritable landmine of political and social capital. For my own story, it forced me to confront what corporate politics meant as a queer professional. The complex decision making that goes into stepping up and calling in as an activist involved me assessing



my own risk and the implications of making a decision to say something versus staying silent. In the end, I needed to stay silent for the safety of my own well-being and livelihood.

This writing is my own form of institutional activism. As I have already mentioned, I come from multiple places of oppression, and have experienced many transgressions as a result of these identities and backgrounds. I also use this writing as a space to speak to what I call queer sensibilities, or a depiction of the lives, experiences, affect, emotions, and knowledge that queer people hold as an opposition to cultural norms. But this does not mean that I do not experience privileges which enable this writing to occur. Coming from a position of whiteness, maleness, ability, education, and so on, I am able to produce and articulate this writing in a way that (hopefully) does not offend, is clearly articulated, is given voice to, and published.

### Challenging Workplace Culture

As a form of institutional writing, I must consider here why there is a need to engage in institutional activism in the first place. There are three major components to this experience which inform the need to challenge hostile workplace culture on the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels (see Figure 1 below). These impacts are important considerations in how the workplace culture of my own narrative, as well as corporate workplace culture more broadly, can operate and the impact that this may have.

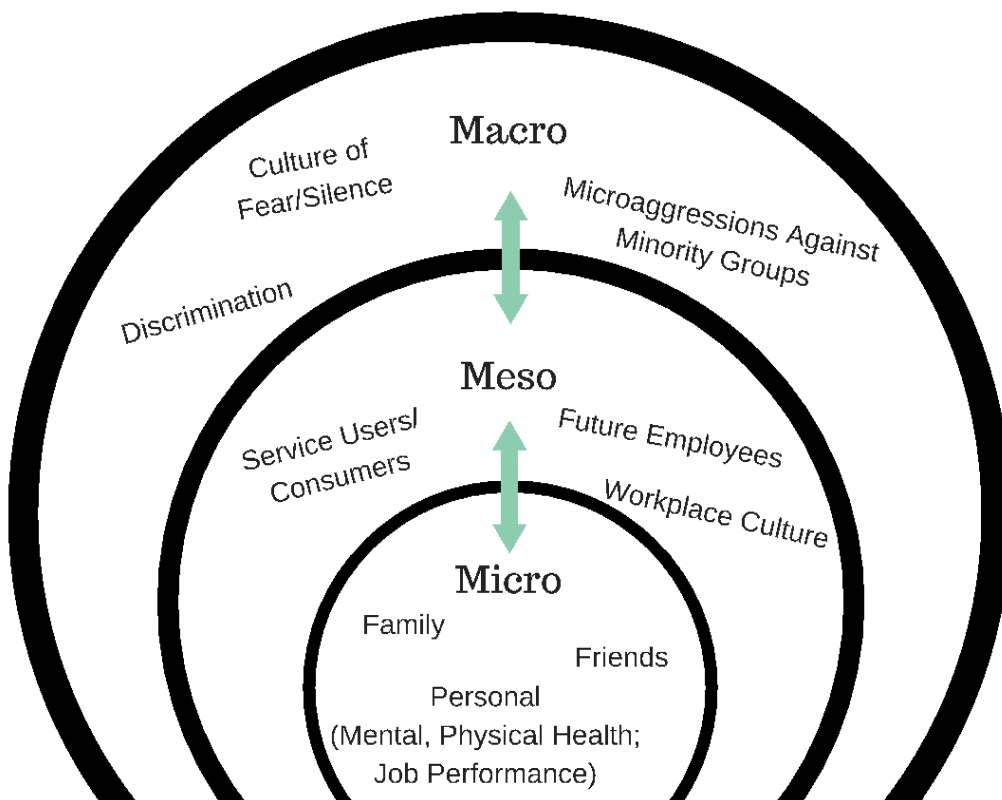


Figure 1. Summary of micro-, meso-, and macro-level impacts of hostile workplace culture.

*Note.* Adapted from *Social Statistics*, by H. M. Blalock, 1979, New York: McGraw-Hill.

Image is the original creation of C. Cumby, 2018.

The micro-level impact of hostile workplace cultures is numerous. The impact of a traumatic or difficult situation such as the one that I examined in this paper can have negative influences on the personal self. These influences can be psychological, including lower self-worth and self-esteem, agitation, depressed mood, and anxiety or worry about the future, among others. Negative mental health can lead to clinical diagnosis of depression, anxiety, and potentially complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD; Nielson & Einarsen, 2012). Nielson and Einarsen (2015) further found that workplace bullying was a strong predictor of mental health issues in a five-year prospective study of the Norwegian workforce. This may also affect physical health, as mental health and physical health are intimately linked, and long-term psychological stress may result in negative physical health (Thoits, 2010). As a result, this may also impact individual social functioning, resulting in a withdrawal from friends and family, difficulties with intimate partners, and problems with colleagues. Taken together, this not only influences personal health, but also effects individual workplace performance, as silencing prevents workers from being able to engage productively.

The meso-level impacts of hostile workplace experiences, such as the ones described here, include impacts on community members, cultural signifiers, and future employees, among others. These experiences are largely insignificant if taken alone; however, when considered within the vacuum of workplace culture, this has widespread implications. When people within positions of authority allow and actively engage in discriminatory practices, which may be defined as verbal or physical actions, they create a workplace culture which excludes those members of targeted groups as well as their allies. This creates a toxic workplace in which current and future employees may feel silenced or may seek opportunities elsewhere, thereby reinforcing the toxic workplace. This affects both future employees who may enter such a workplace, as well as the community of service users of the business. If we consider that such businesses like the one described here avoid the duplication of services, then community members are vulnerable in that there are no other services available to them.

Finally, macro-level impacts of hostile workplace cultures may include the development of a systemic or systematic discrimination of targeted minority groups, and create a culture of fear and silence. When discriminatory practices are normalized within workplace environments, they may be perpetuated further. When more and more workplaces reinforce this toxic culture, and when these businesses may have influences within the realm of politics and media, then a social culture may be normalized to a certain extent. Microaggressions are a form of discrimination that originated from research related to the experiences of people of colour (Sue et al., 2007) but has since been expanded to include other minority groups, including LGBTQ+ people (ex. Nadal, 2013) Microaggressions are subtle re-enforcers of discriminatory culture, which may include conversational devices such as microinvalidations, which “exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274) of a person. Microaggressions from a systematic and systemic perspective can perpetuate

hostile social climates toward minority peoples, and when considered on the micro-level can create feelings of shame and silence. When these impacts are taken together, it is clear that there is a need to challenge hostile workplace cultures.

### **Considerations for Challenging**

Challenging authority is no easy feat. Within the workplace, there is a lot of risk involved due to the nature of corporate politics. We may lose our reputation, respect from our work colleagues who may label us as complainers, and we may even lose our jobs. There is a struggle with power, more specifically, who has it and who does not.

Mizzi (2013) explores this point further in his research on heteroprofessionalism in the workplace. Mizzi found that heteroprofessionalism can be broken down into four prominent domains surrounding thought and behaviours. First, it reasserts heteromascularity as 'normal' practice within a workplace. In Mizzi's study, participants noted that despite policy protecting sexual orientation, this was largely ignored by agency personnel. Similarly, when authority figures such as in my narrative reinforce a heteromascularity perspective, it becomes more acceptable for heterosexism and transphobia to be present, or for bystanders to turn a blind eye.

Mizzi (2013) further explores heteroprofessionalism as operating on discourses of professionalism which devalue LGBTQ+ identities. Mizzi constitutes Western professional discourse as one which seeks to sustain and promote a cohesive work environment. Workplaces such as the one in my narrative use oppression as a justified experience to promote resilience in minority people, thus enforcing both a heteroprofessionalist but also cisprofessionalist milieu.

Third, Mizzi (2013) notes that heteroprofessionalism can be reinforced by the silence, undervaluing or marginalization of workers who attempt to address heteronormativity in the workplace. This was indeed present in my own narrative, as a new employee who spoke out about the oppression of LGBTQ+ people, I was dismissed and I had to consider my new employee status against the implied threat of being let go or transferred.

Finally, Mizzi (2013) suggests that heteroprofessionalism is reinforced through the creation of programs and policies which do not take into account homosexuality. I would argue that this can be taken further to include all queer and trans people, given the transphobic comments that arose from the discussions at my workplace. Despite having rainbow flags in the office and some pamphlets available for service users, the promotion of LGBTQ+ inclusivity was largely depended on an active social body to enforce. Without the consistent promotion of diverse perspectives, coupled with the absence of visible LGBTQ+ employees, workplace culture can become normalized to exclude such diverse points of view. From this experience, the nature of the corporate culture with temporary contracts and job instability furthered this narrative of exclusion.

Taken together, Mizzi's (2013) concept of heteroprofessionalism can be applied here, and serves as an important point of consideration for others. Through a lens of hetero- and cis-professionalism, it felt as though I had lost my voice. The writer's block that I had felt acted as a metaphor for my oppressive silence. However, as Gedro (2009) notes, coming out is an act of courage, and it is the first step in helping to create change. Writing this narrative reflects my own version of *coming out* as a necessary act of change, to contribute to LGBTQ+ activism and writing from the academy. I am showing up in this writing, and I am using my own visibility in the place for those who are unable to.

### **Alternative Stories**

*I stared at my computer screen for a while, watching the cursor blink. "It's finished. Done." I think to myself. "The story is over, at least this one is for now." I sigh with a breath of relief. My words on the screen acted as a sword and shield against a metaphysical monster—unbeknownst to me, unimaginable to those who have not heard its whispers. The whispers of the monster were not those of The Boss, but that of a cultural exchange used to create discontent and sow discord. To divide and conquer. After all, isn't that what power is—the sound of silence against a backdrop of whispers? I learned in this process that you can challenge that silence, as difficult as that can be. If nothing else, this story was my own triumph in challenging the silence, and discovering my voice in the process. It is important to remember, however, that the narrative of my life is just an alternative story; one that has been told by thousands before me and thousands after me. Sometimes, all it takes is for us to open up and listen to those stories.*

As we increasingly have access and ability to enter these professional spaces, there is a pressure and tension for professional spaces to adjust themselves accordingly. This question spans multiple disciplines of research, many of which are outside of the scope of this writing, including human resources, business, queer and feminist theory, critical theories, mental health, as well as the larger social/sciences and humanities disciplines. Realistically, my story will not move mountains; however, it will hopefully contribute to a growing dialogue about the need for inclusive workplaces and employee well-being.

As professionals and academics reading this piece, we may begin to dismantle and (re-)examine the spaces that we live and work in. We can question the policies, regulations, and practices, which allow for the kind of disconnections between marginalized communities and professional spaces to exist. There are many different ways that this may take shape. Senior and permanent staff may advocate on behalf of LGBTQ+ workers and service users, as well as the general public, through institutional activism. They may request an audit or scoping review of existing policies and regulations of the workplace. They may also review the policies and practices of similar organizations in other areas. Consultation with other organizations can further emphasize collaboration and partnership. Even low- or no-cost solutions may be possible, such as asking organizations to volunteer their time to provide free competency training for working with LGBTQ+ people. This may be especially easy for university campuses with gender studies departments.

While activism is necessary, it should be taken in consideration of the local climate. Assessing the attitudes and opinions of colleagues and upper administration is a necessary first step. In cases of a conservative workplace, sometimes institutional activism may be as simple as being out and present at workplace events. Other times, institutional activism is impossible, and the most valuable thing that we can do is show compassion and support to each other and LGBTQ+ people specifically.

To accommodate this shifting dialogue, we must consider a re-telling of my story and of stories similar to my own. This re-telling can be told as a collective, and this story can begin a tapestry of other stories which can inspire us all to re-tell a story of empathy. Perhaps this is an overly optimistic goal. However, I stand with the position of hopeful optimism, especially during a time of political disarray. In writing this story, I hope to have shed some light on the process of writing not only an autoethnography, but a queer autoethnography. Although it can be challenging personally and professionally to engage in this method, it can provide a useful tool for creating a dialogue and public discourse. Ethically, we must consider ourselves and the people involved in our writing; we must carefully place ourselves at the centre of the writing with the larger public in mind at all times. We must also be prepared for criticisms, as a fringe method, it may not be accepted by both the literary communities as well as the scholarly communities. However, when we consider these things, we can work together and create an alternative story of hope and empowerment.

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