'We are celebrated but not included': heteronormativity and cisnormativity in Aotearoa New Zealand workplaces

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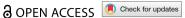
Le Cui ⬥

Kāhui Tū Kaha, Auckland, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Using survey comments from organisations across various sectors in Aotearoa New Zealand, this qualitative study examines the workplace climate for Rainbow employees. It employs the theoretical frameworks of heteronormativity and cisnormativity to challenge established gender and sexual norms within organisations. The study explores how cis-heteronormativity manifests at both organisational and interpersonal levels. Highlighting the limitations of current inclusion practices, it deepens the understanding of power dynamics within organisations in a region conventionally regarded as Rainbow-friendly. Although many employers demonstrate a commitment to Rainbow inclusion, as evidenced by organisational initiatives and the pursuit of Rainbow Tick accreditation, organisations can still function as spaces that are both Rainbow-supportive and cis-heteronormative, positioning Rainbow employees as valued yet non-normative. The study argues that despite the growing visibility of Rainbow identities within organisations, further efforts are needed to confront entrenched cis-heteronormativity that impedes the full inclusion of queer employees. Additionally, it proposes rethinking organisational approaches to Rainbow inclusion, shifting the focus from the margins to the norms.

Introduction

'We are celebrated but not included, or left to only be part of the rainbow groups.' (survey comment from a Rainbow employee)

Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ henceforth) is acknowledged as a nation with progressive policies and culture regarding gender and sexual minorities, having gained a reputation as a global leader in Rainbow[1] rights (Bywater 2022; Time Out 2023). In Aotearoa NZ, sexual orientation was added to anti-discrimination law through the Human Rights Amendment Act in 1993. Same-sex marriage was legalised in 2013, making Aotearoa NZ the first country in the Pacific-Oceania region to do so. On the *NZ Story* website, a government initiative to enhance and promote Brand NZ, there is a dedicated webpage titled 'Proud to be a Rainbow Nation.' This page states, 'NZ is known for its

forward-thinking, tolerant approach and progressive views, and has been recognised as a world leader in LGBTQI + rights' (NZ Story 2024). Auckland, Aotearoa NZ's largest city, has been named among the most queer-friendly cities in the world for queer travellers (Bywater 2022; Time Out 2023). Existing studies of queer communities in Aotearoa NZ have highlighted positive experiences, such as 'breathing the air of freedom' (Cui and Song 2024, p. 5) or being 'happy in my skin' (Adams and Neville 2020, p. 512). In the realm of workplaces, Standards NZ – a unit within the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment – has published '*Rainbow-Inclusive Workplaces: A Standard for Gender and Sexual Diversity in Employment*' in 2015, the world's first standard designed to help organisations create Rainbow-inclusive workplaces (Standards 2015). For transgender employees, the Aotearoa NZ government underscores the protection against employment discrimination (Employment 2024). Many Aotearoa NZ organisations have addressed the needs of transgender employees undergoing gender transition by introducing special leave policies and gender affirmation guidelines (Sharma 2023).

Despite Aotearoa NZ's reputation as a liberal nation with progressive policies, existing queer studies focused on the Aotearoa NZ context indicate that heterosexual and cisgender norms remain dominant across various aspects of social life, including education (Cui and Song 2024; Garcia et al. 2024; Howell and Allen 2021), healthcare (Semp 2011; González and Veale 2024; Tan et al. 2022), and media (Kaulback and Maydell 2024). This cis-heteronormative social climate adversely impacts the lives of queer individuals, as evidenced by studies documenting the marginalisation and exclusion experienced by Aotearoa NZ's queer communities (Garcia et al. 2024; Tan et al. 2022). Marginalisation is especially evident due to the intersectionality of power structures, as shown in studies on Chinese queer international students (Cui and Song 2024), queer ethnic minorities (Adams and Neville 2020), and older queer individuals (Betts et al. 2020) in Aotearoa NZ. Undermining Aotearoa NZ's reputation for inclusivity, a recent study on crime victimisation provides empirical evidence that queer people in Aotearoa NZ experience significantly higher rates of victimisation than non-queer people across all types of crime (Plum and Zhuge 2024). This sobering reality, coupled with recent queer-phobic incidents such as the vandalism of rainbow crossings and protests against Rainbow Storytime events (RNZ 2024; NZ Herald 2024), highlights a disturbing surge in anti-queer rhetoric and violence, driven by the dissemination of disinformation and misinformation about queer communities.

Despite the growth of queer scholarship in Aotearoa NZ, studies on queer issues within the employment context remain limited (Fenaughty et al. 2022; Johnston 2018). A recent survey of Rainbow youth in Aotearoa NZ reveals a complex picture of Rainbow employees' workplace experiences. While over half (56%) of participants (N = 762) reported that their workplace was supportive or very supportive of Rainbow employees, nearly half (47%) of participants (N = 609) reported they had not told someone at work about their Rainbow identity because they were worried they would be treated unfairly (Fenaughty et al. 2022). The power dynamics underlying this ambivalence have yet to be fully explained through qualitative empirical evidence on workplace climate. Consequently, there is insufficient knowledge regarding whether organisational cultures in Aotearoa NZ align with government-level policy protections and the broader reputation Aotearoa NZ enjoys both domestically and internationally. Furthermore, the unique challenges faced by transgender employees in Aotearoa NZ are still insufficiently

understood. Johnston's (2018) study provides valuable insights into transgender people's feelings of (dis)comfort and belonging in Aotearoa NZ workplaces, emphasising the complex relationship between the workplace, bodies, and (in)security. However, there is a need for more research into transgender employees' workplace experiences to better advance diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Therefore, this study aims to examine the workplace culture for queer employees in Aotearoa NZ and identify areas for development.

To examine normative culture and advance conventional understandings of organisations, this study employs theoretical concepts of *heteronormativity* and *cisnormativity*. Compared to the commonly used terms 'homophobia' and 'transphobia,' which tend to individualise antipathy towards queer identities, the concepts of heteronormativity and cisnormativity situate this behaviour within a broader social and institutional context. Heteronormativity refers to those relations and practices that promote and produce heterosexuality as natural, desirable and privileged (Corlett et al. 2023; Marchia and Sommer 2019). Cisnormativity assumes that everyone identifies within the gender binary and conforms to the gender they were assigned at birth (Kelly et al. 2021; Köllen and Rumens 2022). These concepts allow researchers to shift their focus from the margins to the centre and to challenge taken-for-granted norms about gender and sexuality (Barnard et al. 2023; Cui 2023a, 2023c, 2023d; Cui and Song 2024; Köllen and Rumens 2022; Rumens 2016). By elucidating and denaturalising how heterosexuality, cisgender identities, and the gender binary are normalised, privileged, and institutionalised, this study aims to destabilise and disrupt prevailing gender and sexual norms in the workplace. In doing so, this paper responds to the call from scholars who advocate for 'queering the workplace' (Buddel 2011) and sheds light on the possibilities of thinking and doing differently in the workplace.

This paper aims to build on the extensive and long-standing body of literature concerning the workplace climate for queer employees – a research focus that has drawn attention from scholars across various social science fields, including sociology, management, and geography (Byington et al. 2021; Colgan and Rumens 2015; Johnston 2018; Maji et al. 2024). Many scholars have explored the workplace climates and experiences of queer employees across different professions and contexts, such as construction workers in the UK (Barnard et al. 2023), academics in China (Cui 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d, 2023e, 2024), and police officers in Sweden (Rennstam and Sullivan 2016). Various aspects of queer employees' workplace experiences have been documented by researchers, including discrimination (Galupo and Resnick 2016; Steffens et al. 2016; Willis 2009, p. 2012), identity management (Cui 2022, 2023b, 2023c, 2023e, 2024), the discourse of 'professionalism' (Davies and Neustifter 2023; Miao and Chan 2021; Mizzi 2024), agency and resistance (Cui 2023b, 2024; Grace 2020; Willis 2012), and the unique challenges faced by transgender employees (Doan 2010; Johnston 2018). In recent decades, there has been an increase in workplace support for queer employees, leading to greater queer visibility and positive outcomes (Kelly et al. 2021; Taylor et al. 2011; Webster et al. 2018; Willis 2009). However, despite significant social changes in the West, cis-heteronormativity remains embedded in the workplace at the organisational and interpersonal levels (Corlett et al. 2023; Priola et al. 2018; Rumens 2016). As a result, queer employees face marginalisation and are not fully included (Kelly et al. 2021; Rennstam and Sullivan 2016; Willis 2009). Even in queer-friendly

organisations, queer employees may still feel compelled to downplay their queerness at work or are constrained by stereotypes about how queer individuals are expected to look, act, and work (Priola et al. 2018; Tindall and Waters 2012; Williams et al. 2009). Despite the rich body of queer research in the organisational context, there remains a gap in understanding the workplace climate for queer employees in the Aotearoa NZ context, which is the focus of this study.

This study uses data collected by Rainbow Tick, an accreditation programme focused on assessing workplace culture and promoting Rainbow inclusion, through its accreditation service with Aotearoa NZ organisations (see Methodology section). Employee comments from the online surveys conducted in 30 organisations are used to explore the workplace climate for Rainbow employees. This article shows that despite the broader queer-friendly social climate and legal protections in Aotearoa NZ, Rainbow workers still do not feel fully included in organisations that remain embedded in cis-heteronormativity. As the quote at the beginning of this article shows, Rainbow employees may feel that they are 'celebrated but not included, or left only to be part of the rainbow groups.' Cis-heteronormative workplace culture is manifested and perpetuated in a range of organisational and interpersonal practices. For example, cis-heteronormative representations and assumptions still dominate organisational practices related to management and service delivery; gender-inclusive toilets are often not available in workplaces, so the organisation cannot meet the needs of gender-diverse employees; inappropriate comments and jokes are still common, othering and marginalising Rainbow employees. Therefore, by revealing the limits of inclusion, this study argues that despite an increasingly accepting and welcoming workplace climate for Rainbow employees in Aotearoa NZ, further efforts should be made to challenge the cis-heteronormativity embedded in organisational and interpersonal ways.

Methodology

This study draws on data from the Rainbow Tick accreditation service, which is designed to help organisations in Aotearoa NZ promote Rainbow inclusion in the workplace. Rainbow Tick assesses an organisation's level of workplace inclusiveness for Rainbow employees and makes evidence-based recommendations for change. To attain Rainbow Tick certification, an organisation is evaluated in areas such as policy and strategy, organisational development, and external engagement, based on Rainbow inclusion criteria. Once accredited, the organisation must also continue to improve according to the recommendations to pass the annual review and be re-accredited. As at November 2024, 90 organisations in Aotearoa NZ are certified (see the website: https://toitutakatapui.co.nz/). As part of an organisation's accreditation process, Rainbow Tick uses an online survey to assess the organisational culture. Specifically, the survey is designed to gather an organisation's employees' perspectives on Rainbow issues, and to identify positive aspects and areas for development. The survey comprises six multiple-choice questions (with options of 'yes', 'no' or 'none of the above') and covers key aspects of Rainbow inclusion in the workplace. These include:

• Do you think your workplace is inclusive for Rainbow employees?
• Does your workplace organise or celebrate Rainbow events?

- Have you noticed any discriminatory behaviour towards Rainbow communities in the workplace?
- Do you trust the ability of management and HR to handle Rainbow issues?
- Do people in the workplace have access to gender-inclusive/gender-neutral toilets?
- Are you aware of the Rainbow-inclusive policies and guidelines in your workplace?

Although surveys are not conventionally used as a qualitative research tool, each survey question includes a text box to maximise the potential for capturing employee perspectives that cannot be fully conveyed through predefined answer options. The text box allows respondents to comment on the Rainbow issue in the survey question and say whatever they want. Responses to the survey are anonymous to protect the identity of respondents. As a result, Rainbow Tick has received a wealth of survey comments from organisations on a range of topics. For example, the comments include respondents' views on their workplace culture, their personal understanding of sexuality, or their own experiences of engaging with Rainbow issues or being a Rainbow person. These survey comments, representing diverse issues, views and experiences, are used in this qualitative study as data to explore the workplace climate for Rainbow employees in Aotearoa NZ.

Specifically, this study analysed comments from 30 surveys conducted across 30 organisations, involving a total of 2,293 respondents and 2,873 survey comments. All surveys were conducted using SurveyMonkey, an online survey tool, in 2023. Rainbow Tick first created the survey and sent the survey link to the organisation. The organisation then shared the survey link with their staff. The organisation was typically given two weeks to distribute the survey. Data for this study were collected from 30 organisations of varying sizes (see Table 1) and sectors, all of which had either gained their certification or were in the process of accreditation at the time of the study. These organisations span a range of sectors, including commerce, education, construction, food, media, energy, transport, health, legal services, and public services. The organisations are geographically spread across both the North and South Islands of Aotearoa NZ, with the majority having their headquarters in Auckland and Wellington. The variety of organisations covered in this study ensures that the findings reflect the patterns and complexities of workplace climates across a wide spectrum of organisations in Aotearoa NZ. The use of the survey data was consistent with the organisations' agreement with Rainbow Tick, which stipulates that the data may be used for research and analysis, provided no identifying information is included. All organisation names were masked, and only sector information was retained. Some identifying information in the data has been deleted or obscured to ensure the anonymity of the organisations.

To capture the complexity of the data and develop patterns of meaning, the data was analysed using thematic analysis, generating both semantic and latent themes. In terms of the specific approach of thematic analysis, this study employed reflective thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022). This approach to thematic analysis acknowledges that

Table 1. Information about organisation size.

Number of Employees	51–200	201–500	501–1,000	1,001–5,000	Over 10,000
Number of Organisations	6	10	5	5	4

themes are actively created by the researcher at the intersection of data, analytic process and subjectivity (Braun and Clarke 2022). The process of thematic analysis in this study was guided by the theoretical concepts of heteronormativity and cisnormativity, which seeks to unsettle and disrupt dominant identities and notions. Informed by these two concepts, the process of data analysis has sought to challenge the gender and sexual norms that have a marginalising and restrictive effect on queer employees. Reflective thematic analysis sees qualitative research as a subjective and creative process in which the researcher's subjectivity is seen as a resource rather than a potential threat to knowledge production (Braun and Clarke 2022). The researcher positions himself as a cisgender gay man and an employee in an Aotearoa NZ organisation, which allows him to conduct this research as an 'insider' (Braun and Clarke 2013). As an accreditation specialist with Rainbow Tick, the researcher evaluates workplace culture based on data collected from client organisations, writes reports, and provides consultation. This role has allowed him to closely observe organisational culture in Aotearoa NZ. The researcher's work with Rainbow Tick has provided access to data collected from client organisations and enabled him to gain support from both these organisations and his own, Kāhui Tū Kaha, where Rainbow Tick is part of the services delivered.

Cis-heteronormativity at the organisational level

Cis-heteronormative organisational practices

In Aotearoa NZ organisations, heterosexual representations remain dominant in organisational practice, while non-heterosexual representations are often absent or limited. In this way, heterosexuality is the default sexuality and constitutes the norm in the workplace. For example, the following comment shows how heteronormativity is perpetuated and reinforced in the heterosexual couple image in rebranding practice.

> In the recent rebranding, the slide pack that was given for PowerPoint includes icons of heterosexual couples and even an organic chicken but no icons that represent queer communities. (a law firm)

Like heteronormativity, cisnormativity is ubiquitous and embedded in the workplace. The cisnormative assumption is evident in the difficulties and denials that transgender employees face in having their preferred name and gender recognised by their organisation.

> I recently changed my name. The hurdles that I had to jump through to get my name changed on the internal systems was ridiculous. I spent over a month back and forth with IT. They couldn't understand why I wanted it changed. 'We can't do that cos its linked to the system'. I have to look at my dead name every time I log in and every day at work. (an engineering company)

> Was hard for the girl I work with to have her dead name removed and her gender changed. (a supermarket company)

Cisnormativity does not only affect employees, but is also embedded in service delivery and consequently affects customers. The following comments from two insurance companies show that cisgender and gender binary are the default in insurance claims and services, and there are no gender-diverse options. These cisnormative practices limit the accessibility of products and services to gender-diverse people.

> Our claims systems have a default selection for male or female and no gender-neutral options for salutation. No clear way to note on policy or claim customers' preferred name or pronouns etc. (an insurance company)

> Insurance premiums are gender binary, and there's no clear guidance for people who are not cisgendered. Our assessment process does not allow space for customers who don't belong on the binary. (an insurance company)

Another crucial way in which cis-heteronormativity is institutionalised and consolidated in organisations is through management. Several respondents reported their manager's problematic behaviour or felt that management was not supportive of Rainbow employees. This could lead to employees, including Rainbow employees, not trusting management to deal with Rainbow issues.

> I've been in the presence of a manager who was moaning about one of our trans colleagues asking not to be called 'mate'. This then caused other employees to say some ignorant things about trans people. (a transport company)

> I've heard some colourful opinions come from management that would make me think twice before raising any rainbow issues. I would expect to not be met with validation or understanding. (an insurance company)

> I would not feel comfortable raising rainbow issues with management. I would rather go hang out with friends I'm comfortable with to talk through my issues. Management teams at XXX still don't feel like they are there for us. (a media company)

When homophobic or problematic behaviour does occur, it may be tolerated by management. Management has either taken no action to hold the perpetrator of homophobic acts accountable, or has let the target of problematic behaviour not pursue the matter. By failing to uphold justice, management perpetuates and reinforces cis-heteronormativity in organisations.

> A senior staff member once sent a homophobic image to a company-wide email list in response to a Pride announcement. The response was to delete the email from the mail server and pretend it never happened. This person never faced any form of repercussion. (a media company)

> A team member was recently called a derogatory name by a colleague. His manager told him not to pursue it as there was likely to be little action taken. (a transport company)

> I have raised concerns however the leadership team are hesitant to address the behaviours as they don't want to rock the boat. (a transport company)

Notably, cis-heteronormativity can even be embedded in organisational policies. Several respondents pointed to the eligibility restriction in their organisation's parental leave policy as failing to address the parental leave needs of Rainbow employees. As the following comments show, by restricting eligibility to cisgender biological mothers and excluding parents through surrogacy, the parental leave policy fails to recognise the diverse ways in which Rainbow employees give birth or become parents, thus depriving them of leave entitlements. This problem arises from the cis-heteronormative assumptions embedded in policy-making, which in turn marginalise Rainbow employees and reinforce cis-heteronormativity in organisations.

Not even our parental leave policy is inclusive – it still refers to 'females employees who are having a baby' and 'birth mother's parental leave entitlements'. (a law firm)

They should develop a parental leave policy for intending parents through surrogacy. This doesn't pertain to just the rainbow community, but they do make up a large proportion of that group. (a transport company)

Parental leave for same-sex surrogate parents needs to be looked at as this policy needs updating to be more relevant to those parents who cannot provide documentation within the timeline stated to qualify for parental benefits. (a transport company)

Configuration of space

Cis-heteronormativity is not only an ideology or notion, but can be materialised in physical forms. The most obvious manifestation of cis-heteronormativity embedded in architecture is the arrangement of toilets. Many comments confirmed that only gender-segregated toilets are provided and that there are no gender-inclusive/neutral toilets in the workplace. Such an arrangement fails to meet the needs of gender-diverse people, including transgender, non-binary and intersex people, and thus reinforces the binary gender norm.

Typically bathrooms are male and female in our offices. (an aviation company)

Toilets are only split into men's and woman's bathrooms at my building. Many of our facilities are super old and rundown, and built around 1990s ideologies of what an office space should be. Gender-inclusive toilets were not thought about during that time. (a media company)

As the comment above shows, the binary arrangement of toilets may have been determined by building design decades ago, when gender diversity was not a consideration in architectural design. However, the binary gender norm is so powerful and dominant that proposals for gender-inclusive/neutral toilets can be rejected even in newly designed buildings.

Even in our newest building, the decision was made to have separate male and female bathrooms. Gender-neutral toilets were proposed for the new building but rejected by the leadership. (an aviation company)

It was disappointing to see our new building started with gender-neutral toilets and ended up reverting back to single-gender rooms. (a media company)

Even in workplaces where gender-inclusive toilets are available, the number is limited – often only one. This not only makes it inaccessible to employees who work in areas far from the gender-inclusive toilet, but also makes employees who have to walk a long way to reach it feel excluded.

There is only one gender-neutral toilet on our reception level of the building, but not on each working level of the firm. Not truly accessible compared to gender-specific toilets. (a law firm)

Having only one gender-inclusive toilet on campus is not good enough because staff and students have to walk a long way to access it. (an education institution)

> We don't have unisex bathrooms in the staff area. Team who don't feel comfortable using male/female facilities have to use the customer toilet which immediately makes them feel excluded as they are on the other side of the building. (a supermarket company)

The inaccessibility of gender-inclusive toilets can force gender-diverse employees to use a toilet that does not correspond to their gender. As the comment below shows, the trans woman had to use the men's toilet because of the distance from the gender-inclusive toilet.

> There is one gender-neutral bathroom at the office I work at. However, it's waaay down the other end and is pretty much just a relabelled disabled toilet. I end up using the men's most often, which isn't ideal as a trans woman. (an energy company)

Gender-diverse employees may choose to use disabled toilets, which are often the only option for toilets without gender-specific signage in the workplace. Although a disabled toilet can function as a gender-inclusive toilet, using a disabled toilet without gender-inclusive signage is problematic for gender-diverse employees, as Rainbow identity is not a disability.

> Non-binary and trans people tend to resort to the disabled/single-stall toilet for their safety. Being LGBTQI is not a disability! (a law firm)

> Our only 'gender-inclusive' toilet (if you can in fact call it that) is the disability toilet. (an insurance company)

> Toilets are still gendered. The disabled toilets are used by gender-diverse students but are not signposted as such. (an education institution)

> Forcing trans employees to use the disabled toilets is not enough. (a government department)

Limitations of rainbow events

Although organisations have promoted Rainbow visibility by organising or celebrating Rainbow events, many respondents reported that Rainbow events were rare, not well-publicised, or failed to engage many employees. The lack of Rainbow events could leave Rainbow employees feeling disappointed and sad, as shown below.

> Extremely limited and almost invisible. Only thing I've ever seen is the rainbow flag flying, once. (an aviation company)

> One time in about 5 years! It only involved the people who wanted to wear our own shirts and there was no posters or flags, so customers kept asking why I wasn't in my uniform. I'm always jealous of what other stores do. (a supermarket company)

> It's hard to get invited and hard to know when the rainbow events are. A lot of people often feel left out and it's not widely promoted. (a transport company)

> Nothing for pride. I know the business celebrates but not at my store. Very sad as a lot of us are queer people. (a supermarket company)

Rainbow events are often not organised by management, but fall on the shoulders of Rainbow employees, adding to their workload. In addition, Rainbow events are often only celebrated within the Rainbow network, limiting the potential for engagement with non-Rainbow employees.

> It falls on Rainbow employees to do so and does not appear to be easy. (a law firm)

> The workplace supports employees to this organising but this is in addition to normal workloads rather than making time and space for this to happen – the burden is on the community. (a clothing retail company)

> LGBTQIA+ events are celebrated and recognised within the LGBTQIA+ group but lacking somewhat as a whole organisation. (an educational institution)

> It appears to rely on the Rainbow group volunteers to run rather than the core organisation-led series of events. They are celebrated within the Rainbow Network but not in the wider organisation. (a government department)

Importantly, several respondents criticised Rainbow events for being 'tick box' exercises, 'feeling false' or 'feeling like tokenism/rainbow-washing'. By this, they meant that Rainbow events lacked meaningful engagement with employees and the local and organisational context, and failed to bring about real change.

> We celebrated the Rainbow awards we won but I also heard a senior leader mocking the awards themselves so the celebration felt false in some ways. (a sports organisation)

> There are 'events' scheduled or announce, but nothing actually touches the staff in a meaningful way. It's starting to feel like tokenism /rainbow-washing. (a food retail company)

> We are told to celebrate Wear It Purple Day because our parent company in Australia do – but it has no relevance or context here, which makes our 'Proud' effort feel like a copy & paste exercise from Australia. Just to tick the box of being involved with the rainbow community. There is no visibility at local events like Big Gay Out, there is no uniqueness about how XXX celebrates pride. (a retail company)

The potential box-ticking nature of the Rainbow celebration has a significant impact on employees' willingness to participate and sense of belonging. As shown below, employees may withdraw from involvement due to disappointment with their organisation; Rainbow employees may feel disconnected and marginalised from the organisation.

> I have withdrawn from being involved because I feel like it's become too much of a tick-box exercise instead of real, visible support and change. (a supermarket company)

> We are celebrated but not included, or left to only be part of the rainbow groups. (a media company)

Cis-heteronormativity at the interpersonal level

Cis-heterosexual assumptions in interactions

Heterosexual assumptions are common in workplace interactions. Employees are often assumed to be attracted to the opposite gender, which is influenced by the pervasive heteronormativity in the workplace.

> People in the workplace assume that I, as a male, would be looking for a female partner. (a law firm)

> Not discriminatory, but heteronormative behaviour/use of pronouns. (an architectural company)

Likewise, employees are assumed to be cisgender, and transgender employees are often misgendered and deadnamed as a result.

> Misgendering and deadnaming are common. A colleague did that to a trans staff member, and while he was called out – he didn't apologise. (an insurance company)

> I do know of people who are misgendered by their colleagues which should not happen. (a government department)

> I have noticed some non-intentional behaviour, i.e., deadnaming trans team members, but people are quick to correct themselves once educated. (an aviation company)

Othering and marginalising comments

Many respondents reported that inappropriate comments were made in interpersonal interactions in their workplace. These include offensive comments, the use of derogatory terms, prying into Rainbow people's sexuality, and snide remarks. Although these comments may be made out of a lack of education rather than an intention to harm, this type of behaviour can have an othering and marginalising effect on Rainbow employees.

> I have heard someone refer to a difficult task as 'that's such a f*g'. (a law firm)

> Offhand comments at times – coming from a place of ignorance/ not understanding more than any intention to offend. (an entertainment company)

> Snide remarks behind people's backs. Comments have been thrown back and forth. (a construction company)

> A guy during work drinks repeatedly asked a recent hire about whether they were gay – and eventually they said that they were. I gather others called him out for prying into a Rainbow person's sexuality. (a law firm)

A notable feature of inappropriate comments is that they often take the form of jokes. Although the joke may not be directed at anyone personally or mean any harm, it can create an environment where Rainbow identity is treated as the abnormal other, thus perpetuating and reinforcing cis-heteronormativity.

> Heard employees make harsh jokes about the LGBT community, thinking it's just a joke and not meaning any harm, but they don't realise that they might be making it a bit scarier for others to be themselves. (a construction company)

> Not directed at anyone in person, but the thoughtless jokes and "funny" comments that have their basis in gender and sexuality are rife. (a government department)

> Jokes about conversion therapy and gender-inclusive bathrooms. (a law firm)

Among the various factors that contribute to cis-heteronormative and inappropriate interactions, age is a commonly reported factor. It is often the older staff members who make inappropriate comments, suggesting that they could benefit from relevant training.

> Most of the harsh jokes are from the older staff because that is just the way they were bought up and most of them don't purposely mean harm. (a construction company)

> Comments were generally from the older workers. Some older staff can be mean, thinking they are just 'making a joke'. All the office-based younger workers are open and not discriminatory. (an aviation company)

> There is a huge learning curve for older generations who do – on occasion – commit micro-aggressions. (an insurance company)

> I have heard countless stories of older staff questioning why we need to be so PC or 'woke' all of a sudden, and not being supportive. (a law firm)

In many cases, problematic comments in the workplace relate to transgender issues and individuals. This not only highlights the particular challenges of cisnormativity faced by transgender employees, but also suggests a need for training on gender diversity and inclusion.

> I have heard people mock people who use they/them pronouns, say awful things about trans people playing sports. (a law firm)

> Inappropriate discussion about trans customers. I don't believe it was with malicious intent, more so ignorance. (a government department)

> I have noticed some 'talk' or gossip about a trans person. (an aviation company)

> I have noticed the odd comment around pronouns which could be offensive to some people. I think this mostly comes from a lack of education. (an architectural company)

Rainbow employees' experiences of navigating the workplace culture

The cis-heteronormative workplace climate, where Rainbow identities are othered and marginalised, has a significant impact on Rainbow employees. As shown below, they may face bigotry and hostility, and feel excluded and isolated.

> In theory, heaps of initiatives by the company, but you're always othered to a covert extent. I've had odd/gross comments from time to time about us gays (and me as an individual from that community), by a few older males. There's one individual who makes awful comments about the trans community, sometimes out of ignorance, mostly out of plain bigotry. I always push back it's met with hostility. The extent of the hatred is disturbing. The silence from others, who often just want to get on with it, doesn't really help. (a media company)

> I have not seen direct discriminatory behavior but I have seen exclusion. I still feel I'm isolated and underrepresented. (a media company)

Because of the concerns about coming out and fear of potential stigma, Rainbow employees may have to cautiously navigate the workplace culture and hide their identity. The comment below illustrates the identity anxiety of a transgender employee who was considering gender transition.

> I'm wanting to transition this year and no one has any idea yet. I terrified of the uncertainty of how it's going to go with people. I wish some people would be understanding of why people have their cameras off in meetings – that's not how I want to come out. (an energy company)

An unsafe environment in which Rainbow employees are subject to bullying can hinder their professional development. As the following comment shows, the gay employee would not seek promotion or change roles for fear of discrimination and dismissal.

> As a gay employee I have been subjected to bullying, primarily from management and trainers. I don't feel comfortable seeking promotion or moving into a new role for fear of being made redundant for this reason. I know of cases of team leaders deliberately seeking to not hire gay staff, and believe if I were not fortunate in my team then other team leaders would have found reason to fire me for being gay. (a government department)

Discussion and conclusion

Through a reflective thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022) of employee survey comments collected from 30 organisations across various sectors, this study has explored the workplace climate for Rainbow employees in Aotearoa NZ. This work is informed by the theoretical concepts of heteronormativity (Marchia and Sommer 2019) and cisnormativity (Köllen and Rumens 2022), which seek to problematise gender and sexual norms and situate queerphobia within broader contexts. Despite legal protections for Rainbow employees and a broadly liberal social climate, this study provides extensive evidence that Rainbow employees are still not fully included in the workplace. It shows that cis-heteronormativity is maintained and reinforced through various organisational practices. For example, cis-heteronormative representations and assumptions are pervasive in the organisation's practices with employees, services, management and policies; Rainbow events and celebrations are often limited and celebrated within the Rainbow network, fall on the shoulders of Rainbow employees, and seem to be 'tick-box' exercises. In interpersonal interactions, Rainbow employees are often assumed to be heterosexual and cisgender, and are subject to inappropriate comments and jokes that result in alienation and marginalisation. To avoid being ostracised and stigmatised, Rainbow employees may need to navigate the workplace climate carefully and manage their identity at work. The evidence on cis-heteronormativity presented in this study contributes to the growing body of research on how cis-heteronormativity operates in the workplace at both institutional and interpersonal levels (Corlett et al. 2023; Cui 2023a, 2023c, 2023d; Priola et al. 2018; Rumens 2016).

While there has been extensive research on heteronormativity in the workplace (see Corlett et al. 2023, for a literature review), there is significant room for more studies on cisnormativity in this context (Anderson 2024; Doan 2010; Johnston 2018; Suárez et al. 2022). Importantly, this study illustrates the operation of cisnormativity by highlighting the unique and disproportionate challenges faced by transgender employees. In interpersonal interactions, problematic comments often concern transgender issues and individuals, such as mocking the use of pronouns or gossiping about transgender people. As highlighted in our data, transgender employees often experience significant challenges, including anxiety, concealing their identity during gender transition, being misgendered or deadnamed, and encountering institutional obstacles when attempting to update their name and gender within organisational systems. The most obvious manifestation of institutional cisnormativity is seen in workplace toilets, which are predominantly based on the gender binary and lack gender-inclusive options. Gender-inclusive toilets are often either unavailable or very limited, and thus cannot meet the needs of transgender employees, who may be forced to use a disabled toilet or a gender-specific toilet that does not correspond to their gender. These findings highlight how a binary system of gender norms – what Doan (2010, p. 649) describes as 'the tyranny of the

gender dichotomy' – is perpetuated and reinforced through both interpersonal and institutional means, regulating and policing the workplace lives of transgender employees. Consistent with Johnston's (2018) study on the experiences of transgender people in Aotearoa NZ workplaces and toilets, this study shows that these spaces can be challenging for transgender employees, whose bodies and identities are policed both through self-surveillance and by organisational practices and colleagues.

By examining cis-heteronormativity within organisations in Aotearoa NZ – a context often considered Rainbow-friendly – this study challenges and complicates conventional notions of organisational culture. It demonstrates that binary thinking about workplace climate, such as 'friendly/unfriendly,' 'safe/unsafe,' or 'inclusive/exclusive,' fails to capture the complexity of power dynamics faced by Rainbow employees. The findings reveal an organisational culture where queer employees are protected and supported, but only to a limited extent. For instance, while management addresses homophobia, it does not hold perpetrators accountable; Rainbow events and celebrations are organised without involving non-Rainbow staff; gender-inclusive toilets are provided but lack sufficient accessibility; despite legal protections against discrimination, parental leave policies may deprive Rainbow employees of their entitlements by failing to recognise the diverse ways in which Rainbow individuals become parents. This limited inclusivity significantly impacts Rainbow employees, who may feel ambivalent towards the organisational culture, experiencing both support and alienation. As one survey comment from a queer employee in this study encapsulates: 'We are celebrated but not included.' Therefore, despite employers' commitment to Rainbow inclusion, as evidenced by organisational initiatives and their pursuit of Rainbow Tick accreditation, the organisation can still function as a space that is both Rainbow-supportive and cis-heteronormative, rendering Rainbow employees valued yet culturally 'unintelligible' (Butler 2006).

By portraying Rainbow employees as supported but not fully included in the workplace, this study aligns with findings from other Western countries, such as Sweden (Rennstam and Sullivan 2016), Australia (Willis 2009), the UK (Tindall and Waters 2012), and the US (Kelly et al. 2021; Williams et al. 2009). These studies highlight the limits of Rainbow inclusion in queer-friendly organisations, indicating a shift from exclusion and overt stigmatisation to more subtle forms of marginalisation. In such environments, queer employees are officially accepted but still experience marginalisation, often feeling pressured to conform to cis-heteronormativity or stereotypes (Rennstam and Sullivan 2016; Tindall and Waters 2012; Williams et al. 2009). Consistent with the research mentioned above, this study contributes to the global conversation by highlighting the persistent operation of cis-heteronormativity in the workplace, supported by empirical evidence from the Aotearoa NZ context. By highlighting the limitations of Rainbow inclusion practices, this study shows that the operation of power in the workplace is dynamic and complex, involving multiple conflicting discourses that simultaneously disrupt and sustain cis-heteronormative power structures, resulting in both positive and marginalising experiences for Rainbow individuals. It suggests that organisational leaders and HR practitioners should gain a deeper understanding of their workplace culture and implement additional initiatives to provide genuine support for queer employees, ensuring their full inclusion.

Moving beyond a singular focus on Rainbow individuals – such as personal care, individual support, and organisational Rainbow networks – this study advocates for

rethinking the organisational approach to workplace inclusion by shifting the focus from the margins to mainstream norms. Guided by the theoretical concepts of heteronormativity (Marchia and Sommer 2019) and cisnormativity (Köllen and Rumens 2022), this study has revealed how heterosexuality, cisgender norms, and the gender binary are normalised and institutionalised within organisations. By revealing the overt and covert manifestations of cis-heteronormativity in the workplace, this study highlights the role of organisations in not only perpetuating but also reinforcing cis-heteronormativity. As such, this study has important implications for making visible, and challenging, cis-heteronormative organisational culture. This approach to Rainbow inclusion, which focuses on norms rather than the 'other,' shifts the focus of Rainbow inclusion work from the margin to the centre, engaging with non-Rainbow staff and leadership in combating cis-heteronormativity. Critical reflection on normative organisational culture can also prevent Rainbow inclusion efforts from merely becoming 'Rainbow washing' – the instrumentalisation of Rainbow inclusion for commercial and social ends (Özbilgin and Erbil 2024). By examining and interrogating the cultural roots of organisational marginalisation and discrimination, organisations can better address covert inequalities, achieve genuine organisational change, and create an inclusive space for all.

Although this study has demonstrated the potential and usefulness of surveys for qualitative research by drawing on and analysing data with depth and richness, it also has clear limitations regarding the scope of the data collected. Specifically, the survey's focus on organisational culture and its method of collecting qualitative data through text boxes often limit its ability to capture the full depth of queer employees' experiences, especially in comparison to qualitative methods such as semi-structured in-depth interviews. For instance, this study did not address two important aspects of queer employees' workplace experiences: their agency and resistance in navigating a cis-heteronormative climate, and the experiences of those with intersectional identities. Therefore, future research could focus on the following areas. First, to showcase the nuance of queer employees' experiences, future research could highlight their agency and resistance in negotiating organisational context in Aotearoa NZ. Recent studies, such as Cui's (2023b, 2024) research on gay male academics in China and Watson et al.'s (2024) study of trans workers in Italy, highlight that queer employees, despite being constrained by cis-heteronormativity, are not merely victims but actively adopt strategies to create queer spaces and challenge cis-heteronormative norms. Second, another research gap worth exploring is the intersectional experiences of queer employees in Aotearoa NZ as they navigate multiple power structures related to their diverse identities, such as gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, disability, nationality, and migration status. An emerging body of studies, such as Hennekam and Dumazert's (2023) research on transgender individuals with an ethnic minority background in the Netherlands and Abreu et al.'s (2023) study on immigrant Latinx transgender individuals in the U.S., demonstrates that intersectionality is a valuable theoretical tool for examining how intersecting power structures shape the employment experiences of people with multiple marginalised identities. In the Aotearoa NZ context, an important population requiring scholarly attention is Takatāpui employees, whose organisational experiences may be simultaneously influenced by power structures such as cis-heteronormativity, whiteness, racism, and colonisation. By identifying directions for future research, this paper aims

to stimulate further scholarly engagement with queer issues within the Aotearoa NZ workplace context.

Note

1. Rainbow is used in this study as an umbrella term for non-normative identities of gender and sexuality. It is a commonly used term in the Aotearoa NZ context. This study also use queer as an umbrella term and these two terms are used interchangeably.

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ORCID

Le Cui http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3010-0139

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