“You’d Just Cop Flak From Every Other Dickhead Under the Sun”: Navigating the Tensions of (In)visibility and Hypervisibility in LGBTI Police Liaison Programs in Three Australian States

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Abstract
This article examines the different ways that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) police liaison officers in three states of Australia conceptualized and problematized the public visibility of LGBTI police liaison services. In a climate where LGBTI police liaison services are a prominent model for building relationships between police and LGBTI people, this article considers, through interview data with LGBTI police liaison officers, these officers’ perceptions of the role that the visibility of these programs played in their success. Specifically, it explores the tensions and difficulties for officers and LGBTI communities resulting from the general invisibility of liaison officers themselves (and, by extension, these programs), as well as the problems that increased visibility of these programs might bring to officers, to LGBTI communities, and to policing work itself. Although enhancing the visibility of liaison services may be an important goal, this research suggests that careful consideration is required regarding how this visibility is produced and maintained, particularly given the concerns that officers reported about the potential risks posed by adopting new forms of visibility, including the risk of hypervisibility. This article questions the

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conventional view that increased visibility is unproblematic and is the key to the success of such programs.

**Keywords**
police, LGBTI, liaison programs, visibility, invisibility, hypervisibility, heteronormativity, homonormativity

**Introduction**

There is no doubt that, across much of the Western world, relationships between police and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people have been historically problematic due to the criminalization of sodomy, cross-dressing, and the discriminatory policing practices associated with them (Ball, 2016; Dwyer, 2014; Ford, 2008; Peterson & Panfil, 2014; Tomsen, 2009). Police work was (and arguably sometimes still is) informed by assumptions—often shared by the general public—about the perceived immorality of LGBTI people, and the related view that they required stringent, and often violent, regulation (Dwyer, 2011; Jones, 2015; Mallory et al., 2015; Willett, 2008). In recent times, however, there have been significant shifts in how the public, and indeed police, think about and respond to LGBTI people. This is evidenced in the resources police organizations have invested in rebuilding relationships with LGBTI people (Dwyer & Tomsen, 2015; Field, 2007; Gillespie, 2008; Miles-Johnson, 2016; Pickles, 2019; Tomsen, 2009). Of course, these initiatives do not necessarily mean that police now unreservedly protect LGBTI people—LGBTI people still experience police violence in the contemporary moment (Russell, 2016, 2019). But police organizations around the world are seeking to address these issues through concentrated relationship-building efforts.

Visibility appears to be a crucial component of these forms of relationship building between police and LGBTI communities, particularly as a way of increasing the awareness of these programs among LGBTI people (Pickles, 2019). When we talk about visibility, we mean how someone or something is able to be seen and observed—it is about see-ability, noticeability, perceptibility, and viewability. Different strategies are used to increase the visibility of positive interactions between policing organizations and LGBTI communities, such as having visible police contingents in major LGBTI events, including marching in uniform in annual Pride parades and having a stall with representatives of police organizations and police cars and bikes at such events (Russell, 2016, 2019). Given the contemporary shift toward community policing initiatives, these moves are unsurprising and have achieved some success.

A key component in improving the relations between LGBTI communities and police and supporting LGBTI victims of crime is LGBTI police liaison programs. Many police organizations internationally now have a dedicated liaison program for LGBTI people (Gillespie, 2008; Russell, 2019). In the Australian context—the focus of this article—these programs have been implemented in a somewhat uneven way,
driven by state police services themselves, and with different levels of investment by senior leadership within those organizations and the LGBTI communities that they serve, leading to slight differences in how programs operate around the country. However, generally speaking, police officers (whether they identify as LGBTI or not) volunteer to be part of these programs (in addition to their other responsibilities as police officers) and are provided with specialized training about LGBTI issues to support them in undertaking this role (Tobler, 2006). These specially trained officers are available when an LGBTI person wants to speak to a police officer for informal advice, providing a key form of frontline support for LGBTI people. Interestingly, while we have evidence that LGBTI people know of the existence of liaison officers, rarely do they access the support provided by these officers (Berman & Robinson, 2010). Moreover, we know that LGBTI people who do access liaison services feel more supported than when they access general police (Bourne et al., 2010; Leonard et al., 2008), and that these liaison units are having an overall positive impact upon police relationships with LGBTI people (Colvin, 2012). Yet, we continue to have little other research evidence with which to evaluate the effectiveness of these forms of relationship building (Colvin, 2012). In the absence of such evidence, officers and community advocates rely on assumptions about what is working and what could be improved to enhance the effectiveness of these programs. One such assumption is that greater visibility of the program and liaison officers themselves is key to the success of liaison programs (hence the advertising of the program in community magazines, the police presence at community events and venues, and the frustration expressed by some officers that their role is invisible and such invisibility hampers their effectiveness). It is this assumption that we explore in further detail here.

This article examines the results of research exploring LGBTI police liaison services across three states in Australia (Queensland [QLD], New South Wales [NSW], and Western Australia [WA]), which sought to understand what stops LGBTI people from seeking support from liaison officers. During their interviews for this study, LGBTI police liaison officers provided significant insights into other aspects of these programs, and key among these is the importance of, and complexities surrounding, the visibility of these programs. This visibility is positioned by interviewees as a central aspect of the program’s (potential) success, but also a source of potential risk. The article first discusses the theoretical framework informing the understanding of visibility in this context and the analysis of the interview data, followed by an outline of the methodology employed for this project. It then examines the key themes emerging from the interviews with LGBTI police liaison officers. Finally, the key implications of our findings for policy and practice development in police and LGBTI community services are discussed. This study is original as it focuses attention on this kind of visibility, its implications, and its complexities in attempts to enhance LGBTI police liaison programs. It brings together the issues of recognition, visibility, and normativity (discussed below) to complicate calls to simply increase the visibility of liaison services, and to think in different ways about how these services can be enhanced.
What Do We Mean by Visibility?

Visibility is a core concept underpinning the analysis in this article. It is central in some respects to the operation of liaison programs because they assume a particular kind of visibility on behalf of LGBTI people. The act of approaching a liaison officer is, itself, making one visible as an LGBTI person. These programs require that LGBTI communities “become visible before the law [so they] can access protection” (Moran & Skeggs, 2004, p. 5).

Visibility is, in some cases, desirable. For example, seeking to enhance one’s visibility can be a reaction to the legal and social exclusion of LGBTI people, and the subsequent invisibility that this produces—as it is in the case of liaison programs. As Lamble (2009) has shown, LGBTI people have long been invisible before the law and the police. But, for LGBTI people, seeking or enhancing visibility can also be fraught. They may not want to be made visible. Making one’s queerness visible, either through the disclosure of one’s gender or sexuality, or through a visible display (via one’s mode of comportment, dress, or other physical markers), is akin to coming or being “out.” Such disclosures are not straightforward. They occur multiple times in different contexts and contain significant risks (Lamble, 2009; Panfil, 2017). These risks are amplified for queer and transgender people, particularly because visibility can mean that they actually become hyper-visible as “non-normative” or “queer.” They may in fact seek to avoid being visible as LGBTI, and rather “pass” so that their gender or sexuality is not brought into focus. Decisions around whether to be visible as queer, in what contexts, and how to do so, must be understood as negotiations of safety for LGBTI people—attempts to navigate the risks of violence and harassment that they encounter daily (Lamble, 2009). This means that depending on the context, LGBTI people are constantly navigating the tensions between being visible enough to avoid social and legal invisibility, and avoiding becoming hypervisible, which would draw unwarranted and unsafe attention to themselves as LGBTI people.

Thus, LGBTI police liaison programs rely, in many respects, on service users being “out,” self-confident individuals who have the capacity to identify with, and therefore seek support from, an equally visible police service enhancement program (Ball & Dwyer, 2017). They also rely on the willingness of policing services to explicitly see LGBTI people (Lamble, 2009). Visibility and recognition go hand-in-hand here—one must be able to be seen to be recognized. Moran and Skeggs (2004) rightly warn us that “recognition politics is always reliant on a scopic economy, that is, it assumes that groups can be made visible, want to be made visible, and that visibility can enable a claim to be made on the state” (p. 5).

Although visibility is a tool for achieving recognition, and a problematic one in this context, it can also have normalizing effects. Foucault famously pointed out that “visibility is a trap” (Foucault, 1975, p. 200), and as Mason (2002) notes, “human subjects become particular types of individuals according to the ways in which we are rendered visible within historically specific systems of knowledge” (p. 14). Once an individual is made observable as a subject, they must then “assume responsibility for modifying
and constraining [their] behaviour . . so as to conform” (Mason, 2002, p. 20) to dominant expectations of normality.

Some queer scholars have noted that for LGBTI communities, greater social equality and legal inclusion has made them visible and recognizable in “homonormative” ways that reinforce particular accepted, expected, and legally protected ways of being LGBTI (Brown, 2009, 2012; Duggan, 2002; Robinson, 2016). Those who do not meet these ideals risk being spectacularly visible themselves as nonnormative—as outside the sphere of respectability, as deviant, as potentially criminal, and as potential targets of extra scrutiny and policing. Their “acceptable” or “unacceptable” visibility may even impact directly on their interaction with criminal justice systems and agents in public space (Dwyer, 2011).

Although these discussions of visibility have implicitly focused on LGBTI people and communities—specifically those seeking to access policing programs—the themes drawn from these discussions of visibility can also apply to the experiences of liaison officers themselves. It is this context that is of relevance for this article. After all, LGBTI police liaison officers can be positioned as “looked-at” (Young, 1996, p. 210) subjects, particularly because, as we will see, in many respects, they embody liaison programs, and attempts to make these programs visible are often written on the bodies of officers. Notably, in this study, there were times when this issue was very apparent, and, in an interesting reversal of the normal dynamic assumed to exist between police and the public, members of the public became “the subject-who-looks” (Young, 1996, p. 210). Police seeking to make these programs visible (such as through symbols worn on their uniform) encountered the normative force of assumptions about police uniforms and the related assumptions about the masculine and paramilitary character of the police, which made their attempts to enhance visibility more difficult. Interestingly, participants exercised this normative policing over themselves, as much as other officers or members of the (perceived) public did. Moreover, discussions around the risks of visibility mirrored the concerns that LGBTI people have more broadly about negotiating safety when expressing visible queerness—an issue that was complicated by these officers’ dual role as police and (at least for some) as LGBTI people themselves.

Method

The data analyzed here were drawn from an empirical project exploring the dynamics of LGBTI police liaison programs across three states in Australia (Queensland, New South Wales, and Western Australia). The research specifically aimed to provide detailed victim- and police-oriented analyses of the processes and practices of reporting LGBTI victimization to police to address the gap between awareness and access of LGBTI police liaison services. It also sought to work toward improving LGBTI communities’ confidence to report victimization to police. The broader project employed a mixed-methods approach, but the data presented here, and the focus of the methodological discussion below, are the qualitative component.2 This qualitative component utilized semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders—namely, LGBTI people
and LGBTI police liaison officers—to explore the specific issues relating to LGBTI police liaison services mentioned above. This article focuses solely on the interviews with liaison officers.

LGBTI police liaison officers were approached via an email from the State Coordinators of LGBTI police liaison programs in each state. Fifteen LGBTI police liaison officers expressed interest via email and interviews were conducted across Queensland (n = 8; two females and six males), New South Wales (n = 5; two females and three males), and Western Australia (n = 2; two females). The liaison officers were not asked to disclose their sexuality for the study, but many chose to self-disclose this information in the interviews. All of these officers were cisgender people, which may inform their perceptions of the value of visibility (given that they will have their own experiences of navigating visibility). These interviews, between 30 and 60 min in duration, were conducted in person or by phone by members of the research team following a semi-structured interview schedule. The interviews were audio recorded, and the audio recordings were transcribed for analysis. These interviews examined how LGBTI police liaison officers conceptualize their role as liaison officers; how they perceive the effectiveness or otherwise of their services; how their role is influenced by organizational, operational, and training factors; their views on why LGBTI people do or do not seek support from liaison services; and the ways they believe these programs could be improved into the future.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and then thematically coded by members of the research team. Transcripts were uploaded into Leximancer text analysis software to generate key codes in the data. These codes were used to structure the coding of the transcripts using NVivo 10 qualitative data management program. Each interview data set was coded by two team members to ensure intercoder reliability.

In this research, we did not initially envisage a specific focus on the notions of visibility or invisibility, but it became apparent that these concepts were highly significant and perceived as vital to the success of these service enhancement programs within police organizations. The interviewees in our project discussed their visibility or invisibility as liaison officers themselves, or the visibility or invisibility of the programs more broadly, sometimes at great length, although we did not ask participants specifically about this. Overall, participants indicated that they felt that visibility was essential to the success of liaison programs, and that the lack of visibility of these programs was a problem to be ameliorated. However, as we will discuss below, how to ameliorate this issue and enhance the visibility of the program was not as clear-cut.

**Enhancing Visibility**

*Enhancing Visibility Through Police Uniforms*

When asking participants about what facilitated the success of liaison programs, we posed some hypothetical questions about possible strategies through which LGBTI police liaison officers may be able to demonstrate their support for LGBTI people when doing their routine work as a police officer. Some jurisdictions have already
adopted strategies like these, with the most popular being a small badge on the police uniform. There was quite a lot of discussion about these badges in the interviews. In addition to this, as part of our interview schedule, we raised a hypothetical situation where LGBTI police liaison officers might wear rainbow armbands to show their support for LGBTI communities, and asked the interviewees their thoughts about this approach. As a research team, we assumed this would be embraced by participants in the study, thinking that such a symbol of the overt presence of LGBTI people or agents of the law would make LGBTI people visible before the law (or encourage them to make themselves visible), and encourage them to recognize that they could access the protection of the law (Moran & Skeggs, 2004).

Some officers did support this position, noting how they “think it’s a good idea” (Male, Liaison, 5, QLD). However, it was certainly not as clear-cut as we had perhaps anticipated. These hypothetical discussions about strategies for raising the profile of LGBTI police liaison programs spurred lengthy discussions about what equated to appropriate levels of visibility for an LGBTI police liaison officer, and, most importantly, how the visibility of LGBTI police liaison programs ought to be enhanced in ways that ensured the safety of the officers and members of the public.

Participants noted how it would be useful to change the uniform to make the LGBTI police liaison role more easily identifiable. One officer jokingly suggested that police might wear “pink shirts” (Male, Liaison, 2, NSW) to achieve this visibility. Another stated,

I think it is important that people can identify that person as being trained in that area and it’s not dissimilar to other things we do within police to signify people as having specialist training. For example, our mental intervention team. If they have done that course they have a mental health intervention pin that they wear, a similar size to the GLLO [Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officer] badge. (Male, Liaison, 1, NSW)

The key suggestion for changing the uniform to increase the visibility of liaison programs and liaison officers was definitely badges: “what I would suggest is . . . The Dog Squad wear a little German Shepherd badge. The Water Police wear a little anchor. Why not get approval for a little, small rainbow flag badge?” (Female, Liaison, 1, QLD). As one officer noted, such a pin is an important form of visibility because it indicates not just a supportive person, but someone with specialized training, which is itself an important message to make visible:

Well, have the pins and they can be worn with your uniform. It’s not a hugely overt sign . . . I think it is important that people can identify that person as being trained in that area and it’s not dissimilar to other things we do within police to signify people as having specialist training. For example, our mental intervention team. If they have done that course they have a mental health intervention pin that they wear, a similar size to the GLLO [Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officer] badge. (Male, Liaison, 1, NSW)

Some officers received badges upon completion of the required training to become a liaison officer, or through networking with other officers in different jurisdictions.
However, these badges were not official police badges such as those an officer might receive if they had undertaken other forms of training, or to indicate their involvement in a particular organizational unit, such as the Dog Squad or the Bomb Squad. This meant that none of the police uniform policies in any jurisdictions officially approved of officers wearing the badges in their day-to-day police work. As such, most of the discussion about these badges suggested that liaison officers are unhappy and frustrated that they cannot wear the badges, and that really the only time they could wear them was at relevant community events (such as Pride festivals). Inconsistencies between the policies governing liaison programs and those governing other programs on this matter frustrated attempts to enhance visibility, and highlighted the differences between officers and the organization more broadly:

We get as part of the programme little lapel pins to be worn to identify officers who have completed the programme . . . our uniform policy does not allow us to wear them . . . the only time we can really wear them is during an event . . . We have the similar system for the mental health intervention team, but they are allowed to wear them out. (Male, Liaison, 2, NSW)

We have a badge but it’s not a corporate badge, so although it’s obviously been issued to us who have passed the course and who are active in the role . . . it’s not a formal badge that we are allowed to wear . . . So we, when we’re doing our functions, like we march with it at Mardi Gras at night things like that, but it’s not a badge that you would wear every shift. (Female, Liaison, 2, NSW)

I can’t see [a policy allowing badges] getting up, organisationally. I think they’d be allowed to wear it in public—like to pride—but not to wear it like all the time, in your everyday . . . It’s the everyday stuff that you want to wear it, and the thing is we’re also talking about maybe two-thirds of the liaison officers not working on the street. So, somebody in the office. They’re not going to be able to help anybody in headquarters doing corporate work. (Female, Liaison, 2, QLD)

These inconsistencies in official policies about wearing badges in some respects frustrated attempts by liaison officers to enhance visibility, particularly because the kind of visibility that it produced was a selective visibility. Although wearing badges at community events made liaison programs and officers more visible at those events—where police are engaging in “image work” (Mawby, 2002) that enhances their relationship with the community—officers felt that visibility probably mattered more on a day-to-day basis, when they were engaging in everyday policing practice within the broader community.

Interestingly, one officer indicated that, regardless of the policy, they wore the badge anyway:

I do wear a badge actually, without any of them knowing. No one has a clue about the programme, so they see me wearing a gay, lesbian police [badge] . . . and if someone asks me about it from here they’re like “Oh what’s that badge?” I’ll say “I’m a liaison officer.”
Then they say “Oh ok” and that’s the end of it. But if some dickhead wanted to get on their high-horse, they probably could and go “Is that authorised by QPS [Queensland Police Service]?” and I’d have to say no. (Male, Liaison, 4, QLD)

This officer’s comment suggests that they are subtly resisting policies that limit their ability to make the program visible, thereby enhancing the visibility of these programs in an environment that is not supportive of them doing so. Although it seems oxymoronic, this covert or discreet visibility is at least one attempt to ensure visibility in the absence of other practices of visibility—a point to which we return.

The discussion above speaks to the key issue of visibility that the badges are supposed to represent, as discussed by Angel (1994, p. 62) where badges are “something which can be pointed to and seen” by LGBTI people in public spaces. Having officers wear a badge in an office is “not going to be able to help anybody.” From their perspective, wearing the badge is an outward looking, public-facing activity, something that makes the liaison officers more visible to LGBTI communities in public so they can go to them for assistance when they need it. The public are the subjects that look and need to be able to see LGBTI police liaison officers with badges, and the liaison officers are the subjects to be looked at by the public (Young, 1996). We can see the power of the notion that visibility is important at work here—where enhancing the visibility of LGBTI police liaison officers is ultimately thought to enable LGBTI people to access greater protection from police (Moran & Skeggs, 2004). At the same time, we can also see the first inkling of concerns regarding the visibility of the programs and the potential problems of making these programs visible through the uniform of officers. This is a point to which we will return.

Enhancing Visibility Through the Media

Another important strategy discussed by participants for increasing the visibility of liaison programs was through targeted and sustained engagement with the media, and particularly the LGBTI community media. Visibility here is to be achieved by drawing attention to the program but in a way that is removed from an individual officer—raising awareness of the general existence of the program in the community. Interviewees identified past successful program coordinators, particularly in Queensland, as having implemented good examples of this strategy through the sustained media engagement that they fostered. Some officers spoke about a previous coordinator (who was not interviewed as part of the study as they had retired) as someone who “did quite, you know, a few media articles” (Female, Liaison, 2, QLD), and who worked hard at “supporting a positive interaction with the gay media, trying to get them on side” (Male, Liaison, 2, QLD). One officer had been doing work like this in Western Australia and had put together a “[m]edia strategy of sorts” with the local LGBTI community newspaper, through which they promoted their role and the transgender and intersex search policy that had recently been implemented by police at the watchhouse (Female, Liaison, 2, WA).
The key message in the comments of other officers was that being unobservable and imperceptible in the media—particularly LGBTI community media—was directly linked to the lack of success of the LGBTI police liaison program. In highlighting this issue, the officers had in mind the potential impacts that a lack of such media and marketing work would have: “we need that component to let the wider community know that we are GLBTI-friendly. . . We need to do things again from a marketing perspective and be prominent” (Female, Liaison, 2, WA). These officers expressed a concern that LGBTI communities would not be aware of the program, and therefore would not know where to look for information about this program and how to access liaison officers when they required support. Given the situation (of significant under-investment in the program and a very conservative government) in Queensland at the time of interviews, many of the Queensland participants singled out the lack of marketing of the program by the coordinator for strong criticism:

Maybe a bit more media stuff because we’re pretty restricted on that. I know there used to be ads in *Pride* [a local LGBTI community newspaper] every week, [but] they’ve been canned. (Male, Liaison, 4, QLD)

They’d have to have some sort of targeted marketing campaign, I think. Education, media strategies . . . I mean, we have brochures still but they wouldn’t be able to be about the liaison officer programme. (Female, Liaison, 2, QLD)

I’m sure there [are] some young gay people who don’t even know we exist. And [if] they have a hard time, or get beat up at a party and they wouldn’t even know this [programme existed]. (Male, Liaison, 1, QLD)

The importance of marketing the program internally to other officers was also a key issue, and particularly notable in Queensland. The visibility of the program to other officers was seen as central to raising awareness among LGBTI people, because other officers could put LGBTI people in touch with the liaison service should the need arise:

It’s not marketed, neither internally or externally. I’ve had police say to me “Oh, I didn’t even know liaison officers existed, what do you do?” I thought “Well, not very much because no one calls us because no one knows about us!” (Female, Liaison, 1, QLD)

I can pretty much guarantee that if I ring Police Link [a police switchboard linking the public with different services] now and ask for a liaison officer they wouldn’t have a clue where to put me. (Male, Liaison, 4, QLD)

The use of this kind of marketing as a strategy for increasing visibility is important to consider further, as it allows for an increase to visibility without making a change to the police uniform. It also allows greater control by police of the message, and a potentially wider reach than simply one officer being noticed in public. It may be preferred as an avenue for increasing visibility as well because it offers greater control over how
the program is made visible. Focusing on enhancing visibility only within the LGBTI community via community media ensures a more targeted visibility than enhancing visibility to the general public may. As we will see below, a more general visibility to the wider public may in fact create new risks.

The Risks of Increased Visibility

Whether the visibility of liaison programs was increased via badges or rainbow armbands, the comments from officers made it abundantly clear that any visible signs of being aligned with LGBTI communities potentially increased the risk posed to officers, from both members of the public and their policing colleagues. The suggestion of increasing visibility produced concerns about changes to police uniforms and what this meant for police identities. It also led to clear anxieties about how queer visibility apparently posed a threat to whether the officers would be respected as police, or discriminated against as (potentially) LGBTI people. In many respects, the police officers interviewed in this study indicated a concern that, in effect, such visibility would be a form of hyper-visibility.

Visibility Leads to Discrimination From the Public

Officers made it clear that while there was a payoff for making the program more visible to LGBTI people in need of support, the key risk they were concerned about was the potential for officers to become potential targets of homophobic reactions by members of the public. This was not considered worth the risk:

To do that big rainbow on my arm, I don’t think so . . . It’d be good for the gay community to see you there but at the same time, you’d just cop flak from every other dickhead under the sun, like [a] drunken bogan going “Oh it’s a gay policeman” and all that sort of stuff . . . It wouldn’t really be worth it. (Male, Liaison, 4, QLD)

I think it can make you a target too. Not everybody out there is a prospective gay victim looking to report crime . . . there are some not very nice people out there . . . who may very well give that officer a hard time for wearing that. (Male, Liaison, 2, NSW)

For these officers, the promise of visibility comes with the almost inevitable possibility that the risks they face are heightened. Although these initiatives might make LGBTI issues and people within and before the law more visible, it could also attract the wrong kind of attention, marking officers as nonnormative and thus targets of discrimination. Officers appeared to prefer remaining invisible rather than becoming hypervisible in this way—they felt that there was no alternative or that the risks were too great.

Other officers suggested that one way around this would be, in effect, a selective visibility, which would entail officers making a decision about whether they wear such a badge depending on whether being visible is likely to pose a risk. In many respects,
this resembles an LGBTI person’s negotiation of the closet—specifically the decision-making around whether, and in which contexts, to come out. In essence, and again, paradoxically, these participants are suggesting a selective visibility via symbols that are meaningful and visible to some, but are opaque to others:

I don’t know . . . If somebody has got a GLLO badge on all the time, it could lead them to getting persecuted themselves. Maybe if they put it on when they’re going to a job that they know is a same-sex thing—I don’t know. There’s just . . . There are lots of potential risks involved with it . . . But at the same time, I can understand the importance of it as well. So, I guess it depends on how the officer feels about it, more than anything . . .

(Female, Liaison, 2, WA)

Yeah, look I’m a bit ambiguous about that one. I can see merit in it. I’m not an arm band type of person, maybe a badge with LGBTI on it that would mean something to the community if one of the people in the community saw it and said “Oh yeah, you are one of the liaison officers.” I have the concern with the bracelet and homophobic people saying “oh he’s gay.” Something that means something to the [LGBTI] community member but the general community member wouldn’t really know what that means.

(Male, Liaison, 1, QLD)

These officers make it very clear that displaying or wearing visible signs of support for LGBTI communities, in whatever form they take, might make officers the target of harassment from members of the public. In some respects, as mentioned above, this perceived risk mirrors the risk that LGBTI people face regarding the visibility of their own sexuality or gender. Of course, this is not to suggest that the risks or the dangers are the same. The risks that visibility can pose to the very existence of LGBTI people differs substantially from the harassment that visibility as an LGBTI ally may lead to for officers. And this is further complicated by the fact that officers themselves may identify as LGBTI, and thus experience harassment personally, regardless of whether they out themselves to members of the public or they are perceived to be LGBTI.

Notably, these anxieties existed despite participants talking about times when they were wearing a police uniform. While normally these officers may feel a measure of protection as LGBTI people because of their uniform (specifically because it does not draw attention to their sexuality or gender), it seemed that a visible sign of queerness on the uniform would erode the power of the uniform to command public respect. Not only would such a symbol queer the masculinist and heteronormative ethos that has become institutionalized in police organizations and symbolized by the police uniform (Aiello, 2014; Ault, 1996; Jackson, 2003), the comments above suggest that officers are wary of how these symbols might be visualizing queer identity in ways that police officers do not want them visualized—regardless of whether the officer actually identifies as LGBTI. These comments highlight that these police officers have specific ideas about how to be “appropriately visible” (Richardson, 2005, p. 524) as an LGBTI police liaison officer, and this includes the pressure to appear heteronormative. Again, in this example, the marker of visibility makes them hypervisible. Through such badges or symbols, these officers again become “the subject-to-be-looked-at” (Young,
1996, p. 210)—over and above the fact that they are already looked at and visible because of their uniforms, they are looked at here as queer. Members of the public are the subjects that not only look, but, in effect, judge. Notably, one small signifier of queerness has outsize power to such an extent that it eroded the power of the uniform and made officers feel vulnerable.

**Visibility, Community Media, and Perceptions of Police**

Officers noted that some risks exist around media engagement as a strategy for increasing visibility. These were unrelated to attracting unwanted homophobia from the public, but focused more on how the media might perpetuate stereotypes about the police. Some were concerned even with the “gay media” (Male, Liaison, 2, QLD) perpetuating stereotyped ideas, such as police using violence against LGBTI people. They also talked about the work they needed to do to break down these stereotypes, including “correcting them because they had their own prejudice and their own view of police” (Male, Liaison, 2, QLD). While LGBTI police liaison programs can be made more visible via the media, this strategy also has the potential to work against positive forms of visibility if preconceived notions about the history of policing continue to hold sway. Liaison officers were concerned that this approach to enhancing visibility may backfire given that they were unable to control how they were made visible in this context.

Other officers expressed concerns with how media coverage of LGBTI people can sometimes reinforce a view that their policing needs are restricted to addressing their violent victimization, or responding to their violent (read: “dysfunctional”) relationships:

> It’s always a bit of a catch 22, I suppose it can be fraught with danger... There’s not really too many good news stories because really, our role is to help victims of crime. They’re not going to plant that on the front of the paper—“Oh this poor gay man got bashed” or “This poor lesbian was in a DV.” That’s not going to make it to the paper, but you know, just showing us doing something in the community has got to be worth something. (Female, Liaison, 2, QLD)

Although the media had the potential to increase the visibility of LGBTI police liaison programs, there was significant ambivalence about how the media (including the LGBTI media) might respond in these forms of engagement and, in particular, how the media might exacerbate and make more observable the stereotypes that continue to be perpetuated. These comments evidence what Mason (2002, p. 14) notes regarding how “human subjects become particular types of individuals”—they are “rendered visible within historically specific systems of knowledge.” These officers expressed concerns about how systems of knowledge, particularly about the victimization of LGBTI people and about the relationship that LGBTI people have had with police officers in the past, might render LGBTI people and police officers visible in narrow, stereotypical, and problematic ways, thereby working against the strategies for enhancing the use of liaison programs. This example illustrates a desire on the
part of liaison officers to control how liaison programs are made visible to enhance their effectiveness.

**Police Organizational Culture and Enhancing Visibility**

One of the key issues that participants discussed when considering enhancing the visibility of LGBTI police liaison programs—as both a barrier to increasing this visibility and a potential risk of doing so—was police culture itself, specifically its hierarchy, the views of other officers, and how rigorously policed the uniform is. Officers discussed how they believed that the general conservatism of police organizations, as masculinist paramilitary organizations (Aiello, 2014), would not be forward-looking enough to allow for the wearing of rainbow armbands, or any other such symbol. Indeed, a few officers in one jurisdiction talked about their organization as having a potentially homophobic reaction to the suggestion of officers wearing rainbow armbands and the conservative ideas of police hierarchy would mean this would never eventuate:

There is no way in hell Commissioner [NAME REMOVED] would approve that. (Female, Liaison, 1, QLD)

They’re dinosaurs. I don’t know about a rainbow armband . . . I don’t think it would ever happen in the current senior management, considering we can’t even go to Mardi Gras or march in our own Pride. I doubt they’re going to let us wear rainbow things . . . Because they think they’re still in the early 1900s . . . Maybe even 1800s. (Male, Liaison, 4, QLD)

There is the ability but . . . change in any way for the purposes of identifying GLLO officers or any relationship to the GLBTI community would not happen. I would suggest that that’s a long way down the track. (Female, Liaison, 1, WA)

Oh, I don’t think it would get past Uniform Committee . . . I know that the uniform code of dress actually says you can’t wear any of those things [badges]. People do . . . And look, I understand why they do it. It’s about bonding, it’s about shared, you know, whatever. But technically, they’re not [allowed] . . . I don’t think the Commissioner would be really impressed. (Female, Liaison, 2, QLD)

These comments highlight well how officers did not think it was possible for senior management to enable changes like this to police uniforms in such a conservative police climate. As we have seen, this move would queer (Ault, 1996) the heteronormativity of the police uniforms. Again, perhaps this reluctance with queering police uniforms signals an ongoing, institutionalized unease because doing this represents a symbolic threat to the heteromasculinity of the police organization (Aiello, 2014). The officers perceive that this would not be an acceptable form of visibility for LGBTI police liaison programs and police uniforms could potentially become “sites and sights” (Angel, 1994, p. 63) of queer hypervisibility, and subsequently something that may erode public respect.
The police hierarchy and culture were not the only points of contention in this respect. Participants also discussed how other officers within the same police organization also constituted a significant barrier to the visibility of LGBTI police liaison programs. They noted that there were police officers at all levels in the police organization that would respond negatively, including in discriminatory ways:

It has its positives in that awareness is raised. If I was to wear a rainbow banner around my arm saying I’m an LGBTI officer, the condemnation would come not just from the Police Service—and that’s the individuals that are in the organization. (Male, Liaison, 6, QLD)

And I’ll probably go for something more like—not that police officers wear them—but . . . like a lanyard or something like that rather than changing uniforms which is again, another traditional thing that police have. Other police officers will feel like that’s taking away from the legitimacy of their uniform. (Female, Liaison, 2, WA)

While most officers were concerned about the potential homophobia that other officers might receive from the public as a result of wearing a badge, some acknowledged that those currently wearing such badges had already experienced actual stigmatization from other police officers. They were concerned about the possibility of experiencing similar discrimination should they follow suit. This experience of discrimination was particularly the case for those heterosexual officers who had undertaken the training and wore the badge:

The cops that did it [the GLLO programme] that were straight were being treated very differently in the canteen lines as opposed to anyone else, and cops looked down on them because they had the big GLLO badge on them when we . . . walked around campus. They got an insight in what some gay and lesbian people get everyday. (Female, Liaison, 1, NSW)

Although this officer makes it evident that stigmatization is a negative outcome for these heterosexual liaison officers, they also acknowledge that this can have an educative role for these officers, where they are introduced to an aspect of daily life for LGBTI people.

Most importantly, the placement of the badges and armbands on the bodies of police officers signifies a precarious move fraught with insecurity for these officers because these symbols might possibly imply a queer identity rather than just an alignment with a specialized, volunteer role. It is clear that officers do not think that wearing rainbow armbands is going to be supported by police hierarchy or among other police officers due to the conservative climate that still persists within that police organization. Again, demonstrated here is a concern with how, by wearing rainbow armbands, these officers are potentially queering the heteronormative expectations that underpin the organization, and also how this heteronormativity is policed by others. Officers that queer heteronormativity are subjects that become “looked-at” (Young, 1996, p. 201) by other officers, visible examples of how not to do heteronormativity in the organization, with
onlooking officers who uphold the heteronormative status quo as the subject who looks at officers that queer heteronormativity “in an ever-present state of watchfulness” (Young, 1996, p. 201).

Conclusion

This article has analyzed some significant challenges that exist around the visibility of LGBTI police liaison programs. What otherwise might appear to be a simple desire—to increase the uptake of LGBTI police liaison services by making those programs more visible to the relevant communities that they serve—is much more fraught than initially assumed. Visibility is volatile. It exposes people to the gaze of others (both colleagues and members of the public), and this gaze may pose a threat. An attempt to draw greater attention to the program through liaison officers can attract the wrong attention, and attention that may degrade the symbols—and, by implication, the reputation—of a police organization as a heteromasculine paramilitary organization. Visibility is also about more than just advertising the liaison program—it also involves making queerness itself visible, and writing this queerness on the bodies of liaison officers.

The tensions around visibility are not unusual for LGBTI communities. As discussed, the reaction to attempts to enhance visibility draws closely from the cultural narrative of “coming out,” and the associated negotiations of potential risk. It is therefore not surprising that increasing the visibility of the liaison program is complex, and officers were cautious about how to go about it. Interestingly, many of the comments about the risk of such visibility, particularly if it was embodied by officers themselves such as through their uniform, clearly illustrated the crux of the issue—that it would inappropriately “queer” the police in a hypervisible way.

Despite the concerns raised about the volatility of visibility, it remains difficult to imagine how to avoid the pull of increasing the visibility of these programs to improve their uptake and success. It is also difficult to imagine LGBTI people not needing to make themselves visible to access these programs. More formal investment in the visibility of the programs is necessary. But it is equally important to remember the dangers that always attend to visibility, particularly the powerful normalizing effects of (in)visibility, and the dangers of hypervisibility. Future research in this context could usefully delve deeper into these issues, particularly in relation to the experiences of transgender and intersex people, given that these programs (and even the symbols utilized to enhance visibility such as rainbow flags) are rarely tailored to their specific needs. Such research could also highlight the possibility of new forms of enhancing visibility that are original, relevant, and effective, and successfully navigate the tensions with visibility identified here.

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Notes

1. Each police service utilizes different initialisms to refer to the communities served by the liaison programs discussed in this article. We use LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex) as the most expansive of these but also acknowledge that not all communities are served equally by such initiatives. For example, transgender and intersex people continue to experience services that are not tailored to their needs.

2. The project underwent ethical review through the Queensland University of Technology, Griffith University, and the University of Sydney, and was administratively reviewed and approved by the research committees of participating police (Queensland Police Service, the New South Wales Police Force, and the Western Australian Police) and community organizations (the AIDS Council of New South Wales and Twenty10).

3. Participants in this study are referred to using these identifiers. This particular example refers to the interview of a male police liaison officer (Male, Liaison) and it was the fifth interview conducted in Queensland (5, QLD). NSW refers to New South Wales and WA refers to Western Australia.

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