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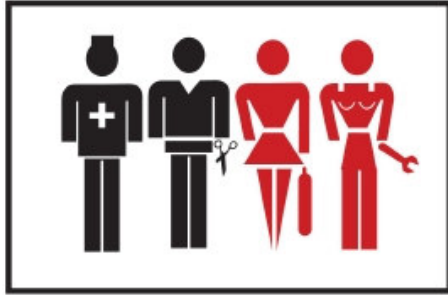
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**Laboured Sexualities:  
The Experiences of Young Queer People in the  
Workplace**

Submitted by

**Paul Willis BSW (Hons)**

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy (Social Work)

University of Tasmania, January 2009

## **Declaration of originality**

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This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the thesis, and to the best of my knowledge and belief no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the thesis, nor does the thesis contain any material that infringes copyright.

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Paul Willis  
31<sup>st</sup> January 2009

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Paul Willis  
31<sup>st</sup> January 2009

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## Abstract

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This thesis is an investigation of how young people experience the workplace as queer (non-heterosexual) workers in the Australian labour market. Previous studies discuss the workplace as a problematic space for queer workers, depicting a site of discrimination, harassment and abuse on the grounds of sexuality. It can be argued that the workplace is configured as a sexual and gendered environment in which heterosexual expressions and relationships are frequently privileged over other sexual subjectivities. The voices of young people are predominantly absent from the literature examining queer sexualities in the workplace, despite their unique position as newcomers to the labour market. Thus, the aims of my research were to learn how young queer people experienced their place of paid employment in the Australian labour market and to examine how organisational dynamics affected their working lives. Addressing these aims through a constructivist methodology, I invited young queer people to share their accounts of former and current work environments. Thirty-four (34) young people aged 18 to 26 years participated through three qualitative methods: web-based surveys, online interviews and face-to-face interviews.

The findings of this study show that young queer people experienced the workplace across five interdependent dimensions as: 1) sexually exclusive spaces; 2) regulatory spaces; 3) silencing spaces; 4) inclusive spaces; and 5) sexually diverse spaces. Across these dimensions, young people participated in both enabling and constraining environments. Negotiating constraining work environments constituted a secondary form of labour for young queer workers as they faced adverse challenges in sustaining supportive and safe work-relationships with other organisational participants. Conversely, working in enabling work environments brought opportunities to form supportive and validating relationships with other organisational participants. Within their accounts of the workplace, young queer people were positioned as victims of symbolic and material violence, as agents of change in resisting and refuting homonegative discourse, and as equal and valued employees. This thesis concludes that while working across the multi-dimensions of the workplace presents complex challenges for young queer workers, it also generates solutions for the development of inclusive work environments. Accordingly, the findings of this study hold implications for change in policy and practice in the field of workplace diversity, and for extending social work knowledge in the field of sexuality.

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