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Cross-group friendships, the irony of harmony, and the social construction of ‘discrimination’

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ABSTRACT

Cross-group friendships are often assumed to be a panacea to intergroup conflict. However, the irony of harmony hypothesis suggests that friendships can have negative consequences for collective action and social change. We complement this research with accounts of cross-group friendship, using interviews and focus groups with minority (African-Caribbean and/ or gay) and majority (White and/ or heterosexual) participants (n= 54). Participants repeatedly deployed ‘friendship’ as an idealised category such that what happened within friendship could not be constructed as discrimination. Majority participants said that anything that happened within friendship could only be a mistake/ misunderstanding that would be easy to rectify. Minority participants struggled to reconcile the category entitlements of friendship with the problematic experiences that they described, but constructing such experiences as ‘discrimination’ presented practical, moral, and rhetorical difficulties. Harmonious cross-group friendship may therefore require that minorities become tolerant to discrimination, while simultaneously enabling majorities to warrant (ill-informed) claims.

KEYWORDS

Discrimination, racism, homophobia, stigma, contact, discourse;

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Introduction

Cross-group friendships are often assumed to be a panacea to resolving intergroup conflict: an opportunity to build trust and shared understandings, reduce anxiety, and counteract stereotypes. However, the irony of harmony hypothesis concerns contradictory effects of intergroup contact. On one hand, contact has positive effects on majorityⁱ attitudes and stereotypes (Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011). Cross-group friendships are a context in which it is possible for actors to build shared and empathetic understandings of each others' experiences, to talk about category memberships and experiences of discrimination. On the other hand, contact can be a site of conflict and disrespect (Lamont, Silva, Welburn, Guetzkow, Mizrachi, Herzog, & Reis, 2016), and reduce support for collective action and/or social change (McKeown & Dixon, 2017; Wright & Lubensky, 2009). This effect is most marked for minority participants: positive intergroup interactions are associated with reduced attention to social inequality and support for social change, particularly when there is an emphasis on superordinate, shared identities. This latter emphasis is important because majorities often want to emphasise superordinate categories and commonalities (as a way to demonstrate that they are not prejudiced), while minorities may want to address issues of status and inequality (that necessitates talking about difference: Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010; Brannon, Carter, Murdock-Perriera, & Higginbotham, 2018; Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008). Majorities and minorities may therefore start cross-group friendships with incompatible goals.

If one potential problem in cross-group friendship is incompatible goals, then a second potential problem involves the practices of friendship. Friendships often involve teasing, banter, or 'tearing down' i.e., mocking each other in a non-serious, but competitive way (Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Robles, 2019). This teasing can be category-based (i.e., drawing on understandings of category-based differences such as sexuality or heritage) and involve the use of pejorative categorical language (e.g., 'straight-boy' Greenland & Taulke-Johnson, 2017). Teasing practices are simultaneously hostile and benign, affiliative and disaffiliative (Billig, 2001): they reinforce solidarity and signal ingroup status and intimacy, but category-based teasing can also reiterate intergroup boundaries and neglect the role of power (Schnurr, 2008;

Wolfers, File, & Schnurr, 2017). Teasing is also difficult to challenge, because taking offence can constitute losing the game (Gough & Edwards, 1998).

Negotiating 'discrimination' within cross-group friendship

One key variable in irony of harmony research is attribution to discrimination: the extent to which participants explain events as caused by discrimination or other factors (e.g., a mistake or lack of understanding: Major & Crocker, 1993). Attribution to discrimination within friendship is interesting in two ways. First, because there is reliable evidence that while both minorities and majorities recognise overt forms of discrimination, majorities are much less likely to describe subtle forms as discrimination (Carter & Murphy, 2015; Inman & Baron, 1996). Second, intergroup contact often has a sedative effect such that minority participants become progressively less likely to make attributions to discrimination (even as majority levels of discrimination remain unaffected: Saguy et al., 2017).

The research outlined above has largely researched attribution to discrimination as a cognitive process using quantitative methods. However, discrimination can also be theorised as a social construction that is shared, negotiated, and reproduced in the form of social representations (Greenland, Andreouli, Augoustinos, & Taulke-Johnson, 2018; see also Durrheim, Quayle, & Dixon, 2016), and negotiated in local level interactions (Condor & Figgou 2012; Durrheim, 2017; Figgou & Condor, 2006). To some extent, therefore, the boundaries between 'discrimination' and 'not discrimination' are negotiated within specific local contexts by interactants who may mobilise social representations in order to do so. Cross-group friendships would be one of these contexts. For example, category-based teasing is interpretable as both 'discrimination' and 'not discrimination': on one hand, it involves the use of use of category labels and pejorative language which is widely interpretable as discrimination. On the other, actors can deploy intention arguments to argue that their intention was to be funny (rather than to discriminate; Greenland et al., 2018; Swim, Scott, Sechrist, Campbell, & Stangor, 2003).

Although 'discrimination' is negotiated between interactants in local contexts, extant research suggests that making a claim of discrimination is difficult and complex work (Lamont et al., 2016). Claiming discrimination has high social costs, even when the evidence of discrimination is strong (Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Kaiser & Miller, 2003). It can also be constructed as an unwarranted and personal attack on authenticity, identity, and free speech (Brannon, Carter, Murdock-Perriera,

Higginbotham, 2018; Clarke, 2019; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2012; Goodman & Burke, 2010; White & Crandall, 2017). Making a claim of discrimination is difficult rhetorically because it constitutes making a complaint (Edwards, 2005; Kirkwood, McKinlay, & McVittie, 2013): a successful complaint sequence requires that the complaint is constructed as legitimate while also defending the complainer from counter-accusations (e.g., as unreasonable or blameworthy). A number of researchers have described how membership category devices are resources that are frequently deployed in doing this work (e.g., Sambaraju, 2019; Whitehead, 2013).

If making a claim of discrimination is difficult in general, then cross-group friendship may be an extra-ordinarily difficult context in which to do so. ‘Friendship’ has practical, moral, and rhetorical elements: first, because friendship is linked to moral identity (i.e. as person who is socially competent; as ethical; as a person who exercises good judgement; Smart, Davies, Heaphy, & Mason, 2012). Second, because friendships can involve dependencies and debts of gratitude, such that extricating oneself from a difficult friendship may be problematic both ethically and practically (Jingre & Finlay, 2013; Kirkwood, McKinlay & McVittie, 2013; Parker, 2018). Third, because friendship itself is a category that can be deployed to resist claims of discrimination (‘some of my best friends are...’ Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Thai, Hornsey, & Barlow, 2016).

The current research

The irony of harmony hypothesis suggests that intergroup contact can have a sedative effect on support for collective action and social change. Cross-group friendship can lead majorities to become overconfident that they understand intergroup issues, while making minorities less likely to challenge those perspectives (Davies & Aron, 2016; Holoien, 2016; Holoien, Bergsieker, Shelton & Alegre, 2015; Saguy & Chernyak-Hai, 2012; Tausch, Saguy, & Bryson, 2015). We extend this research by exploring the construction of ‘discrimination’ within cross-group friendship. Cross-group friendship is a context in which majority participants could gain an increased understanding of minority experiences of discrimination, but also one in which minority participants learn that talking about discrimination is problematic.

We used qualitative interviews and focus groups with both majority (White and/ or heterosexual) and minority (African-Caribbean and/ or gay) participants to explore their accounts of ‘discrimination’ within cross-group friendship. We were interested in how participants’ experiences and understandings of cross-group

friendship were consequential for their constructions of discrimination and vice versa. Specifically, we were interested in how the everyday practices and experiences of cross-group friendship might make it difficult to make claims of discrimination, and how participants might deploy ‘friendship’ as a category to make/resist claims of discrimination. Our analysis therefore combined thematic accounts of participants’ experiences, with discursive analysis of the way that ‘friendship’ was deployed as a rhetorical category.

Our approach was critical realist. The boundaries by which participants define what constitutes discrimination are socially constructed and negotiated locally, but they are also consequential (Durrheim, Quayle, & Dixon, 2017; Greenland et al., 2018). A wealth of social science research has demonstrated how participants’ membership of minority and majority groups is consequential (e.g., Pager, 2008), but these category memberships are socially constructed, intersectional, and context specific (e.g., Roth & Ivemark, 2018). People who identify as gay can be understood as minorities in the context of sexuality (because they violate heteronormativity), and people who identify as African-Caribbean can be understood as minorities (in the context of Whiteness). However, these category memberships become more or less relevant as the local context changes and as social institutions change.ⁱⁱ Finally, intersectionality means that participants can be constructed as members of both minority and majority categories (Crenshaw, 1989). Indeed, this was a rhetorical device that was sometimes deployed by ‘majority’ participants in order to build epistemic entitlement: participants reconstructed themselves as minorities when making claims about the nature of discrimination. Thus, although we use the terms ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ participants, we wish to be clear that these are not fixed, but rather the categories through which participants were speaking at the time.

We also wish to be clear that the experiences of men who identify as gay are not the same as people who identify as African-Caribbean (although both were constructed as ‘minorities’ and treated as interchangeable in our analysis. African-Caribbean heritage in the UK is a form of stigma that is visible and associated with historical and social domination (i.e., colonialism, post-colonialism, and slavery). This stigma is also classed (in that African-Caribbean people are historically more concentrated in low income groups) and associated with increased structural discrimination (compared to men who identify as gay). Gay men in contrast experience as stigma on the basis of internal or personal attributes that are not

generally visible (either face to face or in documentation). Compared to African-Caribbean people, they experience less segregation and therefore greater opportunities based on informal networks. At the same time, however, both heritage and sexuality are master statuses and participants from both groups frequently described how they were constructed by others in these terms. Participants from both groups were experienced and adept at negotiating potentially hostile spaces and generated markedly similar accounts of friendship and discrimination.

Method

The data consisted of focus groups and interviews with majority (self-identified as White and/ or heterosexual) and minority (self-identified as African-Caribbean and/ or gay) participants. 37 participants were recruited as majorities and 17 as minorities.

Most of the data on minority perspectives was collected by Taulke-Johnson (2009) and Dumangane (2016) during their doctoral programmes (interview sets 1 and 2). Both of these projects used one to one interviews to explore the lived experiences of gay men (RTJ) and African-Caribbean men (CD) at University. These therefore constitute secondary data: friendship and discrimination were not the primary research questions, and sampling was not stratified. In the event, all minority participants were either university educated, or currently studying at university. African-Caribbean participants had a range of backgrounds in terms of generational status and residential segregation (and most of them had moved away in order to attend university).

Over time, one of us (KG) was struck by the complexity of minorities' accounts and began to collect comparable primary data on majority perspectives. We preferred the use of focus groups for primary data because we were interested in dynamics of construction and contestation between participants (Allen, 2005; Kitzinger, 1994; Marková, Grossen, Linell & Orvig, 2007; Verkuyten, 2005). We recruited majority participants from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, because there is evidence that race talk is classed (Easterbrook, Kuppens, & Manstead, 2016; Kuppens & Spears, 2014).

Participants were recruited through social media, University societies, social networks and snowballing. For focus groups, researchers recruited one person who was invited to put together a group consisting of family and friends: focus groups were therefore always made up of people who already knew each other.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted in a variety of different locations,

according to preference of the participants and practical constraints (these included private homes, coffee shops, university and municipal buildings). Materials and schedule varied according to the method. The interviews were wide ranging and most participants were interviewed twice (for full descriptions see Dumangane, 2016; Taulke-Johnson, 2009). The focus groups all followed the same format: participants were invited to discuss materials that were provided by the researcher. Focus groups generally lasted between 45- 90 minutes. All sessions were audio recorded and lexically transcribed.

Analytic approach

Early analysis involved identifying extracts in which participants explicitly topicalised ‘discrimination’ and ‘-isms’ (e.g., ‘racism’), and the associated turns around those references (Romaniuk, 2015). This included talk about what was *not* discrimination. The second part of the analysis was thematic. We coded the data for themes that were repeated across extracts, with no reference to whether participants were speaking as minorities or majorities. We identified five themes: one of these was the relationship between actors (other themes are detailed in Greenland et al., 2018). We then selected extracts in which participants talked about friendship, friendship groups, and people who they had named as friends (either in the proximate turns or elsewhere in the data).

Finally, we conducted a discursive analysis. We took a broadly critical approach (Wetherell, 1998) with a particular emphasis on how participants deployed ‘friendship’ (or non-friendship) in order to make claims about what was (or was not) discrimination.

Analysis

The analysis is presented in three sections. We describe participants’ accounts of cross-group friendship and discrimination. We then explore how this might be complex for participants who were speaking as minorities. Finally, we explore how minority and majority accounts diverged when talking about challenging discrimination within friendship. As already outlined, we were interested in participants’ lived experiences of cross-group friendship and how they deployed ‘friendship’ as a rhetorical category. The early part of the analysis is largely thematic, before moving onto a combination of thematic and discourse analysis.

Accounts of friendship and discrimination

Participants' accounts of cross-group friendship were uniformly positive: both minority and majority participants argued that people often discriminated because they were inexperienced and/ or ignorant, and that this could be addressed through meeting people from relevant outgroups.

Minority participants often told transformative stories in which they changed people through cross-group friendship. Simon described to his flatmate Ben (see also extract 6), who arrived in their shared student flat as 'anti- anything but sort of white, male and straight'.

Extract 1 (Interview set 1, young gay man)

Richard (researcher): What was the – your difficulty in this flat of eight?

Simon: Well there was four boys four girls, and one of the guys was initially really sort of anti- everything, as in anti- anything but sort of white, male and straight. So it was a real sort of shock for him I think. Er. And – he didn't sort of – he wasn't horrible to me or anything or do anything nasty, but it was just awkward and I think he was uncomfortable and he wasn't happy with it. And later on I said to him – we laugh about it now and he'll say to me oh der der der 'Oh you won't believe what I would say when I heard there was a gay moving in' [Laughs] and all this stuff.

Simon built a contrast between the early, homophobic Ben and the later Ben who became a good friend ('we laugh about it now'): Simon constructed Ben as transformed by his friendship with him.

Both majorities and minorities said that friendship was an effective way of changing majority attitudes. This argument was predicated on a 'soft' representation of discrimination: that discrimination was caused by inexperience rather than malice, and was therefore malleable (Carr, Dweck, & Pauker, 2012; Greenland et al., 2018). In extract 2, Jay had been talking about how his (White) flatmates had assumed that he loved eating fried chicken.

Extract 2 (Interview set 2: African Caribbean man; reproduced from Dumangane, 2016)

Constantino: How did that make you feel?

Jay: Uhm it depends because it was never in uh, a kind of harmful way. I guess it was in an intuitive way. It was just the way that they would come across. I know that they never meant anything harmful because they've become some of my

closest friends, but (pause) it was more that they hadn't had interaction enough with black people to really know any better, I guess.

Jay constructed his experience as a form of soft discrimination: thoughtless, unintended, and based on a lack of experience. Importantly, he elided this with the friendship itself ('I know that they never meant anything harmful because they've become some of my closest friends', emphasis added): the implication was that someone who had intended to be harmful would not have progressed into friendship.

There were many accounts of category-based teasing within the data. Majority participants constructed this practice as unproblematic and not discrimination. In Extract 3, Ryan and Ross talked about why their use of the word 'gay' was not a form of discrimination, in this case as a nickname for their friend 'Gay Bob'. They used two arguments to achieve this: first, Bob's own positive approval ('Said it was a class [great] nickname'); and second, friendship itself ('He was our gay friend but he was like one of us').

Extract 3 (Focus group 2. Young white working class men)

Ross: Yeah remember when I said we called him Gay Bob and he was laughing at me. Said it was a class nickname.

Ryan: Yeah I wouldn't ever have said anything to him to be nasty. He was nice. Gay but nice. He was our gay friend but he was like one of us weren't he. If anyone else said anything to him I think I would have said something to them.

Ross: Yeah because then uh, they would have been saying it to provoke him like, but he knew us and we knew him. We knew he was gay um, so um, had I don't know what the word is. Respect for him?

Tom: ... No lad wants to be called it do they. But we could call him it he didn't mind. Ross and Ryan deployed friendship as a category that allowed them to make claims about discrimination. Specifically, they argued that friendship meant that Bob was 'one of us', that they had 'respect' for him, and that therefore 'he didn't mind' the potentially pejorative nickname. Their friendship with Bob was represented as providing them with certain category entitlements that others (strangers) did not have, and they co-constructed a hypothetical contrast to emphasise the category memberships involved ('If anyone else said anything to him I think I would have said something to them', 'because then uh, they would have been saying it to provoke him like, but he knew us and we knew him'). Thus the same act performed by 'anyone else' had a different meaning, because the category-bound intentions of a friend could

be assumed to be benign. This friend/ stranger category membership contrast was frequently deployed by both minority and majority participants.

Participants talked about friendship as transformative in reducing discrimination (extracts 1, 2). This was predicated on a construction in which ‘discrimination’ and ‘friendship’ were mutually exclusive. In this argument, a person who was truly prejudiced would not choose to engage in cross-group friendship, and a friend would not intentionally cause harm: therefore the actions of a friend could not be constructed as discrimination. Minority participants did occasionally tell stories about friends who had discriminated, but these were usually in the context of trajectories into friendship i.e., before they were really friends (extracts 1, 2, and 5).

The complexities of constructing discrimination within cross-group friendships

In the previous section, friendship was deployed as a category within which (majority and minority participants argued) discrimination could not take place. These arguments were complicated for minority participants, who often spoke of the difficulty of knowing what their majority friends ‘really thought’.

Ollie had been talking about the use of the word ‘gay’ as a synonym for ‘pathetic’ or ‘rubbish’, and when this might or might not be discrimination. In the immediately preceding turns, Ollie had argued that the distinction hinged on the intentions of the actor.

Extract 4 (Interview set 1. Young gay man)

Richard (researcher): You’re saying is there malice behind what she said or is she just

–

Ollie: Yeah.

Richard: Yeah.

Ollie: Which I think is the problem. It’s like obviously when you get physical violence and things related to homophobia, but I think it’s very difficult for people to say that was a homophobic statement you said in regard to some things. Because – obviously if they say something they – oh shut up Ollie [Laughs].

Richard: [Laughs].

Ollie: If they know it’s derogatory and like it’s obvious like - I dunno – ‘All gays are arse bandits’ that’s homophobic.

Richard: Hmm.

Ollie: But er if like Chantal said to me ‘You’re so gay’ is she just making a point – is she just observing a point or is she being derogatory to me?

Richard: Hmm.

Ollie: I think it is very – I think like the more physical side to homophobia obviously isn't subjective, but I think the more verbal and like the intonation and the connotation that has on other people, I think that's more difficult to define as homophobic or not, yeah. Hmm. There we go.

When pressed, Ollie deployed a 'hard vs soft' argument and then an uncertainly account ('It's like obviously when you get physical violence ...but I think it's very difficult for people to say that was a homophobic statement you said'. At a pragmatic level, Ollie's claims about difficulty could be related to the ambiguity of contemporary forms of discrimination (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005). We suggest that it also relates to the rhetorical difficulty of talking about potentially 'derogatory' actions within the category of 'friendship' (and the non-performative nature of 'intention' as an argumentative line; Greenland et al., 2018).

Uncertainty accounts were very common among minority participants. In extract 6 we can start to explore some of the identity work that might be involved. In Extract 2, Simon had told a transformative story about his flatmate Ben. In the second interview, Richard pressed him further.

Extract 5 (Interview set 1. Young gay man)

Richard (researcher): It's interesting that you were talking about wanting – wanting people to like you, accepting you –

Simon: Yeah.

Richard: Do you think that being gay may be a reason for them not to like you?

Simon: Er. Well I'm sure – er – well I think for some people yeah because some people will not like people that are gay or talk to them so – yeah. Well I don't know. But – I think because of my experiences with Ben and how his opinion has changed and how I'm actually really good friends with him now, I don't see that as a problem. Or if somebody didn't seem to like me because I was gay then I would just try and get to know them even more I think. If I knew they were actually - you know that's a nice person –

Richard: Uh huh.

Simon: You know they're kind of worth being friends with because you know they're a good person –

Richard: Hmm.

Simon: Then I would probably try a bit more. But then anyone who's a nice good person wouldn't bother- be bothered anyway about the whole gay thing.

Richard: Yeah, yeah.

Simon: Well yeah OK that's debateable, but generally I think. I dunno. I just think I seem to be attracted to people or get on with people who are just quite open-minded and just normal, relaxed, calm kind of people. I think I was really lucky with the flat I was put in actually because most of them were fine. Ben, there was a bit of an issue at the beginning but now that's fine.

Simon constructed himself as realistic about the reality of potential discrimination ('some people will not like people that are gay or talk to them'), but also as active in reducing the possibility of discrimination in his life. He did this in two ways. First, and as already outlined, he constructed himself as active in transforming the people around him through friendship ('I think because of my experiences with Ben and how his opinion has changed and how I'm actually really good friends with him now'). Second, he described himself as someone who was able to make friends with good people ('I seem to be attracted to people or get on with people who are just quite open-minded and just normal, relaxed, calm kind of people'). We should be able to see the identity work involved in this account: Simon worked up a positive account in which he was not a passive victim of discrimination.

Minority participants often worked to construct themselves as not victims and/or credited themselves as having particular qualities or skills that made them unlikely to experience discrimination (Lerner & Miller, 1978). We would argue that for minority participants, the suggestion that their cross-group friends might discriminate against them constituted (a) an ideological dilemma (in that it conflicted with the normative deployment of 'friendship'); and (b) a threat to identity: being friends with someone who might discriminate against you would suggest a lack of judgement, and maintaining that friendship would risk constructing yourself as a 'victim' (Greenland & Taulke-Johnson, 2017; Liesenring, 2006; Smart, Davies, Heaphy, & Mason, 2012). There were therefore strong reasons (practical, moral, and rhetorical) for minority participants to construct experiences as 'not discrimination'. In a different context, participants could have deployed an 'ignorance' argument in order to achieve this (i.e., to downgrade problematic experiences from 'discrimination' into 'ignorance'; Kadianaki, 2015; Wilkins, 2012). This was not possible within friendship, because friendship was supposed to transform ignorance into experience (extracts 1 and 2). Participants therefore deployed 'uncertainty' accounts to reconcile potentially problematic experiences with their identity work.

Challenging discrimination within cross-group friendship

Majority participants frequently deployed friendship as a category when making claims about discrimination (specifically, to argue that discrimination could not happen within cross-group friendships). Majority participants further said that it was easy to challenge any discrimination that might occur within cross-group friendships.

Extract 6 (Focus group 6. Older white working class participants)

Yvonne: well you might get...there might be something that is said erm completely innocently that somebody thinks oh well I don't like that and you just give them a glare or you say I don't like that one...you can call me whatever else you want but don't call me that and it doesn't get used again. Well I think between a group of people who know each other, normally you can dispel it very quickly

Janet: it's no different to any of us...you know like people get called slappers or things like that

Yvonne: yeah

Janet: and they've been mucking about and you know we just give some abuse back don't we [[Laughs]]

Yvonne and Janet argued that anything potentially problematic would be either an inadvertent mistake ('something that is said erm completely innocently'), or a form of teasing ('they've been mucking about'). They argued that these could be easily addressed because they were already friends ('Well I think between a group of people who know each other, normally you can dispel it very quickly'). It should be evident how these arguments relate closely to those in extract 4 (relating to respect, affection, and benign intentions).

A small number of minority participants talked about the pain of discrimination within friendship, and the difficulty of challenging it.

Extract 7 (Interview set 1. Young gay man)

[[Noah has been talking about how his housemates describe him as 'my gay friend Noah']]

Noah: So. Er. It does piss me off because I'm not – I'm not defined by the people I sleep with. Er. But at the same time I don't – I'm not gonna lose sleep over it because that's just how people are. And I find it kind of – I – people – a lot of people sort of like get on their high horse, yeah 'Gay rights!' you know er all this as I've said before, and I just don't – I don't feel I should waste my time with it. We're never going to be the same as – gay and straight's never going

to be the same, men and women are never – never going to be treated the same, blacks and whites are never going to be treated the same.

Richard (researcher): Yeah.

Noah: And there's no point in – in as I said bitching and moaning about it because it's just – it's – we're all different, that's what makes us the same kind of thing. We're all different so there's no point in trying to make us similar. Er. So whilst I would love to be seen as – as a er – absolutely not marked, it's just not the case.

Richard: Hmm.

Noah: So I'm not going to waste my time moaning about it.

Noah's account of the moniker 'my gay friend Noah' was similar to 'Gay Bob' in extract 4. Both were examples of category-based teasing. In extract 4, Ross, Ryan, and Tom argued that this was not discrimination. Noah worked up a more complex account: he described himself as unhappy at the deployment of his sexuality as a master status (Becker, 1963; Blackwood, Hopkins, & Reicher, 2015) ('It does piss me off because I'm not – I'm not defined by the people I sleep with'). However, he said that he did not challenge his friends. His reasoning was twofold; (i) that he could not affect the change that he would like ('gay and straight's never going to be the same'); and (ii) that to attempt to do so would therefore be a waste of time ('I'm not going to waste my time moaning about it').

We have already outlined evidence that making a claim of discrimination is difficult. Making a claim of discrimination within cross-group friendship could be particularly traumatic for both parties, and could have a significant social fallout (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2012; Durrheim 2017). Teasing is such a shared practice within some friendship groups that to resist it might require leaving the group altogether (Robles, 2019). For Noah, there was also identity work taking place. Noah constructed himself as politically moderate (Duggan, 2002; Wilkins, 2012), and he elided challenging his friends with a strident political identity ('a lot of people sort of like get on their high horse, yeah 'Gay rights!' ... bitching and moaning'). In Noah's account, challenging the behaviour of his cross-group friends represented a Catch-22: he might stop them from using the term 'my gay friend' but simultaneously reinforce the 'Gay rights!' stereotype.

Clare, Deborah, and Stanford made a similar argument as Noah in emphasising the time and energy that could be taken up by challenging discrimination.

Extract 8 (Focus group 1. African Caribbean participants)

Katy (researcher): Supposing that, supposing that I'm now gonna get really tough on you. Are we, being too generous? Too generous to people? Too kind? Too understanding?

Clare: Perhaps, but if that was the case it's down to me being able to get on with my life. Erm, because, if I am going to impose strict standards on everyone then I am gonna be offended by everything and there would be no joy in my life

Deborah: People would turn away from you, yeah

Clare: I wanna get on with my life. Just like I'm sure you do, and everyone else does

Stanford: And the general talk is, if you keep taking everyone seriously, oh he and she has got a chip on their shoulder.

Deborah argued that challenging discrimination could disrupt and damage relationships ('people would turn away from you') (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2012; Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Kaiser & Miller, 2003). As in extract 9, challenging discrimination also risked reinforcing a politicised identity ('and the general talk is, if you keep taking everyone seriously, oh he and she has got a chip on their shoulder', see also extract 8; Duggan, 2002; Greenland & Taulke-Johnson, 2017; Wilkins, 2012).

Majority participants deployed friendship as a category within which discrimination could not happen. Any mistake or misunderstanding that might happen within friendship was argued to be easy to correct, and the lack of challenge from their cross-group friends was deployed as further evidence of non-discrimination (extracts 4, 7, and 8). We suggest that this latter argument contains a fallacy of choice: minority participants said that they were sometimes uncertain and uncomfortable about cross-group friendship experiences, but also alert to the risks and costs of calling out discrimination. These risks included trauma, exhaustion, and upset (extract 10; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2012; Durrheim, 2017; Kaiser & Miller, 2003; Smart et al., 2012); potential loss of social capital and friendship (extracts 9 and 10; Robles, 2019; Wolfers et al. 2017); and risks to identity (being seen as either stridently politicised or as a victim; extracts 6, 9, and 10; Greenland & Taulke-Johnson, 2017; Wilkins, 2012).

Conclusions

The irony of harmony hypothesis suggests that contact can have a sedative effect on support for collective action and social change. Our analysis complements this literature in exploring minority and majority accounts of cross-group friendship. Specifically, we suggest that cross-group friendship may narrow majority and minority participants' constructions of discrimination (such that they are less likely to make attributions to discrimination), and (for majority participants) warrants rhetorical strategies that can be mobilised to resist claims of discrimination.

Majority participants' accounts of cross-group friendship were relatively straightforward. Participants argued that (1) whatever happened within friendship could not constitute discrimination; (2) anything that did happen could only constitute a mistake or misunderstanding; and (3) any such mistake could be easily rectified (extracts 3 and 6). These arguments were consequential in resisting claims of discrimination within the local context, but also in making broader claims about 'discrimination' as a social construct. Majority participants were able to mobilise high facticity stories in which they argued that teasing and banter were not discrimination, and to use their cross-group friendships as credentials to make more generalised claims about the nature of contemporary discrimination (including identity claims; Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Thai, Hornsey, & Barlow, 2016).

Minority participants' accounts were more complex. For these participants, cross-group friendships had practical, moral, and rhetorical elements which were consequential to how they constructed their experiences. Making a claim of discrimination was (1) likely to have a negative impact on their friendships, generating conflict and reinforcing problematic master statuses; (2) impact on their identities as ethical people who made good decisions and/ or were not victims; and (3) constituted an ideological dilemma in attempting to speak about 'friendship' and 'discrimination' (extracts 5, 7, and 8). In this context, minority participants either deployed uncertainty accounts to avoid constructing potentially problematic experiences as discrimination, or else constructed their experiences as discrimination but elected not to call out the actions of their cross-group friends (extracts 4 and 8).

Cross-group friendships were therefore consequential in that minority participants became increasingly tolerant of low level discrimination. Majorities, in contrast, gained an unfounded confidence that they understood minority experiences, and used their cross-group friendships to warrant (ill-informed) claims about the

nature of discrimination. Majorities placed the onus onto their minority friends to call out problematic actions while simultaneously under-estimating the burden and risk that this involved. Our analysis is consistent with research indicating that minorities and majorities can have diverging experiences of cross-group friendship (Shelton, Douglass, Garcia, Yip, & Trail, 2014); that majorities may be over-confident about discrimination (West & Eaton, 2019); and that minorities frequently choose to avoid confronting discrimination because of the costs involved (Lamont et al., 2016).

There are some limitations to our design. First, our focus on common themes in participants' accounts neglects the structural and cultural elements that differentiate participants' experiences and the resources that they have to resist discrimination (Lamont et al., 2016). The experiences of gay men and African-Caribbean people are markedly different, and there are a range of other structural and cultural variables that are likely to be consequential to participants' accounts. Nevertheless, participants deployed similar accounts of friendship and intention whether they were speaking as majorities or minorities; gay men and African-Caribbean participants deployed similar accounts of uncertainty despite systematic structural and historical differences. We suggest that this is consistent with the presence of widely shared social representations about the nature of 'discrimination' and 'friendship' which are then deployed in local contexts.

Second, the nature of our analysis means that we have focused only on those experiences associated with cross-group friendship: we have necessarily focused on relatively local, face to face experiences of disrespect and stereotyping rather than more structural forms of discrimination. Although minority participants described a range of experiences, there was very little talk about structural forms of discrimination in their accounts. This is consistent with research that indicates participants (majorities and minorities) overwhelmingly construct discrimination as an interpersonal (rather than structural) phenomenon (Lamont et al., 2016; O' Brien, Blodorn, Alsbrooks, Dube, Adams, & Nelson, 2009; Unzueta & Lowery, 2008). We would further argue that majority participants' experiences of cross-group friendship have an impact above and beyond friendship itself, because cross-group friendship is often used as a resource by majorities to resist claims of discrimination (extract 3; Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Thai, Hornsey, & Barlow, 2016).

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Endnotes.

ⁱ By ‘minority’ and ‘majority’ we mean people who identify as members of groups which have been historically, politically, socially, and/or economically disadvantaged or advantaged. These categories are not fixed but socially constructed, intersectional, and context specific. Thus, although we use the terms ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ participants in the text, we wish to be clear that these categories are not fixed, but rather the categories through which participants were speaking at the time (see also ‘current research’. This is important because research can inadvertently reify and reproduce essentialised categories of ethnicity, gender, and others (see Howarth, 2009).

ⁱⁱ Nevertheless, these positions are not wholly fluid either: the categorisation of social groups and the meaning ascribed to groups is closely linked to the operation of power (Link & Phelan, 2001).

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