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Holding hands: LGBTQ people's experiences of public displays of affection with their partner(s)

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ABSTRACT

Many LGBTQ individuals grow up with a sense of being 'other' in a heteronormative society. This is not just an internal psychological experience, as many LGBTQ individuals report being recipients of hostility, victimisation and harassment. Interpersonally, homophobia and transphobia (both actual and fear of) may play out between partners and inhibit partners from commonplace displays of affection (e.g. holding hands in public). Holding hands in public, a taken-for-granted act of interpersonal affection for many heterosexual couples, may carry particular anxieties and/or significance for LGBTQ partners. This article reports on findings from a research project that explored 27 participants' personal experiences of holding hands with their partner(s) in public, utilising a participatory, creative research approach. The analysis of data identified themes of vigilance, daily inhibitions, partner negotiations, inside/outside boundaries, and community dilemmas.

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KEYWORDS

Public displays of affection; homophobia; queer spaces; qualitative; LGBTQ

Introduction

In June 2019, there was widespread shock at British media reports featuring a photograph of a young lesbian couple who were attacked on a bus while travelling home in London one evening. One of the women posted a photograph on social media of them both covered in blood, having been beaten up by a gang of boys who also harassed them and asked them to 'perform' sexually for them by kissing. The image was shocking for many as it clearly conveyed the ferocity of the attack, which took place in a public setting. Yet for many members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and queer (LGBTQ) community, although distressing, the knowledge of the attack was not surprising. For most LGBTQ people, awareness of the possibility of harassment or even violence is an intrinsic part of their everyday life and features in how they conduct their relationships in both public and private spaces (De Oliveira et al., 2013; Stammwitz & Wessler, 2021).

This article will explore the experiences of expressing affection with a partner in public among a sample of LGBTQ individuals from the UK. A photo elicitation method was used, allowing participants to guide the interview narrative based on their choice of images that conveyed their thoughts and experiences. In the following sections, we will outline theoretical work on the psychological impact of homophobia and transphobia on LGBTQ individuals' daily life, and how LGBTQ people navigate everyday spaces. Although the importance of spatiality to queer populations has been widely acknowledged, we argue that the psychological impact of this for LGBTQ relationship partners has been overlooked. We will further argue that being queer in public spaces results in

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a range of effects that are inherent to navigating homophobia in wider society. This in turn intensifies the potential importance of other spaces as a safe refuge.

The psychological impact of homophobia and transphobia

While many LGBTQ rights may have been won in a country like the UK, with equality of marriage and adoption rights for example, homophobia and transphobia remains a significant issue and experience for many LGBTQ individuals. Formal equality before the law, while welcome and important, does not unfortunately mean that discriminatory attitudes and behaviour no longer exist. Reports of homophobic hate crimes have in fact increased dramatically in recent years, doubling since 2014, while transphobic hate crimes have trebled in the same period (Marsh et al., 2019). The impact of homophobia and transphobia is reflected in the continued higher prevalence of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and suicidality among people identifying as LGBTQ as compared to the prevalence among the heterosexual population (Pitman et al., 2022; Semlyen et al., 2016). Psychological distress among LGBTQ individuals has been partly attributed to homophobia and social discrimination.

Homophobia may also be gendered, with research indicating that heterosexual men may express more homophobic attitudes than heterosexual women do, and more hostile attitudes tend to be expressed towards gay men than towards lesbian women (Herek & McLemore, 2013). Homophobia may be regarded as a form of social policing of gender, in particular masculinity and manhood (Plummer, 2014).

Internalised homophobia (and internalised transphobia) is a term used to describe the feelings of shame and self-loathing that may develop in LGBTQ individuals as a result of hostile and rejecting familial and societal attitudes being absorbed psychologically to form part of a sense of self (Allen & Oleson, 1999; Malyon, 1982). While internalised homophobia is a useful concept for understanding the individual psychological impact of oppression, it is important to state that this does not mean that the problem is situated 'all in the mind'. To attend to the complexity of how societal attitudes may be internalised, we pursue a psychosocial approach across this study, prioritising an appreciation of how the 'social' and the 'personal' are fundamentally interwoven (Frosh et al., 2022).

Many LGBTQ individuals report being recipients of hostility, victimisation and harassment. In 2017, the UK Government Equalities Office (2018) conducted a national survey of the experiences of LGBT individuals, which was responded to by 108,000 LGBT identified individuals. The analysis of survey responses showed that two in five respondents reported experiencing an incident of harassment or abuse for their LGBT identity. Thus, LGBTQ people's everyday psychological and social experiences are very much related to geographical spaces, and the experience of where it is and feels 'safe' to be openly LGBTQ.

Navigating everyday spaces

A substantial literature has highlighted the significance of urban spaces to queer imaginaries. Weston's (1995) classic article exhorted lesbians and gay men to 'get thee to a big city'. It is widely acknowledged that metropolitan centres are more accepting of diversity and are associated with more tolerance of minorities. The anonymity of big cities also typically provides more opportunities to come out away from family and local neighbourhoods. Annual Pride parades expose the extent to which the daily spaces of the city are usually coded in heteronormative ways. This is the reason why queer claims to public space through events such as Pride are so significant. This process is particularly important due to the ever-present threat of homophobic and transphobic violence.

Studies of queer life and everyday spaces have highlighted the significance of metropolitan spaces for creating and supporting community (Castells, 1983; Weston, 1995). However, authors have pointed out that this access to city spaces is much facilitated by gender, class and racial privilege (Knopp, 1998; Chasin, 2001). The ways in which home spaces become particularly important

as a safe refuge from a homophobic and transphobic world, as well as a place to express queerness safely, have also been widely documented (Johnston & Valentine, 1995; Ryan-Flood, 2009; Valentine, 1998). Kuhar (2016) refers to the 'heteronormative panopticon' to describe how LGBTQ people internalise an awareness of homophobic and transphobic threats to their safety in public. Stella (2016) suggests, however, that active negotiation of everyday spaces in the face of homophobia through self-management (careful discipline of one's public behaviour) is an expression of queer agency rather than simply conforming to heteronormative expectations.

This wider literature highlights how everyday spaces, from the GP surgery to the office, are typically experienced in relation to heteronormativity, whether it is a form or member of staff who makes assumptions about the gender of a partner for example. Heteronormativity is typically coded into these spaces at a fundamental level. Queer visibility in the landscape therefore challenges these social norms and creates a space for itself, but does so at considerable risk.

While the impact of homophobia and transphobia on individual mental health is well-established, what has been less explored is the impact of negotiating everyday public spaces on individuals and partner relationships. Not every encounter with the wider world will result in the type of violent attack that this article opened with, however, the knowledge of this threat is something that LGBTQ people live with. Furthermore, internalised homophobia may have interpersonal consequences where negative feelings may impact on a sense of comfort around intimacy for LGBTQ couples (Hertzmann, 2011; Rohleder, 2020; Rose, 2007).

Homophobia and transphobia (both actual and internalised) may play out between partners and inhibit partners from commonplace displays of affection (e.g. holding hands) in public spaces. Holding hands in public, a taken-for-granted act of interpersonal affection for many heterosexual couples, may carry particular anxieties and/or significance for LGBTQ partners. In the 2017 UK National LGBT Survey (UK Government Equalities Office, 2018), more than two thirds of LGBT individuals who responded to the survey reported that they never hold hands with their partner in public for fear of a negative reaction from others. To investigate this further in terms of everyday experience, we report here on findings from a qualitative narrative research study, which aimed to explore the experiences and views of LGBTQ individuals about holding hands with their partner(s) in public.

Everyday expressions of queer intimacy in public

Some recent research on PDA (public displays of affection) indicates that this is always mediated by fear of repercussions for queer people. For example, Stasińska (2022) argues that LGBTQ relationship partners practise strategies of *invisibility* in a Polish context, which should not nonetheless be dismissed by Western researchers as simply conforming to the heteronormative gaze. In fact, the authors call for more nuanced research that pays attention to agency by participants instead of evaluating them according to a normative/subversive binary. Stammwitz and Wessler's (2021) research on minority stress and LGBTQ PDAs highlights the importance of context for expressions of intimacy. They note that context affected participants' relative freedom to express affection, depending on the public space they were in (for example the campus versus the city). In their analysis, LGBTQ relationship partners were significantly impacted by minority stress in negotiating physical affection with a partner in public. Thus, navigating homophobia affected their overall wellbeing as well as their choices regarding expressions of affection in public spaces. Giesecking (2016) argues that expressions of queer intimacy in public are an inherently political act. In their research, lesbian relationship partners were conscious of this as they navigated both 'gay friendly' neighbourhoods, and 'crossing the border' to less supportive districts. The authors use these delineations to highlight the significance of the concepts 'territory' and 'border crossings' in everyday queer relationality. Our article focuses on the implications of PDA among LGBTQ relationship partners *for the relationship itself*. Thus, while acknowledging the significance of wider legal, cultural

and spatial contexts, we explore the nature of queer intimacy itself within the constraints of heteronormative social relations.

Methods

Participants and method of data collection

The project involved the collection of data by two complementary methods: Individual photovoice interviews, and participant-led friendship conversations. Convenience sampling was used, with participants recruited via adverts about the project posted on social media, and various social and professional networks of the researchers. The advert invited potential participants to take part in either an individual interview or friendship conversation, or take part in both. Ethical approval for the studies was obtained by the university's departmental research ethics committee.

Individual photovoice interviews

Participants who identify as LGBTQ were invited to take part in individual interviews exploring their experiences of holding hands with their partner(s) in public, and what the act of holding hands meant for them. Photovoice methodology (Wang & Burris, 1997) was used; a participatory research method, where research participants are invited to take photographs or generate other images (e.g. drawings) that represent their subjective experience in relation to the given topic. Participants were also invited, if they wanted to, to keep a personal diary or record of their thoughts and experiences over the period in which they generated their images. In this way, participants were invited into a reflective process prior to taking part in an interview; to reflect on their internal experiences related to the topic, and look 'outside' to create images that reflect and symbolised that experience. Participants were then invited to take part in an individual interview, where the generated photographs, images and accompanying diary were discussed so as to elicit personal stories and narratives. In this way the interview agenda was set by the participants themselves. Twenty-seven participants were recruited for individual interviews. Demographic details were collected for age, sexual and gender identities (see Table 1). The use of pre-determined labels to define sexual identities is contested and not always welcomed (Semlyen & Rohleder, 2022), and so we invited participants to describe their sexual and gender identities in their own terms. Active attempts were made on social media to recruit potential participants representing racialised identities. However, in the end the majority of participants who volunteered to take part were white.

Due to the Covid pandemic and UK government restrictions, the first two interviews were conducted in person, with the remaining interviews conducted on Zoom. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. All participants gave their informed consent and gave signed consent for their images to be used for dissemination purposes. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity.

Friendship conversations

Potential participants were invited to audio record a 10–15 minute conversation with a close friend, colleague or family member (with the other person's informed, signed consent), about LGBTQ people's experiences of holding hands. Friendship conversations allow for participants to discuss and share experiences in relation to the topic, without the presence and influence of the researcher (Heron, 2020). The use of this method allowed the opportunity for participants to take part in the study, who may have been reluctant to talk about a sensitive topic to a stranger (researcher). Five friendship conversations were collected, two of which were from participants who also took part in an individual interview. The conversations were participant-led and were not arranged or facilitated by the researchers, but participants were asked to discuss the topic of holding hands in public and share their experiences. Recorded conversations were then submitted to the research team via

Table 1. Interview participant demographics.

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender*	Sexuality*	Ethnicity
1	Chelsea	37	Gender fluid	Lesbian	White
2	Phoebe	26	Woman	Lesbian	White
3	Wendy	52	Woman	Gay	White
4	James	55	Male	Gay	White
5	Mario	53	Male	Gay	White
6	Jane	36	Woman	Lesbian	White
7	José	45	Man	Gay	White
8	Jon	38	Man	Gay	White
9	Tom	42	Male	Gay	White
10	Roderick	45	Male	Gay	White
11	Ruth	39	Female	Lesbian	White
12	James	24	Non-binary trans masculine	Gay	White
13	Paul	59	Male	Gay	White
14	Sam	35	Agender	Gay	White
15	Martin	33	Male	Gay	White
16	Anna	43	Cis-female	Lesbian/queer-femme	White
17	Robert	32	Cis-male	Gay	White
18	Jennifer	48	Trans female	Lesbian	White
19	Rachel	56	Female	Lesbian	White
20	Issma	36	Woman	Bisexual	British Bangladeshi
21	George	49	Male	Gay	White
22	Pat	32	Cis-man	gay	Mixed race
23	Isabel	29	Non binary	Gay	White
24	Michael	35	Male	Gay	White
25	Amy	29	Female	Lesbian	White
26	David	41	Cis-male	Gay	White
27	Sabrin	31	Woman	Queer	Black

Note: * Descriptive terms reported on here are those used by the participants themselves.

secure file transfer. Recordings were then transcribed and anonymised, using pseudonyms. Demographic details about the participants in the friendship conversations were not collected.

Data analysis and dissemination

All transcripts (interviews and friendship conversations) were analysed by means of thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2015). Two participants shared diary entries with the researchers, and these were included as additional sources of data for analysis. Both an inductive and a deductive approach was used for data analysis, looking at both semantic and latent meaning (Braun et al., 2015). This analysis was guided by a psychosocial theoretical framework, exploring personal subjective experiences related to themes of shame, pride or protest, as well as allowing for the identification of non-predetermined themes. Transcripts were read independently by each of the authors, each identifying recurring themes. This analysis was then discussed and themes identified collectively.

Alongside the data analysis, a selection of images and accompanying stories shared in the interviews were gathered for the purposes of populating a website. The images and accompanying stories were first shared with the respective participant to check accuracy, and to confirm consent for the material to be used for the website. An analysis of the photographs as visual data is planned for, but they have not been included in the data analysis for the purposes of this paper. Readers are invited to look at some of the images collected on the project website (WEBSITE ADDRESS).

Results

Five key themes were identified in the analysis of the data: Vigilance, daily inhibitions, partner negotiations, inside/outside boundaries, and community dilemmas.

Vigilance

All participants spoke of being aware of risks for homophobic abuse, which were often gendered in terms of what was experienced. Many participants described being called slurs, such as 'dyke' or 'faggot' by others who recognise them as a same-sex couple. A small number of the male participants who took part described experiences of violence like having things thrown at them or being hit. There were gender differences around sexual harassment. A small number of the female participants described having sexualised comments made to them as a lesbian couple (such as a male stranger saying 'can we join in?'). Participants reported either experiencing this themselves or knowing someone to whom these sorts of incidents had happened.

As a result of this actual and perceived presence of homophobic abuse, participants described a sense of vigilance around risk and safety when holding hands or thinking about holding hands with their partner. The act of holding hands was described as seldom carefree, coming first with a risk assessment of the space the participants were in. For example, one participant explained:

One of the things that I'm always aware of is always kind of being on alert. So, kind of hyper vigilant around or 'what if somebody comes around the corner?' Or 'what if somebody comes up behind us and I don't see them'... and we're holding hands? So that you know that becomes the line, the kind of barrier to being able to enjoy this romantic intimate moment because, actually, when will it be disturbed? And do we need to kind of jump back from that cause you're worried about what people will think? (Tom)

Similarly, another described:

In terms of holding hands or being intimate, it's always hidden. I remember when I was at Holborn tube station and he [partner] was behind me. I put my hand by my side and then he held it. So it was hidden again, rather than being quite open. And I think the idea of secrecy adds into an idea of shame as well around holding hands and its intimacy specifically, and that is purely from a safety perspective. It's not that we're afraid or not proud. It's just that we didn't want any hassle and we'd rather have a pleasant Saturday morning coming back from swimming rather than anything that encountered any, any difficulties. (James)

This sense of vigilance and risk assessment resulted in daily inhibitions around public displays of affection (as John and James allude to), a second prominent theme in the data analysis.

Daily inhibitions

Participants described daily forms of inhibition, where they hid any act of affection, or were aware of holding back on any expression of affection. For example, some participants described being affectionate with their partner but discretely, such as brushing their hands against each other, or keeping their hand holding concealed from sight.

If you've been away for a few hours or a few days and then you want to welcome your partner home, then it's a natural wish to kind of be physical. To kiss or, and hug and this is the space where I would have mixed feelings about doing that I think depending on the – if I was picking him up in the car, we would probably save the greeting until we were inside the car. If I was picking him up, standing waiting for him, might debate if I wanted to do it in that setting or not you know (physically) hug him or kiss him because of feeling whether it's a safe space because it's a very public station. [...] So probably be a little more guarded, even though the natural thing to do when you welcome somebody is to want to be physical. (Mario)

In one poignant account, a participant described not being able to hold the hand of his partner for comfort at his father's funeral, for fear of offending others or attracting unwelcome attention.

[...] at the funeral of his dad [...] everybody somehow kind of knew [...] that we were in a relationship [...] and I kind of held Terence's hand very, very briefly during the ceremony, because just like you know, you don't want to upset people, it was [a] kind of situation [in] which people were upset [...] grieving, well you know, my partner's dad is [...] is dead and we can't, so was it because we didn't want to upset other people? To add additional aggravation. But even in this extreme situation, just kind of grabbed his hand only very, very briefly (James)

This painful example illustrates the extreme lengths to which participants went to 'fit in' in public spaces. Even at one of the worst moments in this participant's partner's life, they were unable to express ordinary affection in public together. Participants reflected on their own inhibitions and caution, but also reported on how this impacted on the experience between the partners, as the following section illustrates.

Partner negotiations

Some participants reported on differences between themselves and their partner regarding levels of comfort about public displays of affection. One person in the partnership would be more comfortable about holding hands in public, with the other person more uncomfortable. Inevitably, when feeling exposed or anxious, the more uncomfortable partner would drop the hand of their partner, resulting in a moment of disconnect. One participant (Ben) detailed how he and his partner registered and negotiated their different comfort levels around public affection in ways that shifted over time; importantly, he described how in early stages of their relationship, there were moments of dropping his husband's hand, or breaking away from intimacy, which would coincide with the zonal shifts in public space, moving between a 'safe zone' and the 'real world':

[When I first started going out with my partner], there was always that interesting moment where we'd be walking out from the bars . . . almost getting to the end of the gay village . . . and I'd instantly do this breakaway, where my hand would go in my pocket. It just signified the end of the safe zone really; I was doing it almost subconsciously. I was just moving my hand away, but my husband is always very good at highlighting it and asking me if I'm okay. Just making me notice that I'm doing it really, because I'm sort of doing it, I think, out of fear: instinct stops me from holding hands. So that's something that I remember doing, moving my hand away and putting it back in my pocket almost like that's the end of the safe zone and now we're going back into the real world. (Ben)

In the above quote, Ben alludes to how it is the attention paid to this by the partner that helped Ben to become more cognisant of what he was doing.

Other participants reported sadness or tension within the partnership as they tried to make sense of the different levels of discomfort being experienced. For example, one partner might question whether the other was ashamed of them or of their relationship. Such everyday experiences, and their subsequent negotiation within the relationship, were discussed by the majority of participants.

I was walking with my girlfriend one time and a couple of people yelled 'dykes' at us. I was embarrassed about that. So, I wanted to stop holding hands, and then I felt bad because my partner wanted to keep holding hands. (Phoebe)

I've been reflecting on how I feel when I hold my husband's hand in populated spaces and my initial feeling is one of panic and a feeling of being hyper-aware that I am going to be noticed by someone. I'm particularly conscious of groups of males or what I consider to be archetypal alpha males. I'm not usually the one to initiate holding hands and my husband will usually take my hand instead of the other way round. I get a strong initial sense of fear and being unsafe if I'm around other people and I often try to avoid looking at anyone directly. As I'm writing this down, I'm also aware it's the first time I've ever done so and re-reading it back fills me with a sense of sadness as we have been married for 3 years and together for 6. Most times when we've held hands I have felt the same way so we don't generally do it in public. (Ben, extract from accompanying diary)

There is little data on the longevity of queer relationships, but some research indicates that they may have higher break-up rates (Andersson et al., 2006). The participants' narratives here, provide some insight into the pressures that living in a homophobic world can have on a queer partnership. These kinds of tensions and everyday homophobic microaggressions may also affect stress levels and partner dynamics within the relationship.

Inside/Outside boundaries

The theme of inside/outside boundaries was identified for its double valence: to capture how LGBTQ individuals' assessment of risk/safety around expressions of intimacy with their partner/s involves

active surveyance of social space; but also to reflect the complex and dynamic ways that navigation of social space intersects with the 'internal' world of the participant, including a sense of psychological space and subjective sense of freedom of movement.

Many participants described differing experiences between 'inside' and 'outside' spaces. This related to participants feeling comfortable being affectionate with one another when in a safe, 'inside' space, most typically their home, or a place of familiarity, but also a LGBTQ space. Safe 'inside' spaces stood in contrast to an 'outside' and/or unknown space where participants were less comfortable expressing any forms of affection, such as holding hands. The following two quotations express different concerns and emotions that accompany the navigations of inside/outside boundaries:

[...] as soon as we get into this setting, get into this safe space, I want to be affectionate. So as soon as I jump into the car it's quite nice, or [...] a space where we are the only ones in, I know it sounds mad like when we go to the toilets, same sex people have the pleasure of going to the toilet together, so you can have a quick kiss on the urinal together. It's just because ooh we can be together because no one else is looking. And then you get back out of the toilet and get back into [...] airport terminal or whatever, and you're back into that being a bit more guarded and stuff. (James)

One of the things I am aware of, is the lockdown impacting how often I consciously hold hands with my wife – we tend to sit with hands resting over each other, fingers intertwined or actually holding hands at home and we often hold hands in one way or another whilst talking to each other – palm to palm, fingers interlaced or playing with each other's hands side by side when chatting. We went for a walk in an area designated for dog walking and families yesterday – we held hands quite a lot as usual, and for the first time in a while, I was conscious of being somewhere that is not our usual route (we drove to get there for a change of scene!) and potentially being confronted for brazen exhibitionism of our 'gayness' – actually no one batted an eyelid that I noticed, but I realised again that I take it for granted locally that we will be safe, whereas in new settings I mentally prepare for confrontation. (Anna, extract from accompanying diary)

Previous research has highlighted the significance of 'homespace' (e.g. Johnston & Valentine, 1995; Knopp, 2007) for queer subjects who live with the threat of homophobia in public spaces. This research also illustrates what we call 'liminal spaces of queer transgression', or the snatched moments in everyday spaces that temporarily offer a respite from homophobia, as the quotes above illustrate. Indeed, in discussing their images and experiences, many of our participants articulated how their movement through different spaces was habitually accompanied by shifting registers of danger, safety and complex feelings of bodily alertness and/or tension. In highlighting the centrality of spatiality to LGBTQ partners' experience of holding hands in public, the theme of inside/outside boundaries also carried important psychological weight for many participants.

Some participants spoke of being 'locked in' their inside space, as a psychological inhibition where they felt unable to fully express themselves to others, as a result of the fears or shame that they felt 'inside' their minds.

I have protected my emotions and feelings about showing affection in public. I learnt to build a set of protective strategies to keep safe my heart and mind. I built an armor, and I learnt I had to keep any kind of public displays of affection in private. To me it's like a prison or something like that. It's like all my emotions and all the needs I had to express in public; I mean I didn't have the chance to do it. I mean it was not forbidden. It's that I didn't feel, I don't know, like strong or forward enough to do it in public. So, for that reason I think that some of my emotion have been kept; someone stole them from me. It's like the real world is at this side of the picture and my world is on the other side of the picture. (José)

It's difficult for me to cross the barrier to hold hands with people. The light represents holding hands but that's on the other side of the barrier as well. I just always feel nervous holding hands with people because of what other people might think, people looking over and stuff like that. Makes me feel uncomfortable. (Phoebe)

Another participant described how, over time, his navigation of outside space paralleled his questioning of the psychological and seemingly 'internal' positions in his mind:

It's pre-coded that gay people aren't supposed to hold hands, or, you know, it's a problem. We've had to overcome many steps to get to where we are, and there's a level of uncomfortableness that still sits with a lot of us, a lot of the time. In certain situations, we're going to make ourselves safer by stopping holding hands whether we need to or not. The anxiety and the kind thoughts that run round in your brain in those situations, figuring out the level of anxiety, holding hands when everything in your body is telling you to stop! [...] Your brain starts telling you, *don't hold hands here*, even though there isn't any shred of evidence that it's unsafe to do so. Your brain just starts telling you that you need to let go, or that you need to do something else, or anything [...] just the sheer thoughts flipping round about your head! [With time] there's this awareness: *oh actually, if I'd wanted to, I could have done this earlier, or, actually, this isn't as big a deal as I'm making it out to be in my head.* (Pat)

With its notes of intermittent anxiety and self-scrutiny, the above quotation conveys the psychological intensity of Pat's internal, everyday conversations. This is in keeping with the theme of vigilance discussed above. Importantly though, in alluding to the changes in comfort levels he experienced over time, Pat also seeks to understand the anticipated danger through a different logic of inside/outside boundaries; he asks whether the particular outside context meant that he *needed* to stop holding hands, whether it was really unsafe to do so, or whether it was just in his head? In one sense, Pat's thought that he could have felt more comfortable holding hands earlier in his life (*oh, actually, if I'd wanted to, I could have done this earlier*) is a retrospective reflection on his achieved (and relative) security as an 'out' gay man who has taken *many steps* to get to where he is. But his narrative also points to the difficulty of teasing apart the psycho-social dimensions of his experience. A number of participants expressed a similar hesitancy or confusion when trying to establish the correct 'location' – 'inside' or 'outside' – that caused the negative feelings of unease, threat or anxiety they experienced when holding hands in public.

Community dilemmas

Participants reflected on their experiences of holding hands in public spaces in connection to the theme of community, including community identities and dilemmas. The majority of participants articulated an awareness of the political and community significance of the act of holding hands: in the main, this was positively inflected and associated with the desire to make more visible LGBTQ everyday intimacies. A small number of participants expressed an additional note of complication – perhaps reticence or ambivalence – regarding the politicisation of LGBTQ spaces and a concern that their handholding would be regarded by others as an intentional gesture of pride. Participants for whom the theme of community was multiple and complex, discussed the dilemmas and/or difficulties that arose when moving between the different communities they belonged to. As per the logic of intersectionality, community dilemmas and/or difficulties were often more pronounced for minority ethnic participants. The following examples indicate how the theme of community, and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that participants discussed, extends the theme of inside/outside boundaries above.

Mostly, I find that holding hands is perceived positively – we have been smiled at by other same sex couples (men and women) and by children and teenagers. Sometimes, I have caught a teenaged girl looking back or staring across the road, and when I have caught her eye and smiled, there has been a returned smile, and it has always felt like those smiles were about being seen, recognised and that they conveyed relief. [...] I feel very strongly that having had no positive role models who were gay women growing up, it is important for me to be visible – to be the person I needed when I was younger. (Anna, extract from accompanying diary)

For Anna, holding hands with her partner in public was expressly motivated by a desire to increase visibility of LGBTQ everyday intimacies and provide role models for others. Similarly, another participant comments on the importance of making visible an act that is both 'normal' and 'radical':

I still get a thrill when I see two men or two women holding hands in public; it's still, you know, I think, that's so nice! I do wish for a world where it didn't stand out. Maybe that's the ultimate end goal; I would see it as the same thoughtless or effortless thing that I see it as for straight couples. But at the moment it still gives me a thrill

and makes me feel good because it's reflecting something that's true about me. It still feels like a slightly radical act for something that is so normal and something super old! People have been holding hands for very long time, probably forever. (Rob)

Over the course of his interview, Rob shared images that showed how his handholding with his partner of 6 years had progressed from tentative hand-touching gestures to 'full handholding' in public. Performing full handholding with his partner in public, in addition to noticing the handholding of other LGBTQ partners, had become an important 'small' sign of community awareness and solidarity that was sustainable outside of the 'big' community signs like Pride.

Some participants, however, spoke of a kind of self-consciousness or perhaps pressure they sometimes felt to 'perform' hand holding as a deliberate act of pride, or made an observation that holding hands came with an awareness of the act as political in some way. For example, a gay couple, Alex and Richard, who recorded a friendship conversation (neither of them took part in an individual interview) spoke of this in relation to when they hold hands in public:

Alex: I think that for people in our situation, I mean obviously we can only speak from the perspective of being gay men, but it is definitely a physical wordless declaration made in public which is not only a personal thing but it's also something which is read by society and does see us, so it's not simply a personal thing it's almost, for me anyway, political, with a small 'p', act as well

Richard: I can't help but feel as though that I am actively taking part in a political statement, even though I am completely apolitical really as a person. But it is something that does play on my mind, when I'm holding your hand, because first of all you're like the first partner I've ever had who wants to hold hands in public, but even though like I said, I try to avoid being overtly politicised, I am having an awareness that to some people, that they will read that as a declaration of pride and comfort in society, or, as some people might think, you know, brazen protest.

For minority ethnic LGBTQ participants, there were added tensions around experiencing racism in LGBTQ spaces, which inhibited the possibility for them to enjoy being out in those spaces. Sabrin, a black British participant described this in the following way:

Especially Pride in London isn't as inclusive as it should be and it's very frustrating, because in the outside world everybody thinks that Pride in London serves the Community but they don't. They don't support grassroots projects and within their own team they don't respect people of colour. We've had numerous people that have come to us that have complained, and this is not just little things, this complaint of harassment and bullying and racism. (Sabrin)

So although LGBTQ Pride ostensibly serves to provide a space of visible queerness and an opportunity for queer communities to feel at ease in a public space, this unfortunately does not extend to all members of the community. At the same time, minority participants also spoke of feeling excluded within their ethnic communities, where they were supported in terms of their race and ethnicity, which was important to them. However, they could also experience exclusion on the grounds of homophobia. This was not exclusive to minority ethnic participants, as the excerpts from white participants indicate. However, it had a heightened poignancy for minority ethnic participants who relied on their communities of origin for support in a racist world.

One of our participants, who identified as British Asian, described having to shift her sense of self according to who she is with:

It's one of those I do battle with it in the sense, where it's like okay I'm this person in this group of people and [then different] to this group of people. And sometimes it's hard to reconcile those two things. So it can be stressful, it can be very stressful. [...] I hope to settle down with a very long term partner, but I don't want them to be a dirty secret. I hate saying that but [...] at the same time it's kind of like [...] there's a possibility, my parents, my family will not want to talk to me again. (Issma)

Issma presented a thermal image that was taken of herself and her girlfriend at an art exhibition. She described choosing the image because it was of them as a couple, holding hands, yet at the same time due to the thermal imaging, they were not identifiable. She saw this as appropriate for how they

lived their lives together, while not being out to her family or wider cultural community in the area where she lives:

It's almost like signalling in a weird way that yes, I am part of the [LGBTQ] community, I'm part of the community, without having the wrong people figuring out. (Issma)

For Issma, it was important to her sense of self and personal authenticity to acknowledge her membership in the wider queer community, while she also navigated the closet and not being out in places where she was likely to encounter family or other members of her ethnic community. This was stressful and personally painful, but also necessary to retain her connection with her family and wider British Asian community.

Discussion

Our research findings illustrate how experiences of everyday homophobia impact what it means to live a queer life, especially in connection with subjectivity and LGBTQ partnerships. As the data analysis shows, for many LGBTQ people, holding hands with their partners in public is often not a carefree act of affection, rather it comes with some sort of vigilance about safety or, for some, internal scrutiny about the meaning of the act. Individuals in the partnership may have different subjective experiences about the meaning and act of holding hands in public, leading to negotiations and possible tensions between the partners. Our findings show that LGBTQ people's lives continue to be structured by homophobia and transphobia, and heteronormative spaces.

LGBTQ individuals are subject to contradictory cultural messages from a society in which homophobic and transphobic violence remains both commonplace and disavowed. This is especially compounded in neoliberal contexts that 'responsibilize' the individual for their wellbeing and happiness and, in so doing, obscure the structural inequalities that might be addressed via collective social action. The majority of our participants described instances from their everyday lives that illustrated the additional cognitive, emotional, affective and relational labour that LGBTQ individuals perform within neoliberal and heteronormative structures to negotiate the boundaries of what is possible and permissible as a practice of intimacy with their partners. Hochschild (2015) refers to emotional labour as the management of one's own or others' emotional expressions as part of one's professional work role. This concept can also be applied to other expressions of emotional labour undertaken to either manage the threat of homophobia or retain familial relationships with homophobic family members for example (Ryan-Flood, 2014). Our data illustrates some of the ways in which by managing their behaviour in order to protect themselves from other people's homophobic discomfort – as in the example from the funeral above – participants performed extensive emotional labour as part of their everyday interactions in a homophobic society. The consequences of such additional labour on the personal, inter-personal, and community registers remains under-researched in the literature.

By committing to thinking about the social and the personal together, our psychosocial orientation in this study recognises how subjective experience and psychological issues cannot be abstracted from societal contexts. What will be explored more fully in subsequent analyses, however, is the indication that this inside/outside dilemma may be a common area of questioning and self-reflection for members of the queer community. Future research is also needed to examine sexual geographies in the changing landscape of heteronormativity and gentrification, as well as changing sexual citizenship.

In continuing to analyse the psychosocial complexity of LGBTQ people's experiences of holding hands in public, further attention will be given to the complex operations of shame and pride, and their individualising and collectivising dynamics. Important critical literature has explored shame's fundamental dynamic of exposure (Lansky & Morrison, 1997; Lewis, 1995); its intimate association with sexuality (Pajaczkowska & Ward, 2008; Warner, 1999); its entanglement with stigma, violence and self-violence for members of LGBTQ communities (Švab & Kuhar, 2005); and, through association

with pride and protest, its transgressive potential for queer politics (Halperin & Traub, 2009; Probyn, 2005; Sally S. Munt, 2007). For example, S. R. Munt (2019) argues that LGBTQ people have always felt shame on the grounds of their queerness due to homophobia, but that under neoliberalism there is a new pressure to inhabit space in an openly proud way. However, many queer people still experience this shame and internalised homophobia, except that now they're ashamed of being ashamed. Our participants' experiences resonate with this, as they grapple with wanting to be 'out and proud' but experiencing genuine fear and hesitation at expressing affection for their partners in public. This internalisation of shame because of queerness, is unsurprising in a world in which homophobic abuse and violence still takes place. Our research illustrates how psychological processes cannot be separated from the social contexts in which they occur.

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Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and some data from the research is also publicly available, with participants consent, on the project website: lgbtg-holdinghands.com (lgbtg-holdinghands.com).

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