Intergroup contact between front-line cruise staff and LGBT[1] passengers

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Abstract

This article explores front-line cruise employees' interaction with LGBT passengers. Covert data were gathered with 70 staff, many of whom were from developing countries where attitudes to LGBT people can be less accepting. Encounters are illuminated using Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory. Interactions between staff and gay passengers were largely positive, helping normalise homosexuality and diminish negative attitudes. Staff interactions were moderated by factors such as prior knowledge of gay people, their previous service experience on gay charters, gender, the influence of working for gratuities and the sense of fun onboard. The gay cruise provides the context that gives rise to moderating conditions, which then facilitate the mediating processes such as reduced intergroup anxiety and increased cultural learning of gay lifestyles. Suggestions for future research between cruise companies and their employees explore how other variables may positively influence staff service-gay customer interactions. Managerial implications are offered for the cruise sector.

Keywords

intergroup contact, moderators, mediators, LGBT cruise, service encounters, service employees

Introduction

This article discusses an exploratory study of staff interaction with passengers on a LGBT cruise and questions whether workforce contact with this sexual minority encourages gay-supportive views. It also investigates the moderators and mediators that play a role during service encounters with gay customers. It seeks to explore the interaction with front-line staff who come from parts of the world where attitudes to homosexuality are less positive. Even in some western contexts, negative attitudes and hate crimes toward sexual minorities and other

minority groups seem to be on the rise in these increasingly polarised times. Thus, research putting the spotlight on the interactions of customers and employees at the time-of-service delivery is very important for the tourism and travel industries because it shows how they can possibly be sites for positive change related to the timely social issue of discrimination against sexual minorities. Waitt et al. (2008) called for research that challenges heteronormativity in tourism, specifically with reference to the globalisation of sexuality. We argue the cruise setting, an exemplar of globalisation (Wood, 2000), offers an appropriate context to explore staff and passenger relations as it is a contemporary site of this globalisation of sexuality. The study is framed by Gordon Allport's (1954) "contact hypothesis", which has received renewed interest due to its applicability to a vast variety of groups and spaces. This research focuses on a setting where intergroup contact theory has not been investigated before – a cruise ship. Further, it specifically explores interactions between front-line staff and LGBT passengers. This paper thus heeds the call for continued efforts to determine the many mediators and moderators involved in contact between these two cross-groups (Li, 2019; Pettigrew, 2008).

This study contributes knowledge toward several identified research gaps. First, it broadly addresses the sustained neglect of workforce themes in the tourism and hospitality literature (Baum et al., 2016; Duncan et al., 2013; Harris et al., 2017; Ladkin, 2011). More specifically, the study offers an industry specific example of tourism work. Despite some notable exceptions (Ghodsee, 2005; Hsieh & Lin, 2010; Kensbock et al., 2013; Naude et al., 2013) being able to offer critical reflections on tourism and hospitality employment experiences, the contextual focus is often under-utilized. The challenging conditions of hospitality and tourism work are well documented (Baum, 2007; 2015, Wong & Ko, 2009), many of which remain unchanged (Baum & Mooney, 2019; Yildirim, 2021), but arguably, the issues of long hours, shifts, poor work-life balance, low pay, narrow job specificity and un-skilled work etc. are magnified within the confines of a cruise ship. Added to which, the nature of the cruise industry demands that employees are away from home and family for a considerable time, bringing known further challenges for employees (Willis et al., 2017). The industry context is therefore a significant part of the cruise employment experience and may help to explain all kinds of passenger interactions, not only those who may be LGBT.

Second, several studies have addressed the working lives of cruise employees (see, Ariza-Montes et al., 2021; Bolt & Lashley, 2015; Dennett, 2018; Gibson, 2008; Larsen et al., 2012; Nilan et al., 2014; Radic et al., 2020; Terry, 2009; 2014), while others have examined guest perceptions and the experiential value of cruises (see, Jeong & Hyun, 2019; Kang, 2020; Li & Kwortnik, 2017; Sanz-Blas et al., 2019). However, few explore employee-guest interaction, in part due to the protectiveness of the industry toward its reputation as an employer (de Grosbois, 2016; Larsen et al., 2012;). Indeed, Papathanassis and Beckmann (2011: 164) stated "the study of social life and human behaviour onboard is a rarity in cruise research." Lloyd et al. (2011) offered a rare example in their study of crew recommendations for passenger sightseeing, while Matuszewski and Blenkinsopp (2011) revealed pressure on new cruise workers to provide high quality service experiences. Dennett et al. (2014) argued a sociological and behavioural understanding of the experiences of workers on cruise ships remains largely unknown, while Matuszewski and Blenkinsopp (2011) asserted they are unique places of work and life that offer exciting opportunities to research. Dennett et al. (2014:490) highlighted cruise employees are isolated from families and friends for long periods, and so what happens onboard is often kept separate and "the ship acts as a separation from society and normality, providing a physical and social barrier from the outside."

The cruise ship is thus a unique liminal space in which to conduct research into staff-guest interaction. However, scholarly access to relevant actors is tightly controlled by the industry, which thus limits the ability of researchers to freely explore such exchanges. Research indicates interaction with LGBT passengers increases cruise employees' awareness and acceptance of gay lifestyles and reduces negative sentiment as they become allies for the gay community (Jarvis & Weeden, 2017). However, this research takes a management perspective and so further exploration is required to comprehend these issues from the outlook of ship personnel. Consequently, the value of this article comes from its empirical data on the experiences of employees who deliver high levels of service quality, yet whose voices are rarely heard or documented (see, McBride et al., 2015) in regard to their interaction with LGBT passengers.

A third contribution relates to reflections on LGBT employment, about which sociological research has explored a diverse range of issues. However, in the extensive field of the

sociology of work, gender and sexuality is a neglected area (Amaya & Gonzalez, 2019). Most research of service encounters tends to focus on mainstream customers, with fewer studies focusing on interaction between service workers and gay customers (Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Walters & Curran, 1996). Moreover, much research into gay-straight customer-worker interaction has involved the retail industry, or the interface between gay customers and service staff at gay events/festivals and in hotels (see, Pritchard et al., 1998; Ro et al., 2013; Ro & Olson, 2014; Ross, 2012). Other hospitality and/or tourism contexts are rarely addressed. The cruise industry is one of those settings lacking research on interaction between staff and LGBT customers. The benefit of researching the cruise context is to see if such a tourism space illuminates whether staff-LGBT service encounters facilitate positive change in attitudes toward gay people.

The Contact Hypothesis

Writing during a time of civil unrest in 1950's America, Gordon Allport's influential book *The Nature of Prejudice* has endured, becoming a timeless and influential text for understanding prejudice and intergroup contact. The basic premise of the "contact hypothesis" asserts contact between diverse groups of people can foster the development of more positive attitudes between them (Allport, 1979 [1954]). Allport's hypothesis has remained popular amongst social scientists considering issues of prejudice and conflict between groups remains deeply rooted across societies (Vezzali & Stathi, 2016). Despite the simplicity of the contact hypothesis, Allport did not assume any and all contact between disparate groups would instantly reduce prejudice or foster friendly attitudes. Rather, Allport understood contact alone could not alleviate intergroup prejudice noting, in certain situations, intergroup contact could increase prejudice. Pettigrew (2008) argued a greater focus upon negative contact is required, and cross-group interaction that leads to increased prejudice has not been studied systematically.

Allport made a general prediction that if certain conditions were present in the contact situation then prejudiced attitudes between groups may be reduced. These conditions are: (a) equal status between majority and minority groups in the contact situation, (b) intergroup cooperation, (c) common goals between groups, (d) institutional support (i.e., by law, custom

or local atmosphere) (Allport, 1979; see also, Pettigrew, 1998). These optimal conditions have had a lasting influence on the development of intergroup contact theory and are widely cited as important moderators for understanding when a contact situation will lead to positive change in behaviour (Li & Wang, 2020; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Early thinkers such as Sumner (1906) and Baker (1934) however, were sceptical towards the effectiveness of contact between groups. With Baker (1934) fearing intergroup contact would only lead to further suspicion, fear, and conflict. This attitude towards contact by those authors Pettigrew and Tropp (2011) argued, served to non-so-subtly defend the American South's then-existing pattern of rigid racial segregation in schools, neighbourhoods, and public facilities. However, post-World War II writers were more optimistic in their views as evidenced by the Human Relations Movement in America, which sought to end racial and religious prejudice through intergroup contact (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2011). By the 1950's Allport (1979 [1954]) influenced by this movement, racial segregation policies, and a loose body of developing literature on racial issues and integration (see, for example; Brophy, 1946; Williams, 1947), set the scene for the "contact hypothesis".

Since Allport's (1979 [1954]) initial writings, research on intergroup contact has mushroomed, gaining currency across academic disciplines such as social psychology and sociology. With the authors work remaining strongly cited more than 50 years after his passing and resonates with new generations of scholars. Developments have seen social scientists expanding far beyond the original parameters set by Allport in 1954 to unearth a plethora of additional situational conditions explaining when the effects of contact are likely to be strongest (see, for example; Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). For Pettigrew (1998) an ever-expandable set of conditions was considered threatening to the validity of and interest in the original contact hypothesis. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) highlighted this juncture further, concluding that most conditions, including Allport's, are not essential for positive intergroup contact, but should be seen as facilitators that can encourage positive contact effects (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011).

Nevertheless, with Allport's primary focus on when intergroup contact was most likely to be meaningful – the moderators of contact – and thereby most effective in reducing prejudice, he

paid little attention to the process – *how* and *why* intergroup contact is effective for reducing prejudice. Pettigrew (1998) and Pettigrew and Tropp (2006; 2008; 2011), have consistently argued how the moderators alone only have a limited effect on reducing prejudice. Instead, much like Allport, their well-cited work has been influential in exploring the mediating principles of intergroup contact. While Allport's (1979) four key moderating principles were previously identified, mediators refer to *how* and *why* intergroup contact can reduce prejudice. They reveal the process of attitude change as opposed to *when* contact can facilitate positive intergroup encounters. For example, Pagotto et al. (2010) noted mediators are concerned with *how* contact reduces prejudice. Pettigrew and Tropp (2008; 2011) identified the most common meditational processes: increased knowledge, anxiety reduction and empathy/perspective taking. Successful intergroup contact – that is contact which embodies some moderating facilitators - will provide a person/group with useful knowledge about the outgroup, reduce anxiety in intergroup encounters, and help to take a perspective of outgroup members and empathise with their concerns (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). Consequently, these mediating processes explain *how* and *why* people's attitudes may or may not change. Significantly, learning about different outgroup cultures has been added to the discussion as an important mediating effect of intergroup contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011).

When groups meet for the first-time people tend to feel anxious about said encounter or even threatened by the unknown, which can subsequently perpetuate negative attitudes (Dovidio et al., 2003; Hewstone, 2006; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; 2008; 2011). However, research has demonstrated how meaningful intergroup contact serves to reduce people's perceptions of anxiety toward an outgroup, with DellaPosta (2018) finding those without previous gay acquaintances having the greatest positive shift in attitudes. Although, as Pettigrew (1998) warned, if a person has an unpleasant experience with an outgroup member then intergroup contact can increase anxiety. By reducing intergroup anxiety, empathy can then develop between groups (Johnston & Glasford, 2018), which mediates the effects of intergroup contact.

Though the mediators of contact have aided the theoretical development of intergroup contact theory, at its most basic level, the moderating conditions of Allport's original contact hypothesis is well-supported within the literature. For example, in their meta-analysis

Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) reviewed 515 studies on intergroup contact, concluding contact is effective in reducing prejudice, particularly when Allport's optimal conditions (moderators) are met. Interestingly, the authors highlighted how contact has been applied to, and has had positive effects, on outgroup attitudes across multiple populations and situations such as disabled individuals, older people, and across diverse sexualities and sexual orientations, along with race and immigration (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). Notably, these effects extend beyond Allport's original focus on race and racial integration as the contact hypothesis has developed.

Despite overwhelming support for the positive nature of intergroup contact, it should not be viewed as a panacea, or instant remedy to alleviate prejudice. Exchanges are not always positive between groups, contact can be unpleasant or unfriendly under certain circumstances (Meleady & Forder, 2018). Negative forms of contact can also serve to enhance intergroup anxiety, increase perception of threat, and reduce empathy towards an outgroup. Hence, Pettigrew (2008) has called for research that not only explores positive encounters but also negative contact. Furthermore, scholars have revealed negative contact is a far stronger predictor of prejudice than positive contact, implying that the effects of negative intergroup contact can generalise easier than positive relations (McKeown & Dixon, 2017).

A further limitation discussed in the literature concerns out-group avoidance (Hewstone, 2006). For instance, people who are prejudice are less likely to engage in intergroup contact than more tolerant people, thereby inhibiting research on intergroup contact (Pettigrew, 1998). Similarly, even when Allport's conditions of contact are present scholars have revealed groups of people have a limited appetite for intergroup contact (Dixon & Durrheim, 2003). For example, Al Ramiah et al. (2015) identified how White students and Asian students in a school cafeteria 'resegregated' themselves into ethnic groups to avoid intergroup contact. This implies, intergroup contact can fail to materialise even if moderating principles are existing. Moreover, if there is an unavoidable selection bias towards participants who are more tolerant in general, then the results of any academic enquiry are likely to be skewed towards supporting intergroup contact theory.

Despite some limitations of intergroup contact, Allport's contact hypothesis serves as a guiding framework for this research. While the contact hypothesis alone is not significant enough to

explain if interactions between cruise staff and LGBT passengers have a positive or negative effect on the attitudes of the former toward sexualities that challenge their notion of heteronormativity or prejudices, the hypothesis eloquently simplifies the basic premise of intergroup contact. Therefore, this paper additionally draws upon and seeks to advance recent developments in intergroup contact theory (such as the mediators of contact) to understand if, how and why contact works beyond the exchange situation and in an under-researched context – a short-term LGBT gay cruise.

Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) argued *any* contact promotes positive understanding between groups, in all but the most hostile and threatening conditions and that most people begin to like others simply by coming into contact with them. While some stereotypical myths about different groups do not necessarily change, and not all contact is positive, they conclude that interaction between heterosexual and LGBT people is likely to generate the most positive effect, more than any racial or ethnic interaction. In support of this, both Herek and Glaunt (1993) and Broido (2000) contended interpersonal contact with sexual minorities can dismantle negative stereotypes and foster acceptance of diversity. Similarly, Castro-Convers et al. (2005) claimed contact normalises homosexuality and challenges common stereotypes, increases a person's likelihood of having further contact experiences with gay men, thus leading to increasingly gay-supportive attitudes. Since then, Duhigg et al. (2012), Gorman-Murray (2012) and Rumens (2018) assert contact between gay and straight people can result in heterosexuals becoming 'allies' to reduce stigma and discrimination. DellaPosta (2018) identifies even one acquaintance or contact can lead to a moral acceptance of homosexuality, especially to people who otherwise display more negative prior attitudes and less propensity to have LBGT associates.

Brewer (1999) argued not all attitudes towards a different group are negative; rather others are not able to be in environments that foster positive attitudes. She, as well as Eagly and Diekman (2005), suggested intergroup conflict arises not from hostility, but from own-group membership which favours preferential treatment of fellow ingroup members. Research on attitudes towards sexual minorities suggests while there is general increased acceptance, there is a still a global divide on attitudes, with people from Eastern Europe, Russia, the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa widely rejecting homosexuality (Pew Research Center, 2020). The

Center found the publics in the Asia-Pacific region are much more split. Viewpoints are a function of not only economic development but of a nation's religious and political attitudes. Indeed, it was not expected that a majority of front-line cruise staff would hold prejudiced or stereotypical attitudes toward LGBT passengers. But approximately 70% of crew, including hotel staff, come from relatively poorer countries in South and South East Asia, Central America, the Caribbean and Eastern Europe (Janta et al., 2011). Herek (2000) reported correlations between sexual prejudice and negative attitudes towards homosexuals is higher among heterosexuals who identify with a fundamentalist religion, are less educated or from rural areas. Nonetheless, we recognise the complex nature of prejudice and seek to understand how staff construct LGBT people and their sexualities before, during and after contact with them on a gay cruise. The cruise context bubble may help to (re)form new attitudes and prejudices towards gay customers as stereotypes may be reinforced or disconfirmed. Nevertheless, negative attitudes towards disparate groups, whether hostile or subtle, is prevalent throughout societies around the world.

Intergroup contact theory then provides a powerful and comprehensive explanatory tool for understanding how and why the effects of intergroup contact can have transformative effects on attitude, especially in the context of a gay cruise. Askins (2015) noted everyday spaces where encounters take place, such as shops and parks, are important and can extend beyond the superficial. Learning from everyday encounters, however, never happens in isolation from other interaction, considering experiences are related to earlier encounters carried across sites and time. Therefore, they are inherently subjective to the individual and are far from the objective characteristic of the contact situation itself (Spijkers & Loopmans, 2020).

The Use of Intergroup Contact Theory in Tourism

Tourism is a global phenomenon, an agent of the globalisation process and a multifaceted socio-cultural and economic force that connects people, places and businesses across the globe (Sharpley & Tefler, 2015; Timothy, 2019). Tourism engenders an environment for people from a variety of cultural, religious, ethnic and national backgrounds to interact and potentially unite with one another. It is an inherently intergroup experience (Fan et al., 2017). This section explores the literature on tourism with a particular reference to contact theory to determine how

tourism scholarship has utilised intergroup contact, to identify any gaps or limitations within the literature and to assess the relevance this framework in the context of a cruise ship and employee-passenger interaction.

Since the early 1990's tourism has been discussed as a possible vehicle for intergroup contact. Scholars have mostly utilised intergroup contact theory to examine tourist-host encounters and vice versa to ascertain whether tourism influences people's attitudes (see, for example; Anastasopoulos, 1992). Initial research revealed the underwhelming and limited role of tourism as an agent for intergroup contact. Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis, revealed a dearth of tourism literature finding only 9 articles, that had integrated intergroup contact theory in a travel context. They argued tourism could not facilitate meaningful contact, as there was an absence of Allport's conditions present in the studies reviewed. This implies that Allport's conditions for meaningful contact do not naturally occur in a tourism context, resulting in a limited impact on people's attitudes.

Since this review however tourism scholarship appears to have changed, with researchers arguing tourism can provide a natural context for facilitating meaningful contact between tourist and resident and vice versa (see, Celik, 2019; Fan et al., 2017; Li & Wang, 2020; Luo et al., 2015; Pizam et al., 2002; Shepherd & Laven, 2020; Sirakaya-Turk, 2014; Yu & Lee; 2014). The approaches taken and the contexts to which intergroup contact theory have been applied have facilitated a more nuanced understanding of intergroup relations in tourism. Still, tourism scholarship is yet to fully explore the mediating processes of intergroup contact, i.e. the *how* and *why*. Rather, academics have focused on exploring *if* and *when* tourism can facilitate positive intergroup contact.

The aforementioned studies note the importance of quality contact for facilitating positive intergroup outcomes. For example, Luo et al. (2015) explore how quality intergroup contact between Chinese hosts and international backpackers effectively moderated positive attitude change amongst hosts. More recently, Li and Wang (2020) examine how Chinese nationals visiting North Korea – a highly structured and controlled experience – mediated positive attitude change and facilitated empathy toward North Koreans. Further insights reveal learning about diverse cultures through tourism can lead to a reduction in perceived cultural distance.

Crucially, perceived cultural distance has also been shown to perpetuate feelings of anxiety and prejudice between groups (Fan et. al, 2017; Kim, 2012). All these scholars argued Allport's conditions of equal status, common goals and cooperation were engendered through intergroup tourism encounters. These studies reveal tourism can moderate meaningful contact, especially if some of Allport's optimal conditions arise throughout the contact situation, indicating tourism can be an effective agent for positive attitude change. However, these studies focused on tourist-host encounters and not explicitly on tourist-service workers relations. Further, socially oriented contact had a far greater impact on fostering understanding between groups than service-oriented contact. Fan et al. (2017) note the latter is considered superficial and standardised, leading to an increase in perceived cultural distance. Socially oriented contact on the other hand permitted an intimate and intense context for intergroup contact.

A more recent study demonstrated how purposefully designed tourism spaces that aim to actively challenge and improve intergroup relations can be beneficial for achieving positive intergroup outcomes. Shepherd and Laven (2020: 867) identify "hostels are particularly well-suited tourism spaces for cross-cultural learning…and thus the breaking down of prejudices and stereotypes." Their argument centres upon two key findings. Firstly, how the hostel creates a forum for fact-based learning between groups and secondly, how they provide many of Allport's conditions necessary for meaningful contact such as genuine communication, interaction between tourist and host community, and a well-managed supportive social and physical environment for cross-cultural engagement (institutional support).

Similarly, Uriely et al. (2009) stated a 'bubble of serenity' in a Sinai Peninsula resort helped Israeli tourists develop favourable attitudes toward Egyptian service workers because the encounters took place away from the general population. This may have resonance with the cruise ship, also seen as a 'bubble' (see, Cohen, 1972), which may help to facilitate relations as well. While the cruise ship itself is not necessarily a moderator or mediator, it provides a context that gives rise to the effect of intergroup relations. Of note, there is evidence that gay tourism can be socially transformative and help foster a more liberal atmosphere in destinations often characterised as religiously conservative (see, Clift et al., 2002; Hughes et al., 2010; Ram

et al., 2019). However, the focus of this current study recognises the cruise ship as the destination in itself (Weeden and Dowling, 2017).

Tourism, like intergroup contact, should not be viewed as a panacea to lessen global prejudices. There are limitations to tourist's ability to moderate and mediate the effects of intergroup contact. Tourism can give rise to unfavourable, negative contact conditions, which can increase rather than reduce prejudiced attitudes (Anastasopoulos, 1992; Moaz, 2006; Sirakaya-Turk, 2014; Uriely et al., 2009). In some spaces, tourists and service workers may try to avoid interactions as much as possible. McKeown and Dixon (2017) argue voluntary segregation exists between groups of people who selectively avoid contact even in contexts where intergroup contact appears natural. The situational dimensions of tourism and the type of tourist activity can serve to work in opposition to intergroup contact. This is important to keep in mind in the context of this paper – front-line staff may not necessarily develop positive attitudes simply because they come into contact with gay passengers.

The cruise ship, and more specifically a LGBT charter, provides a space for everyday encounters between service workers and gay passengers. The ship could provide a meaningful environment for intergroup contact and the "quiet politics" of encounters (Askins, 2015). Furthermore, cruise ships can be seen as an "unstable space", a temporal experience for staff and customers alike.

Study Context – Gay Charter Cruises

This section explains the study context for those not familiar with the cruise charter concept. Charter cruises are essentially 'private' and marketed as special interest or themed trips, where passengers have exclusive use of the ship and participate in theme-related activities onboard and on excursions. An LGBT charter offers a cruise vacation according to sexual orientation (Jarvis & Weeden, 2017). While cruise companies such as Norwegian Cruise Line and Royal Caribbean International, supply the vessels and staff, there are a number of lesbian and gay tour operators that provide LGBT-oriented entertainment, and they jointly design itineraries and menus. For example, the world's largest gay tour operator, Atlantis, regularly charters ships that accommodate 6,000 passengers. In typical years (not affected by any global

pandemics) they charter six ships with a combined capacity of 15,500 passengers. Staff who do not want to work on a gay charter are able to remove themselves from the ship without penalty. They may do this due to their own prejudices or being uncomfortable working in a setting which may have a pre-conception of being highly sexualised (see, Giuffre & Williams, 1994) or negative stereotypes where gay people are considered immoral and deviant (Stenger & Roulet, 2018). However, due to the precarious nature of cruise employment (Weaver, 2005), and potential loss of earnings, especially from gratuities, in reality it is increasingly unlikely employees do so (Jarvis & Weeden, 2017).

Although LGBT travel is an increasingly important market segment for the tourism industry (Lucena et al., 2015), little academic attention has been paid to the LGBT cruise sector. Notable exceptions include Chawansky and Francombe's (2011) exploration of Olivia Cruises' corporatisation of the 'coming out' of two lesbian sport celebrities through sponsorship, and Weeden et al.'s (2016) study of lesbian and gay men's perceptions of cruise vacations. More recently, Vo (2020) investigated Asian-Canadian and -American experiences on a gay cruise. Significantly, there is a lack of published research on employees' service experiences with LGBT customers, across all forms of business not only tourism. Thus, a gay cruise charter provides a fruitful opportunity to research guest-employee interactions, where intergroup contact between service staff and LGBT passengers involves a complex intersection of axes of difference (Dhamoon, 2011) such as sexual orientation, gender, sex, race, affluence and nationality.

In summary this paper is grounded in Allport's (1954) "contact hypothesis" and developments in intergroup contact theory. It reflects on interactions between hotel staff and passengers on a gay cruise. It seeks to explore the nature of interaction when front-line staff with a range of differing worldviews (see, Gibson & Perkins, 2015) come into direct contact with LGBT passengers, possibly for the first time. It focuses on employees from mostly developing nations because they make up the greatest proportion of front-line staff. On a cruise ship, there exist "multiple marginalised identities, and so research needs to be framed in ways that capture these many voices and identities" (Nakhid et al., 2015: 195). Specific research themes to address include:

- What is the prior work experience of front-line staff on a gay cruise? What is their prior knowledge of LGBT people?
- What are the positive and negative reflections of front-line cruise staff in terms of their interaction with LGBT passengers?
- What do they tell others, such as family members and friends, in their home countries, about these experiences or do they avoid telling others and what does this reveal about them?

These three themes are then discussed to demonstrate how they contribute to new understandings of intergroup contact theory. Further, the discussion section reveals the mediators and moderators that influence their interactions.

Research Methodology and Methods

Cruise lines are extremely reluctant to allow critical scholars to undertake research onboard due to continued condemnation of the industry's staffing policies and tax arrangements (Terry, 2017). Companies are also hesitant as they want to protect their brand image and do not want to be portrayed in a negative light. While a few have been granted access to workers onboard (Gibson, 2008, 2017; Jones, 2011; Lloyd et al., 2011), others (Ariza-Montes et al., 2021; Dennett, 2018; Dennett et al., 2014; Matuszewski & Blenkinsopp, 2011; Terry, 2009; Radic et al., 2020) have had to resort to researching former employees, those between contracts, or crew on breaks away from the ship or via social media. While these latter studies provide insight into the working lives of cruise employees, there are strengths to be gained from researching personnel in situ (Gibson, 2008), hence the decision to undertake data collection covertly via a combination of participant observation and onboard conversations with hotel staff. Baum et al. (2016) identify much of tourism workforce research has been dominated by positivistic quantitative approaches; however, qualitative methods can be fruitful in gaining rich insights into customer-employee interactions. Prior to this study, only Foster (1986) and Weaver (2005) utilised covert methods on a cruise ship, while Kwortnik and Thompson (2009) and Mondou and Taunay (2012) used them partially in their work observing staff and customers. Arguably, this reflects reluctance among scholars, grounded in a much-contested ethical debate (Calvey, 2017; Homan, 1980; Spicker, 2011), to use a covert approach in tourism and hospitality research (Alberti, 2014; Lugosi, 2006). Roulet et al.'s (2017) paper succinctly summarises the nuanced controversies centred around the value of covert research but

ultimately argue for its use as a method as long as researchers deliberate a number of practical considerations such as the publication of people or company's names. Further, they identify covert research, namely participant observation, often exists on a continuum of consent and is not simply a binary of gaining participant informed consent or not. Indeed, while the researchers noted the potential theoretical contributions of the study and consequentialist view that the benefits of the data would outweigh the 'cost' to participants (Walters & Godbold, 2014), they utilised a situated ethical perspective to reconcile their personal anxieties associated with the covert methodological approach (Bernstein, 2012; Calvey, 2008; 2019).

During the data collection, the researchers continually reflected on ethical issues that were shaped by the context of being in situ and thus morally questioned their covert status. For example, in line with Foster (1986) and Weaver (2005), and covert studies on seafarers (Bloor & Sampson, 2009), migrant workers (Alberti, 2014) and interaction between hosts and guests in a gay-friendly bar (Lugosi, 2006), this study anonymises the ship, company name and itinerary and provides pseudonyms for individual staff. These steps also ensured ethical approval from the researchers' institution. Further in some instances, as suggested by Foster (1986) and Lugosi (2006), once a rapport had been established between staff and researchers, the latter revealed themselves as academics interested in researching the cruise industry. It was observed some gay customers were also asking staff what it was like working on a gay cruise.

Data Collection

Data were collected during an 8-day cruise, on a 'super-sized' vessel with 4000 passengers and 2400 crew. The vast majority of passengers were white male North Americans, and in line with research on the LGBT cruise market (Weeden et al., 2016) the largest number appeared to be in their forties, about ten years younger than the average mainstream cruiser (see, Jarvis & Weeden, 2017). It is noted the majority of customers were part of the LGBT community, although the researchers encountered a few who identified as straight and were on holiday with friends or family. Thus, the gay charter cruise can be seen as quite a traditional physical LGBT space, compared to gay bars and urban gay villages which are undergoing significant changes, from once safe, bounded sites to more mixed social spaces (Goh, 2018). According to personal communication with the Cruise Director of the gay tour operator, this particular cruise only

had 72 women, most of those being lesbian. However, while there was some limited diversity observed within this LGBT market, staff reflections reported hereafter thus refer largely to service encounters with gay male passengers.

Seventy conversations were undertaken with hotel staff, which included restaurant and bar personnel, cabin attendants, spa, gym and pool staff, cruise directors and front office staff. Most of these conversations took place during typical service encounters such as having a meal or drink or in other leisure contexts like the spa or gym areas. Each member of staff was initially asked the same four questions to help facilitate fuller conversations - have you worked on a gay cruise before? Do you know any gay people in your home country? How are your interactions with passengers? Do you tell friends and family you are working on a gay charter?

Staff originated from a variety of nations as easily identified by their standard uniform badges which also indicated their names. Conversations were held with those from South and Central American, Caribbean, African, Asian and Eastern European countries because they dominated the positions held by front-line staff. Relatively few were completed with crew from nations like Italy and the U.K. but their answers are also included because they were also encountered during service. Gender and job title were noted in order to identify opinions and quotes for later discussion. One of the researchers was a gay man, the other a straight woman. Each discreetly made diary notes on completion of individual and joint conversations and the researchers later reflected together to facilitate data credibility. The mix of researchers' gender and sexual orientation, along with factors such as previous cruise experience and familiarity with the sector, and the discussion of the notes taken by both facilitated the chance to confirm or challenge each other's perspectives (Bernstein, 2012). Data saturation was judged to be achieved on seventy conversations.

Findings

Prior Work Experience on a Gay Charter Cruise and Knowledge of LGBT People

Staff were asked if they had much experience working in the cruise industry and specifically on LGBT charters because this may act as a moderating factor on their interactions. The profile

of those crew interviewed revealed a range of work experience in the cruise sector. The researchers believe most of those spoken to were in their 20s or early 30s although some revealed their precise age during conversations. Some had just started working in the cruise sector in the last year or two, others had considerable experience. For instance, Malik (male, St Vincent and Grenadines, bartender) was working on his first eight-month contract, Vincent (male, Trinidad and Tobago, bartender) had been employed for the company for nine years, and Simona (female, Romania, wait staff) for eight years. Just over half of the staff said they had previously worked on gay cruises, although a significant number stated this was their first time. Tsvetana (female, Bulgaria, wait staff) indicated she had worked on three gay cruises before in her five years of working in the industry, while Ayand (female, South Africa, beautician) was more experienced, with six previous LGBT charters.

While staff are given the option by the company to not work on a gay charter without penalty except loss of wages, not one of those spoken to knew of any crew who chose to avoid working on the ship for this particular week. Katarina (female, Slovenia, wait staff) noted this was her first cruise and "was happy to be here." Indeed, most signified they looked forward to working on a gay charter compared to typical cruises catering to mainstream customers, because their prior experiences on gay cruises had been positive, with comments such as "gay people are so much nicer" and "gay customers are so much more relaxed than straight cruises." Vincent (first time on gay cruise) said he had "high expectations…other staff told him it would be great." Allan (male, The Philippines, wait staff), emphasized "I especially volunteer to work in the evenings because it will be more fun." Precious (female, Zimbabwe, beautician) said her younger sister was about to join the company and was specifically looking forward to working on a gay cruise. The eagerness to work on a gay cruise was tempered by some female staff in certain occupations. Agnes (female, Hungary, gym instructor) said she likes working on the gay cruise but she is aware gay male passengers prefer to work with her male gym colleagues, meaning she received fewer gratuities. Still, she noted gay passengers go to the gym more than on mainstream cruises so she was still busy and making tips. Similarly, for those working in the spa, they expected their tips to be low because there were fewer female patrons. Thus, gender appears to be a moderator and somewhat tempers the enthusiasm of the interactions between some female front-line staff and gay passengers.

Staff were also asked if they had LGBT acquaintances in their home countries before they had worked in the cruise sector and on gay charters. Knowing gay people acts as a moderator because it helps create equal status between front-line crew and gay passengers. The majority indicated they knew some lesbian and gay people but most did not have close LGBT friends. Agnes told us her brother was gay but no others identified any gay family members. Ivan (male, Serbia, wait staff), for example, who was working on his first gay cruise, said he is very relaxed about gay people even though he did not count any of them as friends. His former girlfriend took him to gay clubs in his home country and "no one bothered him because I was with a girl." Yuhua (female, China, wait staff) said she knows there are gay people in her country but did not know any personally. She mentioned she had overheard four gay Chinese passengers on the ship but she had not yet spoken to them. Crew talked about homophobic attitudes in their home countries like Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Precious talked about attitudes toward gay people in her homeland and said,

> I never even knew the word 'gay' until 21 when I went to beauty college in Zimbabwe…there was a feminine guy there and my friend said he was gay. My friend had to explain what it meant…I am not sure if my parents would be happy if my brothers were gay. My dad is old fashioned…in Zimbabwe it's not completely okay to be gay.

Vincent also talked about homophobic attitudes, this time in the Caribbean,

> Trinidad is changing and they are aware of gay people but there people will leave gays alone if you don't bother them…Jamaica is homophobic.

The implications of prior experience working on cruise ships, and specifically gay charters, and their level of friendships with LGBT people as moderating factors is discussed later once their reflections on interactions are presented.

Reflections of Front-line Cruise Staff Interaction with LGBT Passengers

Employees' initial reflections of meeting gay passengers were overwhelmingly positive, centred around three factors – increased opportunities for gratuities, less-demanding

passengers and the sense of fun onboard. These are discussed before their comments on how their interactions changed (or not) their attitudes toward LGBT people.

Increased opportunities for gratuities

Employees enjoyed working on a gay cruise because they were able to earn extra gratuities than on mainstream cruises. For instance, Antonio (male, Italy, wait staff) expected to earn 5-6 times more tips on a gay cruise. Others noted "gay men tip more" (Diego, male, Peru, croupier; Grigor, male, Bulgaria, bartender), while Diya (female, Indonesia, bartender) said "I like gay cruises - although I am often busier [in the bar] I can make more money, especially if I stay on after my shift." Similarly, Jesus (male, Dominican Republic, bartender) noted, "Gay cruisers pay gratuities up front, whereas mainstreamers don't, and some [mainstreamers] don't tip at all."

Serving less-demanding passengers

In response to questions about what it was like to work on a gay charter, without exception, staff responded positively, citing the politeness of LGBT passengers and the relaxed nature of a gay charter cruise. Precious said it was "stress-free", while the following quotes illustrate the range of answers,

> Mainstream cruisers are ruder. [On a] gay cruise, everyone says, "please and thank you." (Li, female, China, retail assistant)

> Gay people are more educated and know how to behave, whereas mainstream cruisers are not. (Jesus)

> Mainstream cruisers are uptight and complain more, whereas gay men like to party and have fun. [There is a] more relaxed atmosphere. (José, male, Dominican Republic, room attendant)

> I love working a gay cruise because guests don't complain. Straight people complain about everything, even their drinks! (Malik)

In an overheard conversation between Shelley-Ann (female, Jamaica, embarkation staff) and a small group of male passengers, the latter were heard to say "really, you just want us queers

off as fast as possible - after a week you must be tired of us!" In response, Shelley-Ann answered "No! You guys were great, now we get the regular people - more complaining!"

Several comments from staff revealed gay men were seen as less-demanding because they ate less food than mainstream cruisers,

> Gay passengers are less messy and eat less…whereas mainstream cruisers want as much food as they can get. Children on straight cruises are also very badly behaved - they eat under the table and mothers don't tell them off! [It is] much easier on a gay cruise, less work. (Andrei, male, Romania, wait staff)

> I love the gay cruises, they are much less work than the others, they [mainstream cruisers] eat much more food so I am usually sweating. (Usain, male, Jamaica, wait staff)

Sense of fun onboard

In the final set of responses in this section, comments revealed a third shared perceptions that working on a gay cruise charter was a more enjoyable experience than on a mainstream trip, which ultimately delivered a more relaxed working environment for staff. Danilo (male, the Philippines, wait staff), explained,

> I work in the evenings because it will be more fun. You people have so much fun…you deserve to have fun.

> These people are having fun, they like their parties. (Angela, female, Nicaragua, room attendant)

> Mainstream cruisers are uptight and complain whereas gay men like to party and have fun…more relaxed atmosphere. (Jhonny, male, Dominican Republic, gym)

The relaxed atmosphere apparently also impacted managers and supervisors onboard. As Katarina explained, "My supervisors are more relaxed on a gay cruise." Similarly, Agnes noted gay passengers, in comparison to mainstream ones, said "you guys are much more relaxed." Only one respondent (Yuhua) admitted they found all cruise work demanding, however added "sometimes I hate my job and right now I like my job."

Changing attitudes towards gay male and lesbian cruise passengers

Conversations revealed the overwhelming majority of service workers appeared to hold positive attitudes towards the guests and about working on a gay charter. Some may have held largely positive or relaxed attitudes toward LGBT people before their cruise experience but a few were explicit their interactions had led to positive change. Precious had mentioned she did not know gay people back in Zimbabwe until she was 21 and added "after being on three [gay] cruises now I don't think anything of it…I wish all cruises were like this." Vincent also previously talked about homophobic attitudes in the Caribbean and said working in the cruise sector and had helped break down his prejudice,

> I think working on the ship has opened my eyes…I think in the past I had a problem with it…there are gay staff members on the ship, everyone should be treated the same.

Similarly, Malik said he missed his wife and child, and commented,

> I am quite happy about gay people…it doesn't bother me or my wife at all…Before I worked on a cruise, I didn't know many people who were gay, but now I do, so it has opened my eyes.

Katarina enjoyed not having straight men [on mainstream cruises] try to chat her up. She continued, "It's great, everything's relaxed…I love the music, [and] no children. I am not allowed to mingle with guests, but that's okay." AJ (male, Jamaica, wait staff) seemed very sincere in his response to working on a gay cruise and said "I am very happy and used to it…I like meeting different people and everyone is special in their own way." Andrei, who appeared rather formal and 'stiff' in conversation about his attitude to working on a gay charter, nonetheless said he was "comfortable with gay people."

However, a few reflections were rather guarded. For example, Jesus (from the Caribbean) said "I don't agree with the practice, but I realise we are all human beings and everyone is different." Grigor (Eastern European) did not think too much about [gay] sexuality, and said "it is all about the service, not who's onboard…staff are from everywhere, just like the people onboard." Ayand, who had worked on six gay cruises, said she was fine about the passengers, but "my

mouth was open at all the things I saw in the night club on my first gay cruise." She added she was worried some of her female counterparts (in the spa) would not be happy because the number of female passengers was so few on the gay cruise, explaining they would receive fewer tips due to lack of female clients.

Only one employee openly expressed any negativity. Karim (male, Tunisia, wait staff) appeared uncomfortable talking about the subject, saying rather hurriedly "what happens on the ship stays on the ship…I have worked on gay cruises before so it's fine, it's fine." On casual probing he was reluctant to say more.

Telling Friends and Family

Another moderating variable to explore was whether front-line hotel staff told friends and family about working on a gay charter. This can assist in enabling the growth in status of LGBT people in their home countries. Most respondents claimed to openly discuss this at home. Sanja (female, Bosnia and Herzegovina, wait staff) said she told her parents but "they are liberal anyway as they lived in San Francisco….it is hard to be openly gay in Bosnia, but people should be able to live their own lives." Jesus said his parents [back in the Caribbean] "were surprised there was a cruise full of gay men. They were okay, because they are educated too and enjoyed the idea of a gay cruise." Bonif (male, Indonesia, wait staff), who told us he was Catholic, was "very laid back about gays in Sumatra…they can live their own way, I have no problem with it.' Bonif told both his mother and sister that he worked on a gay cruise.

Chalisa (female, Trinidad and Tobago, wait staff) told friends back in Trinidad, where she said,

> People are very open about these things compared to other Caribbean Islands. It upsets me to talk about gay cruises being refused entry to Jamaica, as they are very homophobic.

Vincent told his father back home in Trinidad and told us "my Dad said "Great! Make lots of money." For Diya, who identified as Hindu, and was married with two young children, it "was not a big deal" to tell friends back home in Bali. Similarly, Malik commented,

St. Vincent is more laid back about the gay lifestyle than Jamaica and Barbados…people can be openly gay there…I tell some of my family and friends back home. I told my brother who had never heard of such a thing as a gay cruise, and that surprised him, but it was okay for him.

Not all staff revealed to family or friends they were working on a gay cruise. Karim said "my family don't need to know – I don't tell them." Both Tseng (male, croupier) and Li from China explained they did not tell their parents, while Fan (female, China, wait staff) said "It's my life, they don't need to know about it…what happens on the cruise, stays on the cruise." Finally, AJ, married with one child back home in the Caribbean, explained he did not tell his wife because "she is Christian and she will be upset about me working on a gay cruise."

Discussion

This section frames the interactions between front-line cruise staff and lesbian and gay passengers with intergroup contact theory debates (see, Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The findings contribute to this framework by identifying a range of moderators and mediators that play a significant role in understanding these interactions. As Pettigrew and Tropp (2011: 202-203) stated "to learn *when* contact effects will occur and are maximized, we must seek the moderators of the contact-prejudice relationship…to learn *how* contact reduces prejudice, we must uncover the principle mediators of contact's effects." For Allport (1979), intergroup contact will lead to a greater reduction in prejudice if the contact situation embodies four conditions: (1) equal status between the groups; (2) common goals; (3) cooperation between groups; (4) institutional support for contact. These conditions are not *essential* for positive intergroup contact, rather they should be seen as *facilitators* that can encourage positive contact between groups (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; 2011).

We claim all four conditions were present in the contact situation in the context of the gay cruise. They act as moderators between staff and guests and thus lead to a reduction in prejudice. Specifically, two issues relate to equal status. First, a number of front-line personnel indicated they knew LGBT people back in their home countries, although most were not close friends or family members. Arguably this may lead to them giving gay passengers (the outgroup) increasing status compared to themselves (presumed heterosexual – the ingroup),

underpinning DellaPosta's (2018) assertion that even one acquaintance can lead to less anxiety about and instead a moral acceptance of homosexuality. Findings reveal those staff from nations the Pew Research Center (2020) indicates are regions more hostile to LGBT people, such as the Caribbean, Middle East, Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa, demonstrated the greatest positive attitude change to gay people as a result of their interaction. Even though some of the staff said they did not have any gay friends, these are the individuals likely to have the greatest shift in attitudes (DellaPosta, 2018). As already noted, people from these parts of the world make up the greatest proportion of those working in front-line positions in the industry (Nilan et al., 2014). The gay cruise clearly helps to assuage any heteronormative attitudes about LGBT people, thus answering Waitt et al.'s (2008) call for tourism research to contest and dismantle these notions. The cruise ship is an exemplar of the globalisation of sexuality. Much like Shepherd and Laven's (2020) research on hostels, the ship is a well-suited tourism space for cross-cultural learning and the breaking down of prejudice.

Second, prior experience in the cruise industry and on gay charters also moderates staff-customer interactions to effect positive attitude change, thus facilitating equal status between the two groups. Also, the cruise company, and its corporate values of treating all passengers the same, provide another important condition that can lead to greater reduction in prejudice, namely institutional support for contact. The fact that their employer, a large multi-national corporation, supplies the vessels to a gay tour operator, and the company does not force all staff to work on the charter, creates institutional support conditions that facilitate interactions between front-line staff and LGBT people. The extent to which cruise employees are socially embedded within the cruise company's corporate values about treating all the passengers with courtesy and the reliance on gratuities recalls the work of Granovetter (1985). This affects their interactions with all passengers not only LGBT customers.

The data reveal additional moderators. We argue increased opportunity for gratuities is a moderator of contact considering these encounters resemble Allport's conditions of common goals and intergroup cooperation. Staff and guests alike cooperate while on the cruise – the staff seek gratuities or financial reward, while guests want an enjoyable holiday experience. However, while staff and passengers cooperate for common goals, staff do not have equal status with passengers due to the nature of their service orientated role as defined by their

employee contract. The gratuities are moderated further by gender as some female crew identified they would make less than their male counterparts because of the gay male clientele. Not that this implies all female personnel developed less positive attitude change to LGBT people per se, but gender tempered enthusiasm for working on a gay cruise depending on front-line job roles.

Perhaps, the primary moderator we can see from the gay cruise is a sense of fun, which implies the atmosphere onboard as fun and enjoyable for the staff effectively moderated positive intergroup contact. The atmosphere onboard reveals *when* the effects of contact are likely to be strongest, thus acts as a *facilitator* for positive intergroup contact. Here we claim a gay cruise provides a tourism setting that can effectively moderate positive intergroup contact. Therefore, providing support for other studies that tourism can facilitate meaningful contact (see, Celik, 2019; Fan et al., 2017; Li & Wang, 2020; Luo et al., 2015; Pizam et al., 2002; Shepherd & Laven, 2020) beyond brief service encounters between hosts and tourists. In tourism scholarship, the moderators of contact – or conditions, have been combined to measure the 'quality' of contact (Fan et al., 2017; Li & Wang, 2020; Luo et al., 2015). Despite the temporal nature of a cruise, front-line service interactions, although fleeting in length with each gay individual, but significant when added altogether over the full week and their previous experiences on gay charters, help support what Askins (2015) refers to as the "quiet politics" of encounters. Over time and space, the 'quality' of staff contact is considerable.

The vast majority of staff reflections of their contact was positive. Despite Pettigrew's (2008) call for more negative interactions, our data did not reveal this. This is not surprising. The influence of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) on all aspects of employee-guest exchange, is significant. This is important when gratuities in the cruise sector are an essential addition to basic salaries. This issue illustrates the challenge of researching cruise employees' attitudes toward passengers; few personnel are likely to jeopardise potentially lucrative encounters by revealing negative opinions about gay people. This has shown the moderators of the contact-prejudice relationship are nuanced and complex beyond the basic service interaction.

On the other hand, mediators refer to *how* and *why* intergroup contact can reduce prejudice, they reveal the process of attitude change as opposed to *when* contact can facilitate positive

intergroup encounters. Tourism scholarship, thus far, is yet to fully explore the mediating processes of intergroup contact. Rather, the literature has focused on exploring if and *when* tourism can facilitate positive intergroup contact. Fan et al. (2017), while not explicitly referring to the mediating process of intergroup contact, have highlighted *how* and *why* intergroup encounters can result in attitude change. The authors revealed, when moderating conditions were present in the contact situation (i.e., harmonious relations, equal status and cooperative encounters) the mediating processes occurred. Essentially, if the contact situation gives rise to favourable facilitating moderators such as equal status between groups or cooperation, then mediating processes begin to be enacted. In turn, mediating processes explain *how* attitudes can be changed through contact. For instance, a person may feel less anxious towards another group as a result of contact leading to a positive attitude change towards said group as this anxiety declines.

In a gay cruise context, our results do not reveal any mediating processes of intergroup contact, *per se,* other than some front-line crew who commented "on account of me working on this ship it has opened my eyes and I may have had a problem with it [gay people] if I hadn't worked on a cruise…" and "before I worked on a cruise I didn't know many people who were gay, but now I do, so it has opened my eyes." We believe these comments imply working on a gay cruise charter enabled some form of cultural understanding from the staff's perspective which mediated *how* and *why* their attitudes toward LGBT people changed for the positive. For some hotel staff, working on a gay cruise challenged their previously held stereotypes about LGBT people and appeared to encourage them to develop gay-supportive attitudes and thus normalise homosexuality, all consequences of contact as noted by Broido (2000) and Castro-Convers et al. (2005). Many revealed they share positive gay charter work experiences with friends and family, thereby becoming unconscious 'allies' of the gay community (Duhigg et al., 2012; Gorman-Murray, 2012), in their home countries, many of which are known to be less accepting of LGBT people.

However, for the minority who did not tell relatives or friends about the gay cruise there appeared to be some reluctance to accept homosexuality, possibly attributed to the intersection between minority sexual orientation and a dominant anti-gay religious doctrine, deriving from pervasive norms and values in their home country (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Pew Research

Center, 2020). There was also evidence of ambiguity, with some employees failing to acknowledge (thus erasing) the sexuality of passengers, arguably difficult to achieve given that almost 4,000 openly gay men were onboard. Some may have been fearful of revealing their own feelings about sexuality and/or LGBT people, which may in turn be due to complex factors centred around social constructions of gender and masculinity (Bishop et al., 2009), as well as keenness to avoid negative service encounters. While many employees seemed happy to readily embrace multiculturalism, others may struggle to accept other forms of diverse communities onboard. Therefore, the development of special interest markets, such as gay charters, can create problematic working and living contexts for some, albeit a very small number in this instance.

The cruise itself is not necessarily a moderator or mediator. Rather a gay cruise could provide a context that gives rise to moderating conditions, which can then enact the mediating processes such as, reduced intergroup anxiety or cultural learning. The effects of a gay cruise although may be limited as staff may alter their attitudes to those guests onboard as opposed to generalising to the wider LGBT community as a whole.

The cruise ship is certainly a tourist bubble and our findings mostly support Uriely et al. (2009), in that the cruise served as a mechanism for staff and tourists to construct peaceful and harmonious relations based on mutual interests (economic and social) away from wider political and socio-cultural life of particular destinations (such as family life). We believe this highlights the complexity of the tourism industry as some of the staff conversations noted how they prefer to work on a gay cruise rather than mainstream cruises – they actively sought out opportunities to interact. The nature of a gay cruise itself additionally segregates the LGBT community from other groups highlighting the intricacies of intergroup relations and tourism further.

In summary, the cruise ship provides a meaningful space for interactions and to facilitate positive attitude change toward LGBT people. Arguably, the cruise ship is as an emancipatory space (Robinett, 2014) where dominant heteronormative ideologies about sexual orientation can be challenged and thus diminished.

Conclusions, limitations and recommendations for further research

This study provides a unique opportunity to research staff reflections on interaction with gay passengers on a cruise ship. Research that interrogates customer-employee interactions at the time-of-service delivery is very important not only for the cruise industry but also for many tourism and travel industry contexts such as resorts, hotels and attractions. It is also very timely as it offers additional insights to important social issues such as inclusivity and acceptance in an increasingly polarised world.

It also draws attention to Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory, and its reinterpretation by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), by evidencing the importance of interaction between majority ingroups and minority outgroups for enhanced awareness and understanding of gay lifestyles. It reveals the moderators and mediators which play a significant role in understanding the service encounters, answering the call to determine how they influence contact between two cross-groups (Li, 2019; Pettigrew, 2008). This paper contributes to new understandings of intergroup contact theory.

The results show how some people, in this instance cruise employees, unconsciously lessen discrimination toward gay people in some countries by sharing their experiences with friends and family. Thus, they become political LGBT allies and have the potential to challenge heteronormative discourse or anti-gay sentiments in their own small way in countries known for conservative or less accepting attitudes towards sexual difference. In fact, the staff from countries more hostile toward gay people have shown some of the greatest positive attitude change. Despite the positive nature of their experiences, these interactions are tempered by elements of Hochschild's (1983) emotional labour, as well as Granovetter's (1985) concept of social embeddedness in terms of cruise company's corporate values, especially when staff rely on gratuities. As such, it is difficult to determine whether employees have shared honest reflections. In part this is due to issues of access to cruise employees in situ (see, Gibson 2008), as well as the method of data collection employed in this article.

We acknowledge five limitations to the study. First, although interaction between employee and guest is a significant part of working on a cruise ship, this research does not represent the

experiences of all service staff onboard (Dennett et al., 2014). In addition, those with more negative attitudes toward LGBT lifestyles may have chosen not to work on the charter and therefore their views were not available to be sampled. Second, among ship personnel, some may have been homosexual, thereby tempering conversations and insights about interactions and whether contact changed attitudes toward gay people. At the time, researchers considered it problematic to broach this sensitive and ethical question (Elam & Fenton, 2010) during the course of casual conversations that may have been brief and/or undertaken in noisy and crowded places. While the staff have been documented by gender, nationality and service position it would have been helpful to also know their sexuality. Some explicitly indicated they were heterosexual by talking about their opposite sex wife/husband/partner. This likely would also have implications in terms of initial reflections on interactions and reporting experiences with friends and family. There may have been employees that were working in the cruise industry because they were LGBT. Third, what appears to be spontaneous contact between guests and staff cannot be verified – cruise employees must abide by company protocol in their exchanges with passengers (Weaver, 2005). Further, employee reliance upon gratuities may mean conversations were not truthful, recalling Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour. Finally, most encounters were 'fleeting' (Lugosi, 2006) as opposed to detailed employee opinion. Despite these shortcomings, the data reveal a diverse set of staff reflections on their interactions with LGBT passengers.

While the covert approach yielded valuable insight into the interactions between front-line staff and gay guests, it reveals a need for additional research using more in-depth qualitative methods. For example, further insight might be gained by researching former cruise staff who have no economic reliance on gratuities about their attitudes toward LGBT individuals. With permission from companies, additional overt research with cruise employees could explore the intersection between attitudes toward gay passengers and a number of influencing factors. Thus, being open about the purpose of the study with front-line staff would help facilitate questions that could probe more deeply than those based on fleeting service encounters. While this paper shows how gender moderated the results to some degree, further insights are needed to see how variables such as sexuality, religion, ethnicity and masculinity, and other concepts like social norms, emotion work and being embedded in corporate values may help reduce over-generalisations made about relations in the work place (McBride et al., 2015). The

influence of fellow gay employees and whether this also impacts on their colleagues' attitudes towards LGBT passengers is another point to be pursued. The interviews could also enquire whether employees acknowledge themselves as agents for social change. These suggestions would all contribute to a deeper understanding of what moderates and mediates intergroup contact theory in a tourism setting, especially from the point of view of the service workers as opposed to the tourists or the residents which tends to be the focus of extant tourism scholarship.

While such research would prove fruitful, obtaining permission from cruise companies would likely remain a challenge. There is a need for the industry to collaborate and engage with its critics, to embrace scrutiny and for its human resource policies to become more transparent. This intergroup contact study thus provides an opportunity for the cruise industry to demonstrate its leadership in the breaking down of discriminatory attitudes toward people who historically have been marginalised because of their sexual orientation. This can be a fruitful area of research for a sector that is so often presented in a negative light with regard to its employees.

Implications for human resources management are raised relevant to three areas; recruitment, training and ways to enhance intergroup contact. In a sector often criticised for difficult working conditions, the evidence suggests this is only partly accurate as the work, whilst challenging, may also be pleasurable. The first is the positive work environment that employees remarked upon, a sense of fun and enjoyment from working on the LGBT cruise, often with increased financial reward. In a sector often criticised for difficult working conditions, the evidence suggests this is only partly accurate as the work, whilst challenging, may also be pleasurable. Furthermore, the results show how guest-host interactions can foster positive attitude change toward LGBT people. This is something the cruise company managers can promote in terms of why people may want to work in the industry. Human resource managers should advertise working on cruise ships as a site that provides rich opportunities to meet new colleagues and passengers from all different backgrounds, be it LGBT guests or from other social minorities and groups. In turn, their recruitment should focus on ships being spaces that help confront and challenge some increasingly negative attitudes toward minorities across the globe. Managers should promote the cruise industry as workplaces that nurture inclusivity

and lessen discrimination.

Second, as with all customer-service encounters, there is a need for staff training around issues such as diversity, inclusivity and tolerance. This has particular significance where there are concerns and hesitancy from cruise workers around working on LGBT charters. Training could be undertaken as part of the employee induction process, and reinforced through mentoring throughout the cruise if required. As part of this, there is a role for human resource managers to draw on the experiences and expertise of employees whose hesitancy or views have been changed through positive interactions. The study demonstrates employee views toward LGBT people can indeed change for the positive and reduce prejudice as they become allies and tell friends and family back in their home countries. This important message can be delivered by both managers and employees, thereby valuing the lived experiences of the workforce and undertaking good practice in human resource management.

Third, the findings of this study further reveal practical suggestions for managers on board cruise ships to cultivate intergroup contact between staff and passengers. The fun nature of the cruise for staff can be further enhanced by managers to allow for in-depth interaction between staff and passengers throughout the duration of the cruise to help cultivate a deeper cultural understanding between the two and reduce any anxieties that may exist. Joint activities such as staging shows, quiz nights, and other forms of entertainment that require the mixing of staff and passengers would be well placed for staff to better understand the experiences of passengers and vice versa.

Finally, we call for the cruise sector and its managers to be more generous toward researchers and to provide access to those scholars wanting to study employee conditions as this study reveals significant positive aspects of working on a ship.

Endnote

[1] This article uses the terms 'gay' and 'LGBT' (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender). As noted by Southall and Fallon (2011) 'gay' is used interchangeably with 'LGBT' depending on the context. LGBT is used to represent a range of inclusive identities beyond gay and lesbian.

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