

New Scholars

**COMING OUT OR NOT? HOW NONHETEROSEXUAL
PEOPLE MANAGE THEIR SEXUAL IDENTITY AT WORK**

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ABSTRACT

The context of workplaces could be defined as heteronormative, from a structural, discursive and practical point of view. Sexual orientation is still an underresearched area of diversity in work organizations (Ward & Winstanley, 2005) because of the difficulties in accessing information around themes connected to sexuality. As a result, the framework provided by the present study produces a significant contribution to our understanding of minority sexual identity at work. Through the conceptual framework of performativity, this article's aim is to give voice to every individual who doesn't recognise her/himself in a heterosexual definition of her/his orientation, desires, behaviours, emotions, and identities. I propose to adopt Greimas's semiotic square (1970) in order to define a heuristic device relating to the "disclosure" and "silence" possibilities in workplaces. The empirical material in this article is based on 34 in-depth interviews conducted with nonheterosexual members of private and public Italian organizations.

INTRODUCTION

The workplace demarcates itself as a specific space where differences are socially produced—hence it is readily identifiable that gender and sexual hierarchies are enacted through rules and particular kinds of interactions (Acker, 1990): people who deviate from the norm have to cope with invisible barriers during their

careers, since it is necessary to emulate the dominant social paradigm in order to be successful (Zimmer, 1987).

Recent studies of gender and sexuality in organizations have underlined how individuals enter their workplaces with a set of corporeal desires and attractions that are sewn into the fabric of everyday working life. At the same time, though, “the individual agency involved in these performances is, of course, constrained by a social system of economic imperatives and the patriarchal power structure which constructs male and female unequally” (Jackson, 1996: 18). Since Ward and Winstanley (2003), few researchers have focused upon the construction of sexual identity in relation to the organizational context. The majority of the studies have considered the term “sexuality” with other inclusions alongside the umbrella term “diversity,” analysing it as an individual property rather than a process determined by the context in which it takes place (Ward & Winstanley, 2006). Therefore, in this article I will argue that a restrictive model of (hetero)sexual identity is legitimized within society and reproduced within organizational contexts. Sexuality, defined as corporeal desires, attractions, and erotic behaviour (Brewis, 2002), is underwritten within organizational discourse according to the norms that organize it within social contexts, norms that themselves are heteronormative. To be more precise, heteronormativity is defined as the perceived reinforcement of certain beliefs about the taken-for-granted alignment of sex, gender, and sexuality by many social institutions and social policies. These beliefs include the notions that: human beings fall into two distinct and complementary categories (male and female); that sexual and marital relations are normal only when they occur between people of different sexes; that intimate relationships between same-sex people don’t have a sexual value; and that each sex has certain natural roles in life. Thus, heteronormativity defines the borders of what is acceptable in terms of desire. Moreover, heteronormativity not only posits borders for those who are not heterosexual but also limits even those who do not recognize themselves in a normative model of heterosexuality, masculinity, or femininity (Lee, 2000).

Organizational studies have pointed out how “organizational cultures differ one from the other according to the way in which they conceive gender” (Gherardi, 1995: 4) and how “gender and (hetero)sexual practices are thus organizational resources to be activated and mobilized in everyday working life” (Bruni, 2006: 303), despite the fact that sexuality still represents a taboo area in contemporary organizational theories (Hancock & Tyler, 2001). Following the assumption of many studies in organizational research (Martin & Jurik, 1996; Miller, Forest & Jurik, 2003; West & Zimmerman, 1987), I regard gender and sexuality as components of identity and as social productions that stand out during daily interactions: “individuals ‘do gender’ and simultaneously ‘do sexuality’ with an awareness of the dominant societal norms and in anticipation of the judgements of others” (Miller et al., 2003: 357). It is possible to affirm that the hostile attitude of the society toward sexual minorities is evident in the workplace, making it difficult

for people with a different kind of sexual orientation to come out, and also making it difficult to conduct research in this particular field of studies (Ward & Winstanley, 2003), since sexual orientation can be perceived as an invisible stigma that a person can decide not to reveal.

At this point I consider it important to distinguish between two of the components of identity. On one hand, self-identity refers to how a person considers him/herself. On the other hand, social identity has to do with the perception of how we think that others see us (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Giddens, 1991). In the study of sexual identity, the extent of congruency between these two components is particularly important as “this is an area where considerable splitting and separation can take place” (Ward & Winstanley, 2003: 1257) between what a person feels and wants to be and how s/he decides to be seen by others.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The empirical background of my PhD research, which is reported in this article, was based on 34 narrative interviews conducted between 2007 and 2008 with nonheterosexual individuals working in the Italian public and private sectors. (Interviewees' names have been changed in order to protect their privacy.) In the terms provided by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the research followed a theoretical sampling—however, this nonprobabilistic sample was not representative in a quantitative sense; nor was it intended to be, given the qualitative approach of the study (see Silverman, 2001), which attempted to gather qualitative data on different ways of constructing and managing sexual identities at work. Through a snowball sampling, the selection of interviewees was made according to those who had come out at least once in their workplace and according to their self-identification as nonheterosexuals. This meant that the focus of my research was on coming out as a way of performing sexual identities, as opposed to a focus on homophobia as the central experience of nonheterosexuals at work. This point is remarkable because in Italy the topic of homosexuality has been researched only by surveys and in relation to homophobia, underlying once more the fact that homosexuality continues to be depicted as the “other” deviating from the norm; as Pringle put it: “this small study adds to nascent literature on sexual minorities that is positively focused and contrasts with approaches that reinforce automatic vulnerability to discrimination” (Pringle, 2008: S118).

In actuality, two interviewees were gay men who had not come out at all in the workplace, a fact that I only realized during the course of the interviews. It was after the research was finished that I realized the importance of these two interviews and the fact that they represent the “zero point” of the process of coming out as conceived as a *continuum*. In the literature, Day and Schoenrade (1997) were the first researchers to talk about coming out as a *continuum*: through focus groups they brought to light the fact that unveiling a sexual identity is not a matter of a dichotomy between in and out, as Goffman (1963) highlighted in his work on

stigma. A decision can be made to come out to some colleagues but not to others, to managers but not to clients, to newcomers but not to old collaborators. And once one has come out, it is necessary to continue to manage the discrediting social information (Goffman, 1963).

Furthermore, Schneider (1986) argues that coming out has to be analyzed in context—the decision to come out is taken on the basis of relations within the workplace—the degree of trust among colleagues and an organizational culture that might or might not react in negative ways (Cain, 1991; Miller et al., 2003). In the majority of studies, coming out is seen as a central aspect of a nonheterosexual's life, since he or she has to cope with it in every heteronormative workplace. On the other hand, this research has highlighted the relationship between workplaces and strategies of coming out: trying to show how nonheterosexuals can manage their sexual identity and, at the same time, showing how workplaces are meant to be lived by heterosexuals.

This is one of the reasons why, following Spradley (1979), my interview design consisted of a broadly generative question about the subject's working life, followed by framing and focusing questions. Nevertheless, a high degree of flexibility was retained in order to allow the conversation to flow in directions decided by the interviewee. As suggested by Pringle (2008), narrative interviews were chosen as the most suitable procedure to “capture multiple and shifting identity positions” (Pringle, 2008: S110).

All transcriptions were manually coded and analysed according to narrative criteria that aimed to uncover how people construct and manage their sexual identity at work in light of the constant process that is commonly called coming out.

The Empathic Dimension of Narrative Interviews

Even though I decided to use narrative interviews as the tool of my research, through the interview process it emerged that interviewees had to be strongly encouraged to narrate their stories, leading to a focus on the empathic dimension of narrative interviews, which are usually characterized by few interventions by the interviewer. The initial goal was to create a climate of trust with the interviewees to allow them to talk freely about their intimate experience in heteronormative workplaces. Consequently, my interviews present a lot of the elements of narrative interviews, but at the same time they are characterized by an intense exchange between the interviewee and myself.

From a methodological point of view, I deemed it necessary to deepen the level of empathy that has typified my interviews—as, following Cipriani (2006), empathy is fundamental in any qualitative research. The sociological definition of this concept refers to the aspect of sharing the emotions and feelings elicited during the interview, as well as the ability to identify oneself with the other (Star, 2007). Etymologically, “empathy” is derived from the Greek verb *pasco*, meaning to suffer, to make an experience, to feel an impression—to which the prefix *en* is

added, meaning that “the action is then developed into someone else’s condition, in a situation that is not ours but that of someone else” (Cipriani, 2006: 155).

Empathy is defined as a fundamental hermeneutic device (Diana & Montesperelli, 2005): it is a flexible and interactive approach that posits the relation between interviewee and interviewer as an essential element for good research. Furthermore, “sensibility is the groundwork of social organization, since it is the foundation of understanding” (Denzin, 1984: 44).

The situations that caused me to reflect on the empathic dimension of the interview included the following:

- the fact that I position myself as a young woman in an ongoing lesbian relationship;
- the erotic tension that appeared on some occasions with lesbian women;
- the intimate climate that led subjects to make me question my own private life.

The reason why I answered private questions was that systematically eluding an interviewee’s curiosity could have undermined trust, given that an interviewee can lose interest in a one-way conversation, resulting in the interviewee’s withdrawal of cooperation and avoidance of answering questions. To this end I’ve endeavoured to create a dialectical climate that is in itself unusual in formal research contexts.

Moreover, I deem it politically important to posit myself as a nonheterosexual woman who draws inspiration from postmodern approaches. The literature describes how the awareness of “sharing the same sexual orientation with the one-to-one interviewees meant that there was a level of confidence in the research process—an ‘emotional shorthand’ between researcher and participant” (Ward & Winstanley, 2006: 311). There is, however, a contestable tension in the expression “sharing the same sexual identity,” as narratives collected in my interview process testify to the fact that there could be many ways of living sexual identities. It would be preferable to say that sharing a nonhegemonic sexual identity, that is, the heteronormative one, involves a sort of emotional stenography based upon symbols, conceptual abbreviations, and shared discourses.

Generally, allowing for personal disclosure during interviews is a specific feature of the positioning approach, which is based on the fact that there is no real and clear separation between the researcher and the object of the research and that the foundational principle of any qualitative analysis is trust (Reinharz, 1992). According to Oakley (1981: 43), there is no reciprocity without intimacy:

The mythology of aseptic research as objective tool of data production has to be substituted with the awareness of the fact that personal involvement is more than a dangerous distortion—it’s the condition according to which people get to know each other and let others get into their lives.

One of the main characteristics of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee is that the interview context makes possible the establishment of a relationship based upon trust. If there is no previous relationship, “the reciprocal non-acquaintance between interviewer and interviewee gives the interviewee’s anonymity more warranty and, sometimes, a relational context more appropriate to the discussion of the interview’s topics” (Cardano, 2003: 87).

At the same time, if there is a previous acquaintance, there could be a more fluid and authentic conversation, thanks to familiarity with the interviewee, who can then feel better understood by the interviewer. The cognitive foundation of this comprehension is due to the fact that the interviewer already knows the interviewee’s linguistic code and the social context to which s/he can refer during the interview.

In a narrative interview, the interviewer is an active interlocutor who can help the interviewee to create a dialectical field in which tensions, sharing, and strong emotions can be created. Through the use of narrative interviews, my aim was to listen to the intense moments originated by the dialectical field created in the interview process in order to let the actors feel at ease through their narrative. Through this, the fundamental social function of presenting ourselves as characters is performed (Goffman, 1959), but this function depends upon who poses it (the interviewee) as well as upon who ratifies it (the interviewer).

One of the principal aspects of my interviews was that I helped interviewees to construct an autonomy in their discourse through short, direct questions, accepting silence as a form of communication, as silence has been understood as a device necessary to construct discourse. Another useful tool was that of summing up—that is, the ability once in a while to make short summaries about what has been narrated in order to elicit in-depth comments without asking explicitly for clarification. In fact, one of the difficulties experienced during interviews was my fear of or concern about asking questions that were perhaps too intimate, since sometimes the interviewees could have felt in some way embarrassed to answer. Through a background consultation of the literature as well as initial conversations with narrative experts, these “fears” were managed. In the relevant literature was the following advice from Bertaux (1998: 76): “get rid of your guilt because you’re not a life-thief, but you elicit witnesses. If it’s true that you’re asking for help, it’s also true that, by asking for it, you give the subject a social recognition that maybe s/he doesn’t have anywhere else,”

A conversation with a senior researcher I had met during a previous national project, Professor Cardano, helped me to develop an understanding of the best strategies toward “uncomfortable” questions. From this discussion, it became particularly clear that avoidance of asking difficult questions is a form of rendering explicit an attitude of superiority with respect to the interviewee: a sort of protective attitude that implies the interviewee’s incapacity to answer. Similarly, an

actor can decide not to answer a question if it is deemed too private, but the choice belongs to her/him.

Framing Coming Out in Terms of Performativity

One of the topics connected with my PhD thesis was the matrix of the domain that permeates relations within organizations. This is created at three levels: the levels of the individual, the group, and the system (Martin, 1994). This sort of analysis is very complex because, as remarked earlier, “one of the main taboos within contemporary organizational theory is sexuality and sexual minorities in particular” (Gabriel, Fineman & Sims, 2000: 183). This is why the most important choices related to career are those of whether to come out or not (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Clair, Beatty & MacLean, 2002; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). Moreover, it is essential to decide the right moment and form of coming out, with an awareness of the fact that how you come out is fundamental in defining the reactions of others (Ward & Winstanley, 2005). In this way “work colleagues create social reality for gay people in the workplace” (Ward & Winstanley, 2003: 126)—not just through behaviour and explicit discourse, but even through what is not said. This is the reason why it is so essential to consider the dimension of silence: in constructing sexual identity, we should consider “a path of absence” (Ward & Winstanley, 2003: 1266). This kind of analysis is possible only if we conceive coming out as a *continuum*, not as a single event that happens once, just as Seidman (2002) explains in *Beyond the Closet*. Seidman argues that the closet doesn’t exist anymore, since the process of coming out has more to do with strategic motivations of the subject who decides from time to time whether it’s opportune or penalizing to do it (Seidman, 2002). Coming out is then defined as a process: a performative act that doesn’t happen just once but is reiterated (Ward & Winstanley, 2005), in line with Butler’s definition of performance as a reiterated ritual (Butler, 1993).

The concept of performativity has its historical roots in the work of the linguistic philosopher J. L. Austin (1962), who clarifies what are construed as performative utterances. An illocutionary act can be read as a consequence of a performative utterance, since this kind of sentence has the aim not to describe something but to do the same thing about which it is making an inference. Following Austin’s definitions, an illocutionary act is an act performed *in* saying something; a locutionary act is the act *of* saying something; a perlocutionary act is an act performed *by* saying something. Austin (1962) introduced the illocutionary act by contrast with these other kinds of acts, even though they are to be read not as separate categories but as different levels on which speech might work.

The work of Austin represents a breach with the predominant philosophy current around the 1950s, in which the aim of sentences was considered by philosophers to be that of stating facts, meaning that a sentence was true when the

facts it was describing were true. Austin goes beyond this belief, affirming that some sentences have the power to create what they are actually stating. Thus, language has to be used in the right context in order to have a performative meaning. Derrida (1967) specifies this claim, saying that a performative utterance is valid if it is sincere, that is, it isn't said by an actor or as a joke.

Butler (1997) defines sexual identity as performative because the declaration itself is a performative act whereby discourse becomes social practice or, in other words, talk becomes action (Ward & Winstanley, 2005). For example, Butler (1990) deconstructs the fixed arrangement of gender roles, apparently polarized into masculinity and femininity, revealing how discourses and cultural practices reinforce an arbitrary relationship between sex and gender identity. In Butler's reading, gender should be considered as a set of repeated actions that freeze in the perceived stability of a manufactured identity, socially approved and recognizable (Ross, 2006). Masculinity and femininity are regarded as citational, meaning that their connotation depends upon their constant repetition. As shown in many studies (Lee, Learmonth, & Harding, 2008; Schilt & Connell, 2007; Tyler & Cohen, 2008), performance is complete only when it is activated in an interaction. This is the reason why it is so fundamental to take into consideration the context in which people perform their identity. In the reading of coming-out stories in this study, the desire for recognition (Tyler & Cohen, 2008) is the drive that leads workers in their process of being recognized as nonheterosexual.

If we assume that, in order to exist as subjects, individuals must conform to the norms of the society in which they are born (Butler, 1993), we understand the importance of recognition as a way to form the subject. The word *homosexual* signals a turning point in narratives since it enables non-heterosexual subjects to tell their own story and, at the same time, to shape their identity. According to Sedgwick (1990), this is made possible by the performative power of words.

The Semiotic Square as a Device through Which to Read Coming-Out Stories

The tool employed for the analysis of the interviews in this study was the semiotic square (Greimas, 1970): a device to interpret the elementary structure of signification that people use to give meaning to organizational reality (Bruni, 2000) (see Figure 1). Human beings own an innate ability to recognize objects by negation (to be and not to be) through differences and oppositions. Thus, elementary structure of signification holds a property (freedom of having-to-do), its contrary (optionality, having-not-to-do), a term that consists of the absence of the first term (prohibition, not-having-to-do), and a term consisting of the absence of the contrary term (constriction, not-having-not-to-do). The elementary structure of signification holds, then, relations of contradiction, complementarity, and implication (Gherardi, 1990).

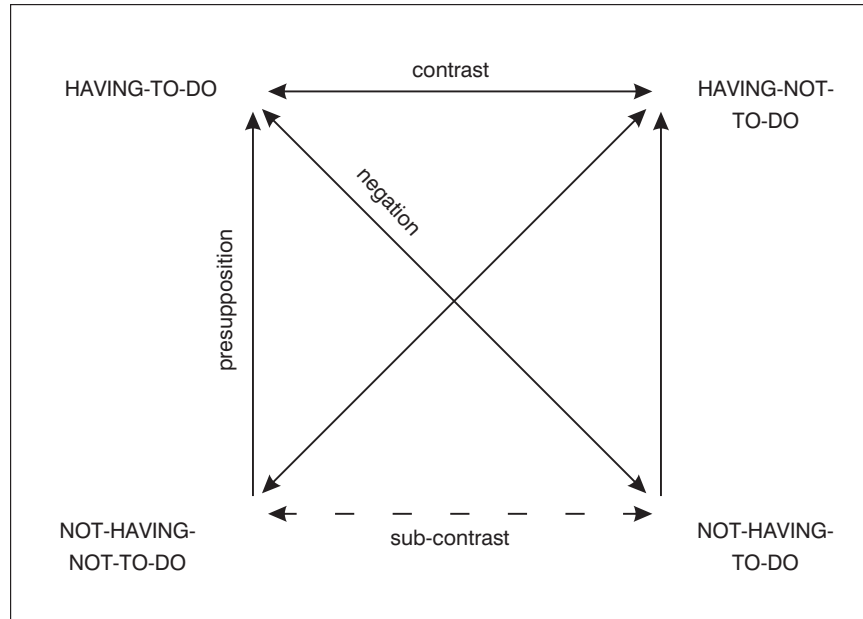


Figure 1. The semiotic square.

The semiotic square is, then, a means of articulating the semantic structure of signification in terms of binary oppositions and, as Greimas emphasized, the oppositions giving rise to meaning are a far richer set than those of contradiction, that is, the either/or of binary logic. Applying the above-mentioned scheme to the present research, a semiotic square was obtained presenting various strategies that could be adopted by workers that don't recognize themselves within a heteronormative workplace (see Figure 2).

The upper part accounts for the practices of agency that can be activated: a subject can decide to declare his/her sexual identity (coming out), or s/he can decide to keep it secret (staying invisible). Coming out, or being "out," is a process: a person can come out to some colleagues but not to others, positioning him/herself along a continuum and not adopting just one position.

This picture clarifies the strategies of coming out as read through the semiotic square, but it is not a representation of the coming out as a continuum. In fact, the picture explains the semantic structures of signification applied to the concept of coming out, making it clear that the process of coming out can not be read as a single event—the point is not about having come out or not, but about how you have decided to manage your sexual identity.

The lower section of the semiotic square presents the modality of passivity, since a person can be outed against her/his will (outing) or can try to be considered

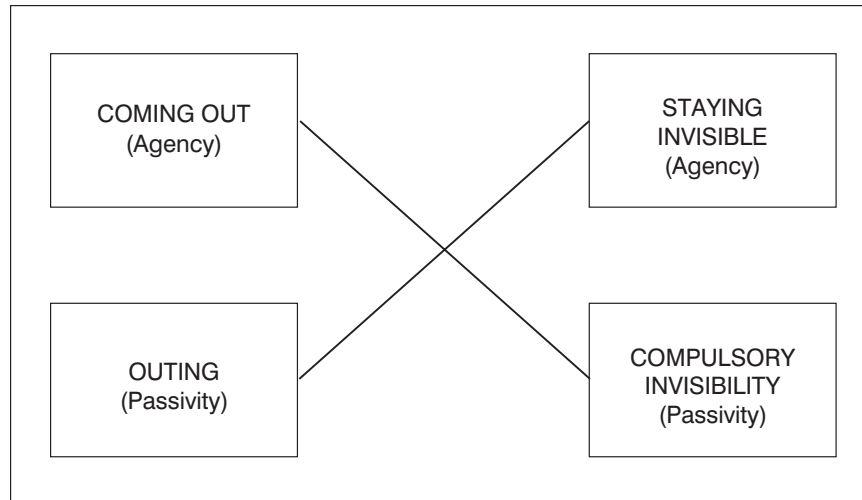


Figure 2. Ways of coming out.

as nonheterosexual without this being accepted by colleagues, who continue to consider the person as heterosexual (compulsory invisibility).

The semiotic square shows that there are at least four ways of coming out, since it depends on the person who performs the act of coming out and on the reactions of the people with whom he or she is in contact. The process of coming out can be considered in two key parts (Ward & Winstanley, 2005):

1. the performative or illocutionary speech act of coming out—subdivided into making an active choice and being forced out;
2. the discourse or perlocutionary speech acts surrounding the act of coming out, that is, the reactions of other people to the act of coming out.

My research provided a broad spectrum of examples of coming out, outing, and pursued or compulsory invisibility. Despite the varied nature of the accounts of coming out, there were some strong themes that arose. In order to present this data, the following themes were explored:

1. coming out as a performative act of agency;
2. staying invisible as a performative act of agency;
3. outing as a performative act of passivity;
4. compulsory invisibility as a performative act of passivity.

It is fundamental to note that each interview could be read as belonging to more than one category, since coming out is considered as a *continuum*: as the literature

has shown, a worker can decide to come out to some colleagues but not to others. Therefore, it is not possible to define how many interviewees have decided just to come out or just to stay invisible: in fact, many of them have chosen to activate both strategies in order to cope with different settings.

Before I go on, it is important to briefly define the concepts underlying agency and passivity: in this case they follow Riessman's definition, focusing on the narrator, who can alternatively assume control over the events he/she is narrating or give it to other actors (Riessman, 2001).

With these themes in mind, I will first present the literature that discusses each of these topics, followed by some empirical accounts collected during the interviews and a brief analysis of the data.

RESULTS

The Decision to Come Out

Making the choice to come out is a performative act of agency, as it depends on the moment, the person, and the physical and social space in which it takes place. In discussing the interviews, I have tried to make visible the way the first coming out went, but it soon becomes apparent that once out, people constantly have to manage information about themselves that is potentially misleading (Goffman, 1963). Moreover, coming out is often seen as necessary because of the presumption of heterosexuality existing in every workplace. As explained before, "coming out is a process in terms of the different stages that lead up to coming out, it is a process in terms of the performative nature of the act itself, and it is a process in terms of the performative nature of living a minority sexual identity" (Ward & Winstanley, 2005: 472).

Explicit coming-out acts signal the commencement of a never-ending process, insofar as the difference must be repeated to each new audience (Humphrey, 1999), as Daniela, the woman in charge of bookkeeping in a small private firm, outlines:

Well, it is something that is continuously moving. I mean, I daily expose my identity, then it is something that always happens to me . . . with everybody, I mean, with every person that I meet there is this . . . coming out. . . . because everybody that I hang out with knows about it. But this was not the last one: there will be a lot more! With every person I'll meet. (Daniela)

The uncovering of silence is constitutive of a positive gay identity (Ward & Winstanley, 2003), and I need to add how much Daniela is aware of her gendered and sexualized identity, because a lot of people interviewed were not so clear in explicating the centrality of their sexual identity. In fact, Daniela underlines the fact that the line between private and public doesn't make sense to her:

I think it's absolutely impossible to separate professional life from personal life: you can't separate any gesture that you make from the person so I think that nobody can tell you that work hasn't got anything to do with your life. Everything counts as a whole. (Daniela)

Humphrey (1999) identifies three reasons why people come out at work: at the personal level, honesty and integrity; at the professional level, open relationships with colleagues; at the political level, educating colleagues about lesbian and gay existence.

The first level, the personal one, is well defined by Sara, a woodworker in a firm consisting mainly of men:

I dislike subterfuges, I don't like lies, I'm quite clear in my life. I haven't got anything to hide, so . . . maybe because [of that] I'm at ease with my sexual identity. (Sara)

Thus, the personal level refers to an ethic of honesty and integrity that has a lot to do with the need not to deny the existence of one's private life:

I needed to do it. If a person talks about topics that he doesn't even know, I have to tell him that I disagree with him [. . .] I think that it is really awful that certain opinions are given without anyone saying: "Fuck, no!" According to me, intellectual silence is worse than a physical one. (Daniela)

The professional level has a lot to do with the personal one, since it seeks to establish trusting relationships with colleagues:

From that point [coming out] on, it was awesome because our relationship did change [. . .]. It was like a wall came down, and from that point on we started to become friends. (Marta, technical saleswoman)

In addition, it is necessary to note that friendship in the work environment is important not just from an emotional point of view but from a professional one as well, given that knowledge about colleagues' personal lives can be a critical element in establishing the trust upon which mentoring relationships are built (Day & Schoenrade, 1997; Kronenberg, 1991).

The third level described by Humphrey (1999) is the political one, involving the desire to educate the work environment with regard to a nonheterosexual existence. According to the interviewees, homophobia is mostly due to ignorance; consequently, the only way to fight it is through self-positioning and narrations:

The best politics is not to censure ourselves daily. (Daniela)

I try to provide some culture, you know? I try to educate people. If you hide, you demonstrate that you have something to hide. That's why I'm in favour of visibility. (Lino, cruise ship's shop manager)

It's not a problem of homophobia; it's a problem of curiosity [. . .]. People are afraid of what they don't know, so talking about it is a way to render it normal. (Eva, call centre employee)

These assertions represent a challenge to the heterosexual hegemony of the workplace occupation: nonheterosexual people are in a unique position to study the subtext of organizations, that is, the sexual repression buried in the organizational unconsciousness (Humphrey, 1999).

As the literature shows, people who are out at work are more committed and have greater loyalty to their organization than those who remain in the closet (Day & Schoenrade, 2000). This is iterated by Martino, a call centre operator:

I've always been very attached to my company, not like a crawler, as it could seem, but because my company has permitted me to accept myself as a person; I mean, the fact of having a wage has been determining in accepting myself as homosexual. So—I've always been very attached to my company because at any rate getting a wage allows me to express myself, but I've also learned to play the role of the company. I mean, I'm the typical person who defends workers but also understands the company's reasons. (Martino)

Homosexuality is still relegated to the sphere of privacy, but heterosexuality is not presumed in a daily work routine. As discussed by Humphrey (1999: 139): "while people believed in the virtue of being out and proud, a few continued to stress that they did not flaunt their sexuality at work." This public/private antinomy operates in order to erase sexuality from the organization, even though work can be constituted as the hegemonic masculinity writ large, flaunting its universality, anonymity, rationality, and objectivity (Burrell & Hearn, 1989). This practice was well described by some interviewees, as will be explained further below, because this antinomy operates not only at the organizational level but at the personal level as well.

Staying Invisible as a Choice

Deciding not to come out is the performative act of agency of people who choose not to leave the closet. The fear of repercussions (Badgett & King, 1997) is the first argument that comes to mind when thinking about silence.

I think that . . . no, I'm sure that if they [human resources managers] would have asked me if I belonged to any associations, during the job interview I would have said no [he belongs to the Italian gay association]. Because of the fear of hostility. And I need to work, so . . . I can't afford to lose a job for this reason. (Lino)

In the interviews, many other reasons for deciding not to come out emerged, connected with the level of friendship that characterizes the workplace:

To my friends I felt I had to tell them because they're important to me, but with my subordinates . . . I don't feel like it, and I don't see the point of telling them: I just have professional relations with them. (Christian, entrepreneur)

I don't feel the need to tell it to my colleagues: fundamentally, I don't have close relationships with them. . . . I mean, we get along, but we don't

talk about tendencies, deviancies, or affective desires, no. (Marta, technical saleswoman)

The most frequently cited explanation for deciding not to come out, though, was not wanting to expose your sexual identity at work for professional reasons—what you do in your bed has nothing to do with your work—showing that the heteronormative discourse remains unchallenged:

Honestly, one issue is to talk about it with friends, but it's quite different to talk about it with your employees [. . .] This is a place where you work. That's it [. . .]. This is my company, I care for it, I'm a serious businessman. (Christian)

I've got a strong sense of duty, so I see my workplace as a place to work, and that's it [. . .]. And I think I'm a good example for my employees. (Fabrizio, senior civil servant)

A crucial point is that recognition of one's sexual identity is not perceived to be central in everyone's life, since there is still a conception of the work environment as separated from the private sphere.

The literature has revealed at least two strategies with which to manage a stigmatized identity. Through the first strategy, sexual minorities can maintain silence through the deliberate decision to pass as heterosexual (Woods & Lucas, 1993):

Before I came out, there was this fairy tale about my Brazilian girlfriend: she was a musician and a dancer, that is, my boyfriend transformed into a girl. I've even found her a name: Elena. (Ivano, teacher)

This is a clear example of an active strategy of constructing a false heterosexual identity, but there is another way for sexual minorities to cover their sexual orientation: by not disclosing information about their private lives (Croteau, 1996): by “refusing or avoiding an intimate approach, individuals can avoid the duty of divulging information about ” themselves (Goffman, 1963: 120).

Before this episode [he was outed by the press] I didn't give a distorted image of myself. . . . I just didn't talk about myself, about my private life. . . . I usually don't give much information about me. . . . I'm really coy. (Fabrizio)

Nondisclosure was found by Day and Schoenrade (1997) to be associated with lower organizational commitment, lower job satisfaction, role ambiguity, role conflict, and job stress. Moreover, other studies affirm that staying in the closet creates a great deal of stress and anxiety (Kronenberg, 1991; Seal, 1991):

I had to sell my shop, not because it didn't work well, but because I didn't feel well: I felt unsatisfied and unhappy because I wasn't out. (Lino)

Stories of Outing

After considering two types of agency, I will now take into consideration two ways of performing passivity. Though the literature has shown that “the involuntary disclosure of personal identity may actually diminish the organizational voice instead of supporting it” (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003: 1413), it emerged from the interviews that nonheterosexual workers were grateful, in the end, to the colleagues who had “outed” them. This outing was due mainly to three reasons: a colleague’s declaration, a casual meeting in a gay bar, and a story appearing in the press.

My first example is Bruna’s story, in which she narrates how she was outed by the colleague she fell in love with:

In the beginning, I’m talking about seven years ago, I didn’t want to tell anybody about my homosexuality because I felt that it was a private issue. We were at a work dinner, and my boss had invited a friend of his that was gay. At the end of the dinner my colleague said, pointing at me: “By the way, she is lesbian too.” (Bruna, blue-collar worker)

In the beginning she was angry with her colleague, but then she explains why this outing turned out to be a positive event:

Well, in the beginning I was angry but then . . . well, it was one of the best things that could ever have happened to me. My boss told me that he already knew because it was obvious. It was from that point on that I started to live it with more freedom. (Bruna)

The second example is the story of two gay colleagues meeting by accident in a gay bar. The men who met in the bar reacted in different ways, the first one defending his privacy, the second one taking advantage of the event:

I discovered that some of my colleagues were gay because I met them in a gay bar. I remember one of them who asked me, “What are you doing here?” and I cut short the conversation by saying, “Maybe the same thing you’re doing here.” It was a laconic and terse answer. (Oreste, manager)

The curious thing was discovering my colleagues’ homosexuality by meeting them in a gay bar. I met a female colleague, and after the shock, we started to develop complicity and confidence—with other colleagues I held back a lot, but not with her. (Alessandro, white-collar worker)

The last example of being outed is the painful story of Fabrizio, a senior civil servant whose ex-partner was found killed in the apartment where they still lived together despite having ceased to be partners. Many newspapers put Fabrizio’s name on their front page, and he had to face this unexpected outing as follows:

What I noticed in those moments was not the fact that my colleagues would have thought I was gay. . . . What bothered me was . . . I don’t know how to explain . . . to be suddenly naked in front of everybody. . . . It was not my

choice [to be out] [. . .] Then, after a couple of months during which I didn't go to work, I had to go back thanks to my colleagues' demonstration of supportiveness and love. (Fabrizio)

But this was not all. After this outing, Fabrizio got to know another executive who was really supportive and who finally turned out to be gay. After this meeting, Fabrizio was introduced to some other gay colleagues and the split between private and public started to fade away:

With them I joke a lot because we know that we are all [gay]. . . . We went on vacation together a couple of times too. (Fabrizio)

Here, Fabrizio was clearly applying a sort of sexuality switching. At the end of an interview in which he set out a vision of his working life as totally separate from his private life, he recognized that he went around with his gay colleagues. Therefore, using the concept of gender switching (Bruni & Gherardi, 2002), I suggest the notion of sexuality switching, that is, in those situations in which nonheterosexual people must ceaselessly engineer their identity, according to the community (professional and sexual) to which they want to belong. I consider this sexuality switching as a means of resisting "the onus upon lesbians and gays to leave their homosexuality at home and to ensure that their professional clothes double up as personal closets, in order to preserve the heterosexual hegemony of the occupation" (Humphrey, 1999: 146). The topic of sexual identity management recalls the strategy of gender identity management through the theme of the double presence (Balbo, 1979; Zanuso, 1987). In the words of Fabrizio reproduced below, sexual community is not in contrast with a professional community, since Fabrizio highlights the masculinity of his colleagues, as a strategy with which to move away from any kind of stereotypical homosexuality:

So he presented me to some really pleasant people that I'd never thought about as homosexuals. . . . Apparently, they are above suspicion: they're not effeminate. I like them because they are serious . . . tie and suit men, I will say. An effeminate man would bother me a lot, and they are not—that's why I appreciate spending time with them. (Fabrizio)

It is possible, then, to draw a parallel between this narrative and women's narratives about traditionally male roles, in which integration by organizational context takes place through the negation of gender identity. The negation of the stereotype associated with the homosexual worker is comparable to the negation of gender identity that leads to the acceptance of women into traditionally male roles (Gherardi & Poggio, 2003).

Compulsory Invisibility

Compulsory invisibility is the definition I've decided to use in my research to intend the performative act of passivity. Compulsory invisibility is caused by the fact that work colleagues may not recognize the nonheterosexual identity of gay

and lesbian people at work, and that as a result, coming out may meet with silence from others in the organization (Ward & Winstanley, 2003). Sometimes the efforts of nonheterosexual people face the famous diktat, “don’t ask, don’t tell”:

I think that this politics of don’t ask, don’t tell is very frequent. And it works even in town: one can say nothing, live his life and others don’t ask him anything. It has always worked this way; nobody ever asked me if I were gay or not. (Jacopo, English teacher)

People rarely ask you direct questions, so they give you a way to escape somehow. (Annamaria, high school teacher)

With regard to compulsory invisibility, the most emblematic episode in this study is narrated by Eva: she has openly declared herself gay at work because she’s taking the path of artificial insemination with her partner, and so she wants everybody to know that she is gay. In fact, the first advice given by homosexual parents’ associations to prospective parents is to come out in every dimension of one’s life in order to prepare the social context and pave the way for a serene welcome for the child’s birth. Yet there is still one colleague who has a hard time considering Eva and her partner (they both work in the same call centre) as a couple:

Almost everybody treats us a couple, even newcomers, but there is still one colleague that stubbornly doesn’t consider us as a couple. I don’t think she does it on purpose. She simply doesn’t get it. (Eva)

What was really unexpected was the reaction of the colleagues of Eva and her partner—most of them reacted by making fun of the colleague who still didn’t recognize the couple’s lesbian relationship:

Our colleagues were laughing at her: “But . . . don’t you get it?” She was the one that was having a hard time at work! They were looking after us. (Eva)

This narrative makes clear one of the reasons why coming out at work is perceived as positive. If colleagues accept a gay worker, they will make the worker’s life at work easier because they will help him/her against anyone that does not accept his/her relationship.

Sometimes, though, trust can be invested inadvisedly, and this may cause the nonheterosexual worker to be discredited, as happened with Bruna:

Well, I had a sort of story with a colleague who had a boyfriend. Despite that, she used to tell me that she loved me and we were often involved in intimacy. But when we were at work she didn’t even talk to me because she wanted to present herself as a heterosexual woman. And I didn’t want to tell my

colleagues the truth, and I was the paranoid girl that had fallen in love with a heterosexual woman. And she used to say: “Well, she knows that there will never be any story between us, but she loves me anyhow.” (Bruna)

This episode is very meaningful because it makes clear how, in a heteronormative context, power resides with the sexual identity that is legitimized in the workplace. This power imbalance is also due to the habit of considering sexual identities as static and unmodifiable, even though many interviewees mentioned that their colleagues were not just curious about homosexuality but explicitly expressed a desire to have an intimate relationship. For example:

And then there was a colleague, married with children. . . . She was very interested in this feminist and lesbian group . . . and she turned out to be willing to have an affair with me. . . . It was frightening, you know, an affair with a married woman! (Annamaria, high school teacher)

One thing that emerged frequently in the study was that nondisclosed homosexuals are often the ones who don't recognize their colleagues' homosexual identity because of the fear of being outed themselves:

One behaviour that I remember perfectly is that of nondisclosed homosexuals. . . . If I met them in the hall they were nice and smiling, but when we were within other people they didn't even say hi to me. In public, they ignored me; they didn't want to be associated with me. (Lino)

CONCLUSIONS

Focusing on daily practices of construction and management of sexual identities through the concept of performativity (Butler, 1994), this article explores the implications of heteronormativity for workers outside this paradigm.

Studying how sexual identity is created, constructed, and maintained implies referring also to the broader setting—that is, Western culture—in which homosexual experience is still considered a transgression, a deviation from the heterosexual norm. The field of organizational studies offers an interesting starting point in dismantling taken-for-granted notions about sexuality, since “organizational cultures are sexualized and their claims not to be are derived from the fact that they have a moral commitment toward an ethic of universality” (Gherardi, 1995: 24). In Gherardi's book, *Gender, symbolism and organizational cultures*, it is made clear that in organizations sexuality becomes neutralized in a double sense, in which sexualized differences are erased and the heteronormative paradigm is made universal, which means heterosexuality is taken as overarching. It is true that a minority of the world's countries have taken legal steps to protect the

rights of nonheterosexual workers, but the dominant viewpoint at work still remains heteronormative.

Following on from Bowen and Blackmon's research (2003), rather than removing discourse about nonheterosexual identities in the workplace, the organizational silence maintained around sexuality creates a climate that stifles voices in a way that is more beneficial to the organization than to the individual.

As shown by a European research study of policies in the workplace for lesbians and gays (Colgan et al., 2007), legislative protections would assist nonheterosexually identifying citizens to feel more comfortable in the workplace. Even though many countries have adopted various kinds of policies in support of gay and lesbian rights, this doesn't mean that heteronormativity in the workplace has been reduced—this is especially true in Italy, where such policies have been adopted only by multinational companies. Large firms outside Italy have also adopted gay-friendly policies. Notwithstanding these policies, there remains a hierarchy of sexual identities in which non heterosexuality represents the "other" against what is considered to be the norm.

During the course of the interview process, I frequently found that a strategy of protection of the intimate life is adopted implying a great deal of energy and much personal analysis of the organizational context prior to coming out. This colours the picture of Italy with regard to the relationship between perception of homophobia and organizational situation: workers come out only when they are sure they won't experience discriminations. Moreover, we need to consider that the interviewees have agreed to be part of this research, the inference being that those who have suffered from various forms of discrimination may have chosen not to participate.

With regard to methods of improving workplace rights, those interviewed in this study were sure that organizations cannot do much about institutional homophobia, because the solution to this problem is to be found at a social level. That is, in order for nonheterosexually identifying workers to reach equality of treatment in the workplace, society must accept and understand what homosexuality means—one proposal being that of making homosexual experience as visible as possible. This is why lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) associations invest so much in promoting visibility, as homophobia is believed to be an outcome of social ignorance.

For some of those interviewed in this study, the law can't help unless cases of physical harassment are reported. As homosexuality is still considered a deviance from the norm and conferring a lower social status than heterosexuality, nonheterosexuals are still facing a situation in which they don't aspire to be out and proud but would simply like to be considered invisible in order to achieve equality with heterosexual colleagues. This desire does not imply a radical revolution of the society, but it simply asks for inclusion in society without trying to change its rooted heteronormativity.

The present study was designed to study various Italian workplaces and has shown how the burden of coming out falls only on the backs of nonheterosexuals. The concept of coming out has been presented as a continuum; thus, unveiling one's sexual identity is not an either/or matter but represents a wide range of possibilities. The adoption of Greimas's semiotic square (1970) creates a heuristic device for the possibilities of disclosure and silence in the workplace. The process of coming out, as it emerged from the interviews, opened up at least four possibilities of performance: coming out and staying invisible as performative acts of agency, as well as outing and compulsory invisibility as performative acts of passivity. In terms of workplace outcomes, it is not easy to define which of these strategies is best for nonheterosexual workers, since this depends on structural variables (levels of homophobia, effectiveness of laws, behaviour of coworkers, and so forth) and also relational factors. With regard to the structural level, this research has started from the assumption that, in a heteronormative society, homophobia permeates workplaces and becomes the given experience of any nonheterosexual in the organizational context. Coming out not only concerns homosexuals but also has consequences for organizations, as work performance can diminish if energies are employed to manage a discredited sexual identity.

In Italy, we observe a nonhomogeneous landscape with regard to sexual identity, since antidiscriminatory laws are not effective at the practical level, as it is very hard to demonstrate that one has been the object of discrimination due to sexual orientation. On the other hand, though, Italy is characterized by a large number of family-run firms, and here the relational level comes into play. In fact, in the absence of a clear and efficacious law, one positive outcome of coming out is the good relationship that nonheterosexual workers are able to establish in the workplace. The focus is not on discrimination per se, but on the fear of being discriminated against (Ward & Winstanley, 2006): in my opinion, due to the deeply rooted prejudices against nonheterosexuals in Italy, it may be inappropriate to educate the minority of nonheterosexual workers on the benefits of coming out, since these benefits depend on the work that has previously been done in the workplace to cushion the effects of prejudice against who doesn't enact a heterosexual display. A suggested solution would be, instead, to sensitize organizations, convincing them to develop an organizational culture that doesn't weigh heavily only on nonheterosexual workers but that envisages the involvement of the entire organizational context. This suggestion aims to avoid one mistake that has been made with regard to gender issues, namely, that, for a long time, gender studies have focused only on women. Similar issues are arising within sexuality studies as they take into consideration only homosexuals, leaving the centre—heterosexuality—untouched.

Reading coming out as a performance is a helpful approach in that it can thus be considered as an act of visibility that renders a sexual identity public and that also involves heterosexual coworkers. Heteronormativity limits heterosexuals'

experiences, and it would be extremely interesting to conduct a further study on the ways in which heterosexual workers feel they are limited by the normativity of heterosexuality in the workplace, since subjects, as social actors, are never independent from the normative context (Pringle, 2008) in which they perform their identity.

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