

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Organizing Sexuality: Silencing and the Push–Pull Process of Co-sexuality in the Workplace

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*How human beings think about, talk about, and organize around sexuality is changing. Growing social legitimization for sexual minority relationships and a more fluid social understanding of sexual identities has shifted how we bound “normal” sexuality. In the workplace, these shifting norms affect employees of all sexual identities who must make sense of new policies and complex daily practices. This paper introduces the concept of co-sexuality, the push-and-pull process of communicatively organizing around sexuality. Using this concept, we take a grounded theory approach to exploring how employees of various sexualities and in different occupations understand “normal” sexuality and subsequently organize around it. Ultimately, participants described being silenced or silencing another to maintain sexual “norms” at work.*

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How humans think about, talk about, and otherwise construct “normal” sexuality has changed significantly in recent years. In the United States, a few of the more recent and visible examples of this social change include the legalization of same-sex marriage by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2015; the nomination of the first openly gay secretary of the Army in 2016; and the first openly gay Miss America contestant in 2016. Furthermore, expanding vocabulary, identity categories, and shifts in meanings about how sexuality is socially conceptualized has affected how people understand themselves and one another (e.g. Eguchi, 2009; Gusmano, 2008; Skidmore, 2004). Though homophobia, heterosexism, and discrimination are still very much a part of American culture (e.g. no federal law exists prohibiting discrimination against employees based on sexual identity), the growing visibility and voice of sexual diversity have shifted how “normal” sexuality is constructed.

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This study explicates part of what we call co-sexuality, the process of how humans communicatively organize around sexuality. The process of constructing and organizing around “normal” sexuality is inherently communicative because of the link between sexuality, discourse, and communication (Dixon & Dougherty, 2014). We take the position that sexuality is not essential or biological; rather, sexuality has been discursively constructed and maintained (Foucault, 1978/1990; Sullivan, 2003). Thus, the ways in which people organize sexuality shift as discourse shifts (Ashcraft, 2007). We follow Foucault’s (1978/1990) argument that sexuality is discourse and that we have discursively constructed and developed our “knowledge” of sexuality. This discourse both works to regulate a social hierarchy of what is perceived as appropriate or inappropriate in terms of sexual acts and sexual identities and has shifted sexual “norms” over time. To acknowledge the unfixed construct of sexuality, we have placed “norms” in parentheses throughout the paper.

This paper explores the process of co-sexuality and sexual silencing in workplaces. We chose workplaces because they are sites of interaction that reflect larger processes of social ordering that are regulated by visible and invisible power structures. Organizational communication scholarship has demonstrated that “non-normative” performances of sexuality are tightly regulated and often silenced within workplace contexts (e.g. Clair, 1998; Ward & Winstanley, 2003). However, social shifts in the normalization of sexual identities affect how sexuality is written into workplace policies and enacted in practices (see Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). By queering taken-for-granted sexual “norms” within organizations (e.g. McDonald, 2015; Yep, 2003), co-sexuality invites an emergent exploration of who and what is normalized and silenced within workplace contexts.

Exploring co-sexuality and the process of sexual silencing contributes to a growing body of feminist and queer organizational scholarship (e.g. Manning, 2015; McDonald, 2015) acknowledging that human sexuality is never “just” sexuality, but a communicative performance reflecting the intersection of highly regulated social characteristics that bind together at specific moments to organize and position people closer to or further away from a socially constructed and fluid sexual “norm” (e.g. Eguchi & Asante, 2016; Rumens & Broomfield, 2014). This research contributes a complex and emergent understanding of this process. Instead of relying on the taken-for-granted heterosexual/other binary, we explore how co-sexuality emerged in workplace settings through the perceptions of persons who constitute them.

### **Sexuality, silence, and workplaces**

Organizational scholarship notes a persistent belief that sexuality must be carefully monitored and regulated into appropriate, organizationally beneficial performances to create productive and efficient spaces (Brewis & Sinclair, 2000; Burrell, 1984). There exists a wealth of research that argues that silencing non-normative identities is an essential part of workplace experiences (e.g. Bruni, 2006; Clair, 1998; Gherardi, 1995; Woods & Lucas, 1993). Acts of silencing have been generally considered negative for

“non-normative” groups in workplace settings because they deny voice, agency, and efficacy. For example, silencing has been acknowledged as a barrier to organizational identification, feelings of safety and security (Ward & Winstanley, 2003), and used to rationalize emotional experiences that ultimately subjugate marginalized voices (Clair, 1998).

Specific performances of heteronormativity have long been privileged, legitimized, and commodified in organizational cultures (Gherardi, 1995). Organizational communication and management scholars have noted that privileging of heteronormativity can be seen both in the ways that organizations regulate their employees’ behavior and in the lifestyles that organizations market to their customers (e.g. Mumby, 2012). In this way, organizations reflect and reify the sexual expectations of society for profit (Bruni, 2006) and effectively silence lived experience that does not fit within the socially constructed “norm.”

As Western society becomes more tolerant of sexual diversity (Williams, Giuffre, & Dellinger, 2009), some organizations have become more fluid in terms of what kinds of displays of sexuality and gender identities are normalized for employees. Some organizations have tried new management styles encouraging employees to “be themselves” and openly communicate about their sexuality. Ultimately, this tactic can silence *all* employees in ways similar to traditionally heterosexist workplaces (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). Similarly, gay employees in organizations that are purportedly more “gay-friendly” are still bound by heteronormative forms of organizing. Rumens and Broomfield (2014) argue that even in “gay-friendly” professions such as the performing arts, gay men navigate heteronormativity and make choices about performing or silencing dimensions of their sexuality for professional success. Across organizational settings, employees are left trying to communicatively construct and negotiate their sexual identity in uncertain and ambiguous terms (Rumens & Kerfoot, 2009).

### **Organizing and silencing sexuality through workplace policy**

Organizational policies are powerful tools that serve to regulate the behavior of the whole organization, as well as the members that constitute it (Skidmore, 2004). Policies serve as a sense-making tool for organizational members; by referencing policy, many employees come to know what behaviors or identity expressions are considered appropriate by the organization (Compton, 2016; Williams et al., 2009). Indeed, organizational policies reflect the organizational structure and are often used as a substitute for larger discussions about employee or institutional behaviors or other organizational decision-making processes (McPhee & Poole, 2001).

Workplace policies have traditionally been undergirded by heteronormative expectations that effectively “other” sexual minorities and privilege certain performances of heterosexual-identified employees, such as those who are married and have children (e.g. Dixon & Dougherty, 2014). As social acceptance of more diverse sexual identities has become more common in the United States, workplace policies have become more inclusive, sometimes offering protections and benefits to employees identifying with more identity categories (Human Rights Campaign

Foundation, 2016; Williams et al., 2009). Although inclusive policies are heartening, the mere existence of policies offering protections does not automatically change how the organization regulates or privileges certain forms or performance of sexuality (Gusmano, 2008), nor do they always address individuals who do not fall within the boundaries of extant identity categories. However, more inclusive policies *do* reflect a shift toward a more complex understanding of sexual “norms” and warrant further exploration of how silencing happens in modern workplaces.

The majority of extant literature exploring the intersection of policies, silence, and the regulation of sexuality in the workplace has focused on sexual minorities who feel pressure to conform to “compulsory heterosexuality” (Dixon & Dougherty, 2014; Eguchi, 2009; Giddings & Pringle, 2011; Rich, 1980), passing as heterosexual or staying silent about their sexuality. Other scholars have described employees feeling as though they are silenced by policies that exclude them (e.g. Ward & Winstanley, 2003). Because policies both reflect and regulate sexual norms for *all* employees, they can be used to silence those who do not conform to a shifting set of normative expectations (Canary, 2010).

### **Organizing and silencing sexuality through workplace practice**

Organizational norms are not dictated by policy alone; each organization has its own culture that cannot be changed by intervention from policy or management involvement (e.g. Kirby & Krone, 2002). Organizational “norms” set the rules for how, when, or if individuals communicate about their sexualities and related gender identities. This phenomenon is well cited in the “coming-out” literature found in organizational communication and management literature, with strategies ranging from full disclosure to full concealment of sexual identities, by which employees push toward or pull away from “normal” sexualities (see Gusmano, 2008; King, Reilly, & Hebl, 2008; Prati & Pietrantoni, 2014; Woods & Lucas, 1993, for example).

Though it may seem that sexual “norms” are becoming more inclusive, the actions of employees frequently contradict purported tolerance and reinforce heteronormative, heteromale norms and silence those who do not conform. Indeed, invisible sexual prejudice is common in many workplaces as people construct reasons to treat people identifying with “non-normative” sexualities unfairly while appearing to treat them equally. Examples of common workplace practices that silence sexuality include the following: homophobic jokes used to privilege white male heterosexual employees and exclude sexual minorities and women (e.g. Denissen & Saguy, 2014; Embrick, Walther, & Wickens, 2007); silencing or ridiculing discussions of nonheteronormative sexuality (e.g. Ward & Winstanley, 2003); and regulating employees’ dress to privilege traditionally masculine or traditionally feminine attire (e.g. Giddings & Pringle, 2011). Gay men have also pushed toward heteronormativity as they work to construct a professional identity, reifying that performances of “normative” sexualities should be legitimized and regulated in work environments (Rumens & Kerfoot, 2009).

This invisible push toward “normal” and performance of a legitimized sexuality has proven to be harmful to workplace performance of sexual minorities (Gates,

2012), which serves as justification for organizations to avoid hiring or to fire sexual minority employees (Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002). Workplace heterosexism can also be harmful to heterosexual employees who either want to be inclusive to their colleagues or who do not want use resources to discipline or replace employees (e.g. Brenner, Lyons, & Fassinger, 2010). How, when, and why employees choose to voice or silence themselves or the other is a complex, often risky process that is shifting in modern workplaces.

### **Co-sexuality: Communicatively organizing around sexuality**

The term “co-sexuality” was generated as the authors were trying to manage the linguistic inequality that permeates conversations about people whose sexuality lies outside of normative expectations. We tried several different terms to help manage our discomfort with the linguistic inequality. For example, we have used “alternative sexualities,” “LGBTQ,” and “sexual minorities.” All of these terms emphasize a deviation from normative expectations and thus linguistic inequality. We then considered theories that displayed linguistic equality for other cultural groups, specifically Mark Orbe’s co-cultural theory, which began with the assumption that although some cultures are dominant, all cultures are valid and equal. From there, we created the term “co-sexuality” to describe various sexualities coexisting with, instead of sitting outside of, heterosexuality. From that point, queer theory helped us consider co-sexuality in increasingly complex ways. First, queer theory allowed us to explore how “normal” and “abnormal” sexualities are communicatively constructed and regulated. Second, by taking the perspective that sexuality is a discursive construct that is both fluid and power-laden, queer theory influenced our belief that sexuality is not a fixed “thing”; it is a process. Below, we review literature on co-cultural theory and queer theory (e.g. McDonald, 2015) to bring clarity to the emerging concept of co-sexuality.

### **Co-cultural theory and co-sexuality**

Co-sexuality draws from two core tenets of co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998). First, co-cultural theory refuses to perpetuate the negative connotations associated with terms such as “subculture” or “subordinate” when exploring organizing processes (Orbe, 1998). Instead, the term “co-cultural” recognizes that although some groups have attained social dominance, no group is inherently superior to another. By understanding sexualities as dominant or nondominant, co-sexuality begins from a place of linguistic equality, rather than overlaying traditional and binary superior/subordinate positions on sexual identities. In terms of organizing around sexuality, we start from the position that sexualities are not essential or agreed-upon constructs.

Second, co-cultural theory, drawing from muted group theory (Kramarae, 1981) and standpoint theory (Hartsock, 1983), posits that nondominant groups organize around dominant groups. Dominant sexualities remain normalized by maintaining ideological and discursive norms, “muting” deviating nondominant groups

(Castle Bell et al., 2015; Hogg & Reid, 2006). Nondominant groups must conform to dominant social structures, and their lived experiences are not reflected in those structures (Harding, 2004). Co-sexuality begins from the position that dominant sexual norms mute nondominant sexualities and that those who deviate from contextualized “norms” must do communicative work to fit within boundaries. Although co-cultural theory provides co-sexuality with a useful framework, co-sexuality is animated by queer theory’s decentering of heteronormativity through notions of sexuality as fluid and discursive.

### **Queer theory and co-sexuality**

At the core of queer theory is deconstructing and questioning “normative” thought (Yep, 2003). In sexuality scholarship, queer theory has questioned “normalized” identity categories (e.g. Butler, 2007) and social politics that reify dominant norms (McDonald, 2015; Warner, 1999). Queer theory guides the development of co-sexuality in three ways. First, queer theory encourages co-sexuality to diverge from co-cultural theory’s argument that organizing processes happen around a “predetermined” hierarchy of group identities. Instead, queer theory sees sexuality and sexual organizing as a more fluid and emergent process.

Second, queer theory critiques and questions how “normal” sexualities have been socially constructed and privileged. Heteronormativity (Warner, 2002) posits that heterosexuality has been socially constructed and understood as the normalized comparison point against which all other sexualities are held. Homonormativity, which emerges from heteronormativity and encourages nonheterosexual persons to follow heterosexual traditions, assumptions, and characteristics, relies upon and sustains heteronormativity by privileging specific performances of sexuality (e.g. physically fit, white, cisgendered, gay-identified men; Rumens & Broomfield, 2014; Yep, 2003). Feminist and queer scholars (e.g. Rich, 1980) have long questioned classifying sexual “norms” because this process ultimately results in hierarchies and binaries that are unrepresentative of human experiences (McCreery, 1999). Queer theory also acknowledges that dominant Western ideals have colonized sexual organizing processes (e.g. Chávez, 2013; Eguchi & Asante, 2016), affecting how “norms” are constructed and organized around. Queer theory argues that sexual “norms” are a misnomer; sexual identity categories are social constructions that are in flux (e.g. Butler, 1997; Katz, 1995). Co-sexuality takes the position that communicatively constructed sexual “norms” are quite unstable.

Third, and related, queer theory encourages a more comprehensive approach to understanding sexual organizing processes. Sedgwick (1990) argues that human sexuality should be explored from a universal, rather than minority, approach because sexual organizing impacts everyone. Queer theory guides co-sexuality to explore the process of sexual organizing by acknowledging, but not relying on, a heterosexual/other paradigm and instead understanding that sexual organizing emerges between humans from different social positions doing identity work and invites multiple ways of knowing this process (Manning, 2015).

Ultimately, co-sexuality begins from central arguments in co-cultural theory and queer theory. First, co-sexuality begins from a place of linguistic equality, rejecting the idea that dominant sexualities are superior and that people who identify with nondominant sexualities do communicative work to accommodate dominant sexualities. Co-sexuality argues that sexual “norms” are unstable, unfixed, and contextually constructed. Finally, co-sexuality takes the “universal” (Sedgwick, 1990) position that organizing around sexual “norms” affects everyone.

We seek to explicate co-sexuality or the process of organizing around dominant “normal” sexuality. Specifically, we are interested in exploring how dominant or “normal” sexuality is communicatively constructed and bounded and specifically how employees organize around that norm within the workplace. Previous scholarship has demonstrated that heteronormativity remains privileged (Dixon & Dougherty, 2014) in organizations; however, it is less clear how employees communicatively organize around that center. As such, we seek to answer the question:

**RQ:** How do employees negotiate silence when pushing toward or pulling away from sexual “norms” in workplaces in the United States?

## Method

We collected data from participants using semistructured in-depth interviews and followed Tracy’s (2013) iterative approach to analyze the data. The first qualification to participate was that individuals must at some point have been a paid employee at any level of an organization. Every participant worked for a for-profit organization and earned a wage.

Individuals over 18 were recruited. Additionally, recruitment targeted the geographic location of the participant’s job, as perceived regional norms can influence perceptions of “normative” behavior. We chose to focus on participants whose work experiences were in the Midwest because of the region’s diverse mixture of urban cities (e.g. Chicago, St. Louis, and Minneapolis) and rural towns with various local and regional laws that affect worker rights. For example, of the 12 Midwestern states, it is still legal in eight for sexual minorities to be fired based on sexual identity; however, the remaining four states offer nondiscrimination protection for employees (Griffin, 2016). Furthermore, the Human Rights Campaign has named workplaces in Ohio, Minnesota, Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Nebraska, which are all Midwestern states, on their annual Best Places to Work for LGBT Equality 2017 (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2016). Complex regional norms made the Midwest an excellent fit for exploring co-sexuality.

Organizational experience, age, and geographic location were the only restrictions on participants. We recruited participants of any race, gender identity, class, and, most relevantly, sexuality. Seeking individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds allowed us to avoid privileging individuals whose social identity matched ours (e.g. McDonald, 2013). To recruit an initial group of participants, the first author used snowball sampling techniques (Tracy, 2013). Snowball sampling involves identifying

individuals who meet the criteria for participation and then asking these individuals to suggest someone who also meets those criteria to participate in the study (Tracy, 2013). Twelve initial participants were people who had expressed interest in participating. Ten of the 12 initial participants gave the first author contact information for other potential participants.

Of note, we worked to remain reflexive throughout sampling, interviewing, and analysis. For the first author, it was important to consider personal experiences and social biases as a queer Caucasian Midwestern woman. Attending to queer reflexivity, specifically acknowledging that matching social categories between researcher and participant does not reflect superior data; awareness that power dynamics between researcher and participant is not always clear, as some social identities may remain undisclosed; reflexivity about the development of the researchers' own evolving social identities; and avoiding making assumptions about self and participants based on social identities: all these helped guide each decision made for this study (McDonald, 2013).

### **Theoretical sampling and saturation**

As the first author was simultaneously interviewing 12 initial participants, transcribing data, and writing memos, themes began to emerge. It became clear that more perspectives from individuals who identified as sexual minorities, particularly those doing blue-collar work, were needed to saturate emerging themes. To continue recruiting participants, the first author contacted colleagues at the university's LGBTQ center. The first author also recruited using personal Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Recruiting ceased when we agreed saturation was reached. We had a total of 30 participants. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 64, with an average age of 33. Though not by design, 15 participants self-identified as heterosexual or straight, and 15 self-identified otherwise: seven bisexual, four pansexual, one homosexual, one heteroflexible, one gay, and one woman/pansexual. Eleven identified as male, one identified as a cisgender male, 12 identified as female, four identified as a woman, one identified as a transwoman, and one identified as a cisgender tomboy. Twenty-eight identified as Caucasian or white; two identified as African American. It should be noted that participants who volunteered for this study were often quite well versed in sexual terminology and specifics of political movements.

### **Interviews**

Individual interviews were all digitally recorded and lasted about an hour and a half. Five participants contacted the first author after the initial interview to share a new experience or to share something they had forgotten. The first author e-mailed questionnaires to participants prior to our scheduled interview to allow plenty of time for participants to consider and respond to the questions, as well as respect participant's time. Participants' descriptions of their identities are included in the analysis.

Immediately before the interview, the first author encouraged participants to discuss their experiences and perceptions, but not beyond their level of comfort.



After receiving consent to proceed and answering any questions, the audio-recorded interview began. At the end of interviews, the first author debriefed participants and answered any remaining questions.

### **Data analysis procedure**

The first author transcribed the first four interviews and sent remaining files to Rev.com. Transcription, recruitment, and analysis happened simultaneously; often, a new interview would be scheduled within a day or two of receiving a transcript. There were 934 pages of interview transcriptions. The first author wrote an additional 354 pages of memos that we incorporated into the analysis. In sum, there were a total of 1,288 pages of data.

#### *Initial and focused coding*

Incident-to-incident constant comparisons (Charmaz, 2014) were conducted to analyze the data. Initial coding began after the first 4 interviews were complete. Incidents were first compared based on the job type, and then, incidents were compared based on participants' described sexual identities. Initial codes were mostly based on specific behaviors, such as "dress" or "avoiding conversation," or on specific workplace descriptions, such as "nondiscrimination policy." Other initial codes included "heteronormativity," indicating when a participant mentioned the word or referenced the sense of "rightness" associated with heterosexuality (Warner, 2002); "policy," which indicated when an organizational policy was referenced; "going along to get along," indicating when participants seemed to be refusing to upset workplace norms; and "Midwest," when participants specifically mentioned the culture of the Midwest as part of their narrative about "normal" sex or sexuality.

After initial coding was complete, the first author drafted a list of initial codes to begin focused coding, which guided four rounds of analysis. Memoing and many conversations about the data led to a draft of the analysis. We also sought collegial input (Tracy, 2013). Participants used multiple explanatory devices and discursive techniques to bound, justify, and explain "normal" sexuality, as well as to position themselves and others around that norm. Thus, focused codes reflected "push," when participants were pushing or pushed toward "norms," and "pull," when participants pulled or were pulled away from "norms." The most common theme that emerged was "silence," participants either pushed toward by self-silencing or silencing others, or pulled away from by breaking their silence. After the first draft of the analysis was complete, the first author contacted 10 participants to discuss the analysis. Eight responded, and though participants largely agreed with the structure of the analysis, it was updated where necessary.

### **Findings**

The most powerful and consistent way that participants described the push – pull process of co-sexuality in their workplaces was in terms of negotiating silenced sexual

norms. Overwhelmingly, participants described not wanting to upset workplace balances and potentially threatening their social status or job. The desire to remain secure in the workplace pushed participants toward remaining silenced about topics of sex or sexuality in the workplace. However, participants of various sexual identities also described ways in which they wanted to push back against silence, particularly when sexuality became salient, such as when the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in 2015.

The process of organizing around sexual silence in organizations evolved in three primary stages. First, participants described experiencing organizations explicitly silencing sex or sexuality in workplaces through policies or workplace practices. Second, participants described self-silencing about topics related to sex or sexuality in their workplaces for reasons of personal or group preference, perceptions of professional expectations, or personal safety. Self-silencing was described as challenging for many participants who resisted fully internalizing sexual “norms” but rather worked to position their own beliefs or identities around a sexual “norm” they understood but did not necessarily resonate with. Third, participants of all sexual identities ultimately internalized and reified the cultures of sexual silence in their workplaces, shutting conversations down or carving extra-organizational spaces to talk about or enact sex or sexuality outside of the workplace. In this step, (hetero)sexual privilege became clearest, but also the most unstable. How participants negotiated cultures of sexual silence in their workplace ultimately served to silence others and maintain sexual norms in the workplace.

### **Organizations silencing sexuality**

Participants described ways in which they perceived that their organizations silenced conversations about or acts of sex and sexuality through various means, including organizational policies, organizational practices, or conversations between managers and employees. Of note, heterosexual participants tended to describe organizations silencing all acts or conversations about sex or sexuality, whereas sexual minority participants were more likely to talk about organizations silencing acts or conversations about sexual diversity.

Many participants described ways in which organizations used policies to create sexual norms in which conversations or talk about sex or sexuality were disallowed. For example, Jane, a 32-year-old straight white female employed at a radio station in Missouri, described feeling pressured to conform to silenced norms by organizational policies when the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in 2015:

I heard the news [about the legalization of gay marriage] break on [Radio Station] and I immediately ran into my boss's office right around the corner and I was like, “This is the best day ever.” And she was like, “Yeah, I know.” And we had a little conversation ourselves; I mean that was kind of the extent of it. It wasn't really like all over the office like, “Woohoo.” Although I did make a little rainbow piece of paper ... I had to! I'm not even sure a lot of people even noticed it because it was real small. I mean because of FCC regulations, we try not to portray our own views to the public or like, each other. ... Usually we'll kind of do it in like a little hush-hush thing.

The push-and-pull process of co-sexuality is clear in Jane's narrative. First, the FCC's rules construct a sexual "norm" in Jane's workplace that disallows personal views about anything to be shared with the public and with each other. However, in moments where personal opinions about sex or sexuality became particularly salient, Jane and her colleagues chose to pull away from the silenced sexual "norm." Jane and her colleagues did not pull too hard away from the silenced sexual "norm"; conversations are described as "hush-hush," and Jane's rebellious rainbow flag was likely unnoticed because of its small size. Jane perceived that the silenced sexual "norm" in her workplace created a powerful boundary that she and her coworkers worked to pull against, but only temporarily to not disrupt the organizational norm.

Several sexual minority participants described occasions where supervisors specifically told them not to bring up issues about sex or sexuality in the workplace. For example, Ashley, a 27-year-old pansexual transwoman employed as a web designer in Missouri, described being happy in her organization. However, when asked whether she could speak openly about sexuality and gender at work, she told me:

I've been told if anything ever does come specifically from my gender identity, um, that it wouldn't be tolerated. Um, but also knowing, you know, how my boss reacted, you know, when I specifically brought up same sex marriage, um, you know, politics, it was, you know, silenced.

When Ashley was hired, she chose to tell managers about her gender and sexual identities to confirm she would be protected. Her managers told her that she was one of the two "nonheterosexual" employees and that her identity was not a factor in her employment so long as she did not bring up topics or behave in ways that could disrupt workplace norms. Over time, Ashley perceived that the sexual "norm" in her workplace was silence about sex, sexuality, and, specific to Ashley, sexual diversity. Ashley told me that she dressed and talked at work as directed (e.g. Butler, 1997) because she recognized that silence protected her from potentially derisive coworkers. Ashley pushed herself toward the silenced sexual "norm" because she was "grateful" for this protection. Unlike Jane, this interaction specifically targeted Ashley's gender and sexuality rather than a larger workplace policy that disallowed any employee from discussing personal views with the public. However, like Jane, when larger social issues became salient, Ashley pulled away from the silenced sexual norm and openly talked about same-sex marriage with her coworkers.

### **Silencing the self: Sex and sexuality**

Many participants shared that they chose not to talk about sex or sexuality in the workplace for personal reasons ranging from their personalities to adhering to their perception of professional conduct as asexual. Self-silencing was always described from a position of conscious agency. However, heterosexual or straight participants had more freedom to choose how or whether they talked or enacted sex or sexuality at work. Contrastingly, pansexual, bisexual, gay, and homosexual participants chose to self-silence to self-protect. In addition, whereas sexual minority participants could readily speak to their conscious acts of self-silencing, heterosexual-identified

participants tended to have not thought about their acts of self-silencing until our conversation, revealing the taken-for-granted privilege that heterosexual employees experience.

Many participants who identified as heterosexual or straight shared that they had not thought about sexuality in the workplace and attributed their self-silence as a component of their personality. For example, Jim, a 26-year-old straight white male employed in a coal plant in Missouri, told me that he did not talk about sex or sexuality at work not only because of his personality, but also because he wanted to be perceived as professional. He said:

Um, it's not really my personality to bring [sexuality] up in the work site. Um, I kind of have my own opinions. Um, but I don't feel like I need to share unless somebody wants to know. And then at that point sometimes I'm even a little bit more reserved. Because I don't want somebody to force their opinion on me. It's weird in a sense because you know I'm gonna try and stay out of the way of causing that conflict if there could be one. I mean my personality agrees with the professionalism of a workplace.

Jim first attributed his self-silencing to his personality, pushing himself toward the silenced sexual norm. However, Jim hinted that he could choose to pull himself away from the silenced heteronormative sexual norm by stating that he has "his own opinions" about the topic. Ultimately, Jim framed his self-silence as a choice, both because he wants to be perceived as "professional" and because he wants to avoid potential repercussions from causing conflict by violating silenced "norms." It is not sexuality that is loud in Jim's comment; it is his privilege of agency and privileging of sexual silence in his rationale. By choosing to self-silence, despite opinions that may contrast with sexual "norms" in his workplace, Jim is pushing toward and ultimately maintaining the boundary that "normal" sexuality sets in his workplace.

### **Self-protection**

Bisexual, pansexual, gay, queer, and homosexual participants, on the other hand, described their choice to self-silence to protect themselves in the workplace. For example, Keri, a 28-year-old white bisexual woman working at a university in the Midwestern United States, told me that she perceived heterosexual relationships as privileged in her workplace. When asked whether she could talk about her own relationships, she said:

I wish it was a less taboo thing. ... I feel like, unless I have, like, an established, almost like intimate relationship with somebody, maybe we would talk abstractly about somebody else's sex, but I don't know that I would talk about, like, my sexual experience and my sex life at work or with somebody that I didn't have almost unconditional love and trust with. Just because I think that makes you so vulnerable in a lot of ways, so I feel like there are a lot of times when I would want to talk about sex at work, maybe, but my filter says, "Don't say that, don't talk about that."

Keri also noted that she perceived that most of her coworkers presumed that she was straight because until recently she had been in a visible relationship with an opposite-sex other. She self-silenced with coworkers because other queer-identified

employees had been targeted by both heterosexual and queer coworkers, their sex and sexuality used as “ammo” to destroy personal relationships among colleagues but also with management.

Primarily, Keri perceived that any conversation she might have about nonheterosexual sex attractions pulled her away from the sexual norm. Had Keri decided to put herself at risk and push against silenced sexual norms in the workplace, she may have caused a confrontation or even quit her job. In terms of co-sexuality, the idea that her sexuality could be used as a weapon against her coerced Keri into adhering to the heteronormative sexual norm. To push herself closer to the sexual norm, Keri “filtered” herself from correcting people’s perception of her heterosexual status, despite her wanting to talk about sex and sexuality in the workplace.

### **Normalized (hetero)sexual voice: Silenced sexual diversity**

Overwhelmingly, participants identified as heterosexual or straight perceived that no topics related to sex or sexuality were appropriate in their workplaces. However, several described talking with coworkers about activities they did with their partners or families, and all topics they came to realize were related to their sexuality. The taken-for-granted nature of this conversation reveals the power of hegemonic heteronormativity as a sexual “norm” within organizations.

An example comes from Kelly, a 29-year-old heterosexual Caucasian female, who said that she and her coworkers talked about their families frequently:

Like, telling funny stories about [my husband] and what he’s done, and I mean, like, no sex stories or anything, but you know? ... I just heard about a few kids that [my coworkers are] having, you know, a pretty happy marriage and stuff. I would say [we talk about it] everyday though, at least multiple times a day. People ask me about my kids all the time. I never realized how easy it was, you know like, to make small talk until I had children. There’s always something to talk about with the kids.

When asked how her coworkers sexually identified, Kelly said that she “knew” most of them were heterosexual because of the sex of their partner or spouse or, more importantly, did not know because they did not talk about it. Though unintentional, Kelly’s narrative reflects sexual silence in two ways. First, the comfort with which she can discuss her family life demonstrates that she is empowered to do so in her organization. Second, the parameters of the (hetero)sexual “norm” in her organization are reflected in the content of the normalized conversations about (hetero)sexuality that Kelly describes. Most importantly, Kelly’s narrative reveals that there is a privileged space for certain kinds of communication about sex or sexuality. Kelly benefits from the privileging of heterosexuality, specifically the ability to discuss her family without worrying that she is violating sexual norms (e.g. McDonald, 2015). Kelly’s narrative unconsciously pulls her within the parameters of the “norm” where certain conversations about sex, sexuality, and possibly sexual identities are silenced.

One of the most self-reflexive moments a participant had during an interview came from Mimi, a 46-year-old white heteroflexible female employed as a diversity coordinator in Missouri. Mimi, who is married to an individual identified as male,

initially said that she did not talk about sex or sexuality at work because she was a private individual, similar to the narrative of self-silencing described by other participants. However, as we talked, she acknowledged:

Here's the thing I just realized. Ha! So, while I don't explicitly talk about my sexuality [at work] ... Anytime I've ever referred to my husband, I am in fact referring to my sexuality. And, that's something I've kind of been struggling with for a while; feeling like I should say, you know, "My partner." I want to sort of like revoke some of that heteronormative privilege that I have. At the same time, partner doesn't feel you know, like the right term. I realize that I invoke heteronormative privilege every time I say "My husband."

Mimi elucidates her unique position among participants in this study as someone whose chosen identity category and sexual behavior reflect a performance of heterosexuality (e.g. Butler, 1997). Mimi had not consciously recognized that "husband" (relative to her female sex) signified a privileged relational category associated with a privileged sexual identity category that gave her "heteroflexible" identity voice where many other sexual minority voices are silenced. Because the relational identifier "my partner" was not for Mimi, she defaulted to the privileged relational term "my husband," which signified a heterosexual relationship and identity. This is particularly interesting, as she could have used the term "spouse." Though Mimi pulls away from heterosexual privilege, Mimi's choice of vocabulary speaks to her access to privileged (hetero)sexual "norms" that other nonheterosexual participants do not share, which allowed her to unthinkingly rely on the dominant sexual culture's implicit language and allowed her to push closer to the center (Orbe, 1998).

Both Kelly and Mimi provided examples of how heterosexuality is implicitly privileged in their workplaces. Though each participant perceived different parameters defining what "normative" sex and sexuality were, both had the ability to unthinkingly voice aspects of their sexuality in casual workplace conversations. Kelly, who identified as heterosexual, used her experiences as a wife and mother to connect with others, pulling herself toward the heteronormative center. On the other hand, Mimi unconsciously relied on the language associated with her marriage to an opposite-sex other to pull toward the heteronormative center. Both participants benefitted from using the dominant sexual culture's language in ways that gave voice to heteronormative privilege.

#### *Shutting down the conversation*

Several participants, all but one identifying as heterosexual or straight, described stopping conversations about sex or sexuality once the participant perceived the conversation to be pushing the boundaries set by their perception of the silenced sexual "norm" in their workplaces. Though sexual "norms" and their relationship to silence functioned differently between organizations, the conversations that were silenced as a result of this process were generally about sexual diversity.

For example, Evan, a 32-year-old heterosexual Caucasian male employed as a waiter and bartender in Missouri, described shutting down coworkers' conversations about sex and sexuality at work once he felt that they crossed a certain "line." Evan

told me that conversations about sex and sexuality, particularly sexual acts between men, were common in his workplace. Employees often goaded each other into more aggressive and extreme conversations. Evan told me that he participated in these conversations because they were a source of stress release and humor; it also allowed him to connect to his coworkers. However, Evan perceived that some of these conversations went too far, and he worked to push people toward a more silenced sexual norm:

To me, when someone is like, shutting something down, and I do it sometimes, it's because it's gotten ... too loud. And crossing a line. I mean, people have conversations when there's people in the restaurant. Now, they probably can't hear you, you know, if someone was close and the conversation's getting a little loud then you gotta shut it down. I don't think that that's like violating a norm, but like, talking openly and loudly about sex, like gay sex when there's people in your restaurant, that's, that's violating I think, because they don't know you. You don't know them.

The fact that Evan describes the normalized explicit sexual talk of gay sex between employees as something that would likely be constructed as a “violation” for most customers illuminates Evan’s perception of sexual “norms” in his workplace as well as a cycle of sexual silence. First, the fact that Evan mentions gay sex as “violating” for customers reifies that conversations about sexual diversity are inappropriate in the public sphere and pushes gay individuals from the sexual norm. Second, the fact that the sexual “norm” for coworkers to talk about explicit sexuality makes the importance of “shut[ting] it down” even more crucial when customers are in the restaurant, as this norm is perceived as “violating” larger Midwestern norms bounding “normal” conversations about sex and sexuality. Finally, Evan having the agency to “shut down” the conversation and perceiving that he will be supported by his coworkers reifies what performances of sexuality are privileged and what voices are dominant in his workplace.

#### *Moving sexuality outside of the workplace*

In several organizations, pansexual, bisexual, and gay employees described feeling oppressed by the sexually silenced norm and worked to make a separate space for conversations with coworkers about these topics. Though separated spaces did allow sexual minority and allied participants a way to push toward a sexual “alternative” in which topics of sex and sexuality were voiced, the separated nature of these spaces ultimately pushed employees toward the silenced sexual norms in the larger organization.

For example, Sara, a 24-year-old white cisgender/tomboy bisexual employed as a graphic artist in Missouri, said that the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015 was a popular topic at work. Sara’s coworkers primarily communicate through electronic chat channels, most of which are readable by all employees (including managers), and a few private channels for specific work groups. When the Supreme Court ruling was announced, the public channels were flooded with positive conversations. Sara’s boss quickly shut down these conversations, claiming that they might be

offensive to some employees. As a result, Sara and her colleagues created a separate space:

We created a private [chat] channel where people have to be invited in, and you can't see it unless you're invited in, and that one is specifically to talk about LGBT issues as they come up in culture, in day to day, talking about issues like that ... because it was just, like, bound to happen. If you're gonna talk about it, maybe not say it where people can be offended kind of thing. It's like something that we all kind of ... I think we have, like, policeman, but I think we all kind of like enforce culture together, it seems, because we ... we know that, talking about sexual diversity issues is not okay in the general channels.

This separate space allowed sexual minority and allied employees a location in which to talk about topics related to sexual diversity outside of the purview of potentially heterosexist employees. This space provided Sara and her colleagues a way to push back against the silenced sexual norm in the organization. However, Sara and her group actually work to regulate the sexually silenced norms in her organization more stringently than her bosses. Ultimately, separating sexuality from public discussion pushed vocal colleagues to adhere to sexual silence.

Similarly, Callie, a 31-year-old pansexual woman working as a librarian in Missouri, talked about organizing a book club for employees who wanted to talk more about sexual diversity and sexuality. Callie chose to quietly organize these events at a bar close to but not in the library, even though she and some of her other book club members had authority to access the facilities after hours. This decision was made not only to separate people from their workplace environment where some employees felt that organizational policies forced them to dress or behave in specific ways, but also to “protect people who, you know, may not want to, I guess, be seen as interested or a part of that kind of thing.” Callie went on to say that it was not just sexual or gender minorities who joined the book club and that many heterosexual employees would ask follow-up questions about her sexual identity during work hours after attending the book club. By moving the book club outside of the workplace, Callie pushed toward self-silencing in the workplace and only pulled against it when she was invited to do so.

Ultimately, participants like Sara and Callie wanted to keep their jobs or protect others and implicitly perceived that by disrupting or pushing against heteronormativity, they were risking their positions. In fact, the number of sexual minority participants and participants identified as heterosexual or straight who described wishing that they could have more opportunities to bring up political opinions or inclusive conversations about sexual diversity was overwhelming. However, these participants remained silenced because they perceived that this kind of talk would not be tolerated by all coworkers or management. Organizations should take note that participants want to have these conversations and should consider functional ways of facilitating them in respectful ways that do not threaten jobs.

## Discussion

Our research question asked how employees negotiate silence when pushing toward or pulling away from sexual “norms” in U.S. workplaces. The taken-for-granted way



participants described organizational silencing and self-silencing about sex and sexuality emerged as a core component of bounding and describing sexual “norms” in the workplace. Silencing, therefore, is fundamental to the process of organizing around sexual “norms” in workplace contexts. Though the specifics of how participants pushed toward or pulled away from silenced sexual “norms” varied, participants of all sexual identities consciously and unconsciously reified the silenced sexual “norm” in the workplace.

The negotiation of sexual “silence” presented in three primary ways. First, participants identified as heterosexual, heteroflexible, and straight or presenting participants had the privilege of talking about certain aspects of sex and sexuality, particularly their relationships and families, that other participants did not. Because all participants described heterosexual relationships as their perception of “normal,” sexual minorities were pulled away from sexual norms and silenced. Ultimately, heteronormativity was unconsciously reified. Second, participants described actively shutting down conversations about sex or sexuality when they perceived that others pushed the boundary of sexual silence as defined by their workplace sexual “norm.” Finally, gay, bisexual, and pansexual participants described carving spaces inter- and extra-organizationally where they could pull away from silenced sexual “norms” and construct their own welcoming spaces. However, these participants regulated conversations and acts of sex and sexuality at work and directed those who transgressed this norm to their separate space, ultimately pushing their colleagues and their own behaviors toward the silenced sexual “norm” in the workplace.

### **Implications for theory**

Co-sexuality adds to a growing body of theory-driven scholarship that encourages queering taken-for-granted “norms” (e.g. Chávez, 2013; Eguchi & Asante, 2016) within organizational contexts (McDonald, 2015) in an applied way. Co-cultural theory and queer theory both inform co-sexuality. Co-cultural theory’s (Orbe, 1998) approach to organizing provides linguistic equality for individuals within groups whose lived experiences are marginalized. Furthermore, CCT argues that communicative work must be done by marginalized groups to position themselves within the dominant structure. Queer theory (e.g. Sedgwick, 1990) encourages a deeper exploration of dominant and marginalized groups, suggesting aversion to “pre-determined hierarchies” as suggested by CCT (Orbe, 1998, p. 2) and instead taking a more emergent approach to how identities are crafted and negotiated. Though this study looks specifically at how sexual identities are organized within a workplace context, this approach could be used to explore organizing and identity work in many contexts.

In particular, co-sexuality contributes an inclusive and emergent approach to exploring sexual organizing. As McDonald (2015) notes, applications of queer theory, particularly in organizational settings, have tended to exclude or gloss over heterosexual viewpoints while simultaneously attempting to deconstruct them. This is particularly true when looking at scholarship-exploring processes of silencing,

which has tended to focus on the perspectives of minorities (e.g. Clair, 1998; Ward & Winstanley, 2003). Empirically, this article shifts toward including the voices of participants who identify with traditionally “normalized” identities. Doing so allows scholars to explore both how “norms” are constructed categorically and the complex and shifting ways that meaning and identity work happen.

In this study, co-sexuality emerged as a push-and-pull process: People simultaneously pushed toward socially constructed sexual “norms” and pulled away from those norms contextually. The fact that pushing and pulling around sexual “norms” happened simultaneously is particularly meaningful to the development of co-sexuality. We believe that the simultaneous push–pull process is indicative of two things. First, that what is considered “normal” sexuality is in flux, and individuals and larger social institutions are in the process of reshaping what is considered “normal.” Pushing toward and away from an unfixed “norm” increases the complexities and risks people take when making statements or enacting certain behaviors, because there is a fluctuating set of social standards by which to measure said actions. Though the sexual identity of participants in this study influenced how the process of silencing affected their lived experience, attributing all differences in perception to identity category is reductive. Silencing was perceived by all, and how it was managed reflected complex intersectional views. Second, the “between” spaces in which participants found themselves pushing and pulling, and sometimes contradicting themselves, in order to position themselves around “normal” sexuality invites scholars to continue exploring how people construct sexuality as an identity, but also as a way of understanding the world.

### **Implications for sexuality scholarship**

This study hints at ways in which scholars can understand the simultaneously fluid yet stable nature of heteronormativity, especially in organizational contexts. Heteronormativity emerged in fluid ways as participants described sexual “norms” at work. Despite participants using similar language, how participants perceived sexual “norms” varied contextually. This is consistent with the previous sexuality research, which has indicated that social class (Yep, 2003), race (Eguchi & Asante, 2016), and age (Sullivan, 2003) all affect how individuals understand and perform their sexuality, as well as how they perceive and interact with others. How individuals pushed and pulled around sexual “norms” not only created a fluid enactment of heteronormativity, but also reconstructed the privilege and power granted to heterosexuality in the current cultural milieu. As a result, the enactment of fluidity through the push–pull process stabilized the power and privilege that are typically associated with heteronormativity. Research on sexuality and organizing should more carefully explore the fluid processes that act to stabilize sexual “norms.”

Additionally, the findings from this study suggest that not only does sexuality shape organizing, but sexuality is also an essential feature of the organizing process. To date, sexuality research in organizations has been understood as a secondary area, with limited implications for the larger organizing processes. However, theories of organizing, such as structuration and Communication Constitutes Organization

(CCO), could be more richly textured if scholars began to consider ways in which sexuality saturates the norms, rules, structures, language, and texts that are the focus of this theoretical terrain.

### **Implications for practice: Silencing**

Practitioners need to recognize that silencing has complex outcomes that need to be managed. In this study, participants all described understanding organizationally silenced sexuality as “normal” in their workplaces. All participants understood that disrupting sexual norms at work was detrimental to the group or the individual. Participants spoke of the organizationally bounded silence sexual “norm” as taken for granted except in moments when sex or sexuality, particularly sexual diversity, became salient. In these moments, participants pulled away from silenced sexual norms in various ways, though all participants pushed toward the silenced sexual “norm” to keep their jobs. However, many participants described being upset or surprised that their organizations had silenced them in these moments and noted that these actions changed their opinions of their workplaces. Practitioners should note that sexual silence was not inherently perceived as negative. Though many saw the ways in which silence was forced upon them unfair, many found silence to be an unspoken protection.

Ultimately, this study informs practitioners that perceptions of silence or silencing at work can change employees’ opinions of their organization. Keeping in mind that acts of silencing are not always negative, our recommendations for practitioners are twofold. First, we recommend that practitioners determine what the cultural and organizational norms surrounding silence and sexuality are in their unique work environments. Following scholarship that draws positive correlations between job satisfaction and the ability to discuss same-sex relationships without fear of repudiation (e.g. Horan & Chory, 2009; Rich, Schutten, & Rogers, 2012), we also encourage organizations to establish unambiguous rules about what can and cannot be discussed by *all* employees, regardless of their sexual identities.

### **Limitations**

The primary limitation of this study is a product of participant recruitment. Participants were primarily from the states of Missouri, Illinois, and Kansas, though participants working in Oklahoma, Nebraska, Ohio, and Iowa were all present in the data. The findings therefore reflect a narrow regional wedge of the United States. By expanding the scope of recruitment, it is possible that the sexual norms could be more nuanced or further developed.

Additionally, our participants overwhelmingly identified as cisgender and white or Caucasian. The overrepresentation of these participants limits our analysis from engaging with the lived experiences of a larger group of individuals who also experience the process of organizing around sexuality. We encourage future scholars to continue looking at how sexual “norms” are perceived across multiple identity groups and across different geographic regions (Kuhn, 2006).

A second limitation is a product of study design. Because our only form of data collection was recruiting participants for individual interviews, our analysis relies solely on participants' memories and individual perceptions of their experiences. Though we planned to incorporate focus groups in the original study design, IRB restrictions limited our ability to conduct focus groups in a timely manner. To continue developing co-sexuality, we plan to conduct focus groups, as well as ethnographic observations of workplaces.

### Future research

We are excited to see co-sexuality further developed and applied in contexts both inside and outside of the workplace. Two primary developments we would like to see emerge from this project. First, we would like to explore the idea of the silenced self, in terms of voice, privilege, and language use. How are employees and organizations navigating changing social norms? How is the ideology of heteronormativity responding?

Second, and related, we would like to see further explorations of how the ever-growing list of sexual identity categories, labels, and terminologies simultaneously works to empower and disempower marginalized groups. The vocabulary associated with sexuality is growing rapidly, affecting how employees and their organizations think about and regulate behaviors and actions, including silencing. Though it may seem that a growing vocabulary would allow sexual and gender minorities a more developed language to communicate about their social positions in (Orbe, 1998), what emerged in the data was a growing frustration from people of various sexual identities about the exclusionary way in which these new terms are used.

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