Sexual Identity in the Workplace: Reasons for (not) Coming out

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Abstract: Extant research on non-normative sexual identity and non-heterosexual people exposes the various forms of discrimination and oppressive practices and behaviors from peers, supervisors and subordinates, clients and organizations in general. This situation creates a dilemma to those workers regarding the self-disclosure of their sexual identity. Most studies shows that the majority usually prefer not to reveal their sexual orientation and or sexual identity in their organizational settings. In the Portuguese context, investigation in this area of research is still scarce. The present paper aims to contribute to this debate by extending knowledge on the reasons underlying the decision to share with others the sexual orientation and/or gender identity at work. To examine the reasons non-heterosexual workers and with non-normative sexual identity offer for disclosing or not to those with whom they interact at work, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 participants with different socio-professional profiles and geographical locations. Women and man were recruited from the personal network of one of the researchers using a convenience and snowball sampling approach. The study findings provide insight into the main reasons why the interviewees choose to disclose or not to disclose. Participants reported as main reasons for disclosure: friendship relationships in the workplace and an inclusive working environment. On the other hand, the decision for non-disclosure results from the anticipated sexual discrimination, the perception of a hostile environment and the lack of friendship relationships. The main results are in line with other studies conducted in international contexts. The study highlights the heteronormativity of Portuguese work settings and the persistence of sexual discrimination of workers with non-normative sexual identity despite the development of Portuguese legislation regarding sexual equality.

Keywords: Sexual identity, Workplace discrimination, Disclosure/non-disclosure, Heteronormativity, Portugal

1.   Introduction

Discrimination and prejudice based on sexual orientation and identity is one of the most prevailing and persistent forms of workplace discrimination. According to the literature, LGBTQIA+ employees report negative experiences in different career stages and several organizational practices, such as recruitment and selection, access to training, promotion opportunities, and work-life balance. They also face impaired treatment from the supervisors and coworkers, workplace bullying, sexual harassment, and tend to show higher levels of psychological distress and poor mental health (Beatriz & Pereira, 2022; Moya & Moya-Garófano, 2020).

This context of constant oppressing behaviors in the workplace creates a dilemma to LGBTQIA+ workers regarding the self-disclosure of their sexual identity at work. According to existing studies, the main reasons for disclosure include the existence of friendship relationships, an inclusive working environment, and senior LGBTQIA+ coworkers in the workplace. On the other hand, the key motives underlying non-disclosure are the anticipated discrimination, fear of isolation, violence, sexual harassment, and lack of promotion opportunities.

In Portugal, legislation has evolved in order to promote equality in the workplace regardless of the employee sexual orientation and identity. However, the few studies that analyze the workplace experiences of this minority group show a high presence of homophobic and transphobic behaviors and attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ employees (Beatriz & Pereira, 2022).

The present paper aims to shed light on the reasons underlying the decision that prompt LBGTQIA+ employees to share or hide their sexual orientation and/or gender identity at work.

2.   Literature Review: To Disclose or not to Disclose

The expression "coming out" is commonly used to describe the process through which sexual minorities decide to assume and reveal their sexual orientation, either in the workplace (coworkers and supervisors) or to those with whom they have intimate or close relationships, namely family and close friends (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Wax et al., 2017).

The decision to disclosure or not in the workplace depends on several factors, such as the anticipation of discrimination experiences (Beals et al., 2009). Other factors have been identified as facilitators of disclosure, namely: friendships in the workplace, inclusive social environments, gender equality and diversity policies, the

need to guarantee a cohesive identity by linking the private and professional domains, the presence of other LGBTQIA+ coworkers, particularly senior colleagues with sexual minority identities already known by others in the organization, the existence of representative movements of LGBTQIA+ with active participation in the daily life of organizations, unions and support networks of sexual minority coworkers, and the willingness of LGBTQIA+ employees to use their sexual orientation as a political tool to change mentalities and to defy the heteronormativity of their organizations (Clair et al., 2005, Colgan et al., 2007; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Tejeda, 2006).

The main reasons for non-disclosure are anticipated discrimination, fear of being isolated by coworkers and their supervisors, moral and sexual harassment, the devaluation of their skills and work experiences due to their sexual orientation (Beals et al., 2009; Levine & Leonard, 1984).

3.   Methodology

A qualitative study was conducted with 21 interviewees (12 gay man and nine lesbian women) from different Portuguese work settings.

A convenience sample was defined using snowball sampling and semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author. The interviewees have different socio-professional profiles and live or work in various geographical locations.

Content analysis was used to create the thematic categories and interpret the collected data. The categories were firstly defined by the first author and then discussed with the other two researchers to reach a consensus.

4.   Results and Discussion

4.1   Disclosure in the Workplace

As found in previous studies, one of the first reasons to come out is the presence of supportive coworkers (Griffith & Hebl, 2002). Trust and honesty in social interactions are considered two important organizational values that increase the willingness to disclosure. The following quote illustrates this viewpoint: "there was openness and complicity in the relationship" (Int. 11). Interviewee 5 said that affinity with other colleagues allowed her to share her sexual orientation. However, the decision to come out only took place after a rigorous evaluation of the working environment, its openness, and the anticipation that they would not be rejected. For example, Interviewee 4 argued that "we need to take the pulse of other people".

Another reason presented by the interviewees to disclosure their sexual orientation is the perception of an inclusive environment. Interviewee 2 stated that "I had a lesbian colleague of mine who worked there and that made me feel comfortable to come out". Interviewee 20 argues that the field of arts, in which he works, is an area far more inclusive compared to other work settings. This opinion was also expressed by Interviewee 15, who works in the audiovisual sector. Extant research shows that acceptance of minority sexual orientation is strongly related to the sector. Beauty, art and fashion areas are considered more accepting of non-normative sexual orientation and employ a higher percentage of LGBTQIA+ workers. The less tolerant sectors are education, justice and army (Colgan et al., 2007; Drydakis, 2019).

A third motive to disclosure has to do with the willingness of the interviewees to promote social change in their working environments using their sexual orientation to increase their coworkers' awareness and educate them on this matter. One participant argues that "I think that coming out in small networks can make a difference. It is a political duty" (Int. 13). This is in line with other studies where sexual minority identity is perceived as a political tool to produce change towards equality and increased acceptance of diversity (Creed & Scully, 2012).

The feeling of acceptance from those in intimate relationships and networks (relatives and friends) facilitates the decision to disclosure in the workplace. Interviewee 17 said that "once I revealed to my parents, I felt that I had no need to justify to others". Portugal remains a very traditional and patriarchal society where family is still at the center of affective and social relationships, and plays a central role in the construction of an individual's identity.

4.2   Non-Disclosure in the Workplace

One of the major reasons for not coming out referred by interviewees is the anticipated discrimination. Interviewee 8 said "the fear of reprisals and bad working environment" prevented him from revealing his sexual orientation. Ragins et al. (2007) mentioned that the fear of negative consequences (e.g. losing the job, being subjected to bullying) results in concealment of non-normative sexual orientation.

Other interviewees separate their private from professional lives as they consider that such kind of information belongs to the personal sphere. The perception of a homophobic working environment reinforces this need to maintain concealed their sexual orientation (Garcia & Souza, 2010). Interviewee 9 said that he heard several homophobic comments from colleagues, his boss, clients, and such negative remarks refrained him from revealing his sexual orientation.

The lack of friendship relationships and perceived lack of support in the workplace aggravates the feeling of not being accepted. Interviewee 19 says: "I do not feel motivated to talk about my sexual orientation since people I work with are very different from me".

Finally, some participants fear that their professional competence can be questioned by their coworkers if they decide to reveal. Some studies show that professional competence is defined by heteronormativity leading to the devaluation of LGBTQIA+ performance at work (Rumens & Kerfoot, 2009).

5. Conclusion

The empirical evidences found out in this study are similar to those presented in previous studies developed in other geographies. This means that the reasons for disclosure or non-disclosure apply to different cultures and societies, which shows that heteronormativity prevails in the labor market and contributes to the persistence of several forms of discrimination at work. Nevertheless, more research is needed to untap the LGBTQIA+ experiences of discrimination in the workplace, particularly in a Catholic country with strong traditional family values.

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