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Kyle Militello
University of Western Ontario, kmilitel@uwo.ca

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***Managing a Homosexual Identity
within a Heteronormative Workplace
Environment***

Author: ***Kyle Carmelo Militello***

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Abstraction

This paper investigates the experiences of openly gay men within the workplace. In exploring the obstacles unique to sexual minorities within the labour market, three common identity management strategies are reviewed. Many studies have documented not only the existence of sexual orientation-based workplace discrimination but also its prevalence within contemporary society. In arguing for the importance of acceptance-based education, this paper advocates for increased tolerance within the workplace.

***Managing a Homosexual Identity
within a Heteronormative Workplace Environment***

KYLE CARMELO MILITELLO

Discrimination based on sexual orientation is widely experienced throughout the paid labour market. Unlike other minority groups, little research has been conducted on the workplace discrimination affecting sexual minorities. Going beyond simply exploring the issue of disclosure or non-disclosure, this paper will investigate how one manages a homosexual identity within a heteronormative workplace environment. Faced with hostile workplace environments, gay men employ various identity management strategies. Specifically, in review of current research, this paper will argue that these strategies take three forms: (1) concealing, (2) tolerating, and (3) educating.

It is important to note that this paper reflects the findings of research on primarily self-identifying gay men. Although excluding other sexual minority groups, by mainly focusing on a single sexual orientation this paper will be able to provide an in-depth investigation into the experiences of gay men within the workplace. Social institutions are based on gendered and heteronormative assumptions. With workplaces in particular, the ideal worker is a heterosexual male who participates within the public paid labour market while having a wife mainly focused within the private sphere of the home (Acker, 1990). In relation to sexual minorities, this paper will review this perceived standard arguing that it perpetuates discrimination among sexual minority groups.

Many studies have documented not only the existence of sexual orientation-based workplace discrimination but also its prevalence within contemporary society. Research has illustrated that discrimination against gay men can be seen in both gaining employment and wage differences. It has been found that even at the initial stages of hiring there is significant discrimination directed at gay men because of their sexual orientation. A recent study conducted by Tilcsik (2011) found that openly homosexual men face notable hiring discrimination within several parts of the United States. In particular, this study concluded that heterosexual applicants received a callback rate nearly double the rate experienced by

homosexual applicants (Tilcsik, 2011). In reference to wage inequality, various studies have found that gay men earn substantially less than their heterosexual male counterparts (Allegretto & Arthur 2001, Carpenter 2007). Specifically, in some cases gay men have been found to earn as much as twenty-seven percent less than heterosexual men when controlling for factors including age, race, education, occupation, and region (Badgett, 1995).

According to recent findings, nearly ten percent of LGBT employees chose to leave a job because of a hostile and non-accepting work environment (Fidas & Cooper, 2014). Faced with prejudice and heterosexism within the workplace, it should come to no surprise that some openly gay men have resorted to relocating to more supportive and ‘gay-friendly’ companies. Research shows that workplace acceptance is a key factor in worker satisfaction among gay men as a result of the legislative protection within these gay-friendly workplace organizations (Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). Although this occupational segregation towards more gay-friendly workplaces appears to provide many benefits, it is nothing more than a Band-Aid solution to a much larger societal problem. This paper will now explore current research into the experience of those within heteronormative companies and the management strategies employed by self-identifying gay men when faced with workplace discrimination.

Management Strategy of Concealment

The topic of disclosure has been an interest in many studies involving the experiences of sexual minorities within the workplace environment. Defined by Collins & Miller (1994: 457), disclosing involves an “act of revealing personal information about oneself to another” which often includes revealing highly sensitive and possibly stigmatizing information. In considering the experiences of gay men within the workplace, the decision not to disclose sexual orientation and hiding their sexual minority status is a common choice among many homosexual men. In considering this, this paper proposes gay men within the workplace may manage their sexual identity with a strategy involving concealment. This strategy to conceal one’s sexual orientation occurs when the individual chooses to hide his homosexuality from the heteronormative workplace environment.

A recent study conducted in the United States by the Human Rights Campaign, a civil rights organization, found that a large proportion of those identifying as sexual minorities

within the workplace are closeted on the job. Specifically, the study found that “despite a changing social and legal landscape for LGBT people, still over half (53 percent) of LGBT workers nationwide hide who they are at work” (Fidas & Cooper, 2014). Although society has witnessed progress regarding the rights of sexual minorities, individuals not conforming to the heterosexual norm continue to face prejudicial and discriminatory treatment. In review of current research reflecting the societal opinions of gay men within the workplace, the National Defense Research Institute (1992) found that a majority of the heterosexual population report feeling uncomfortable with the idea of working with gay men. Furthermore, when asked their opinion of working with homosexual men nearly twenty-seven percent of the respondents indicated that they would “prefer not to” and an additional twenty-five percent admit they would “strongly object” (National Defense Research Institute, 1992).

In response to potential stigma, violence, and discrimination, some gay men within the workplace foster a strategy of concealing their sexual identity. Although providing a shield, protecting them from the potential prejudice they may become susceptible to if out to their coworkers, the act of concealing one’s sexual orientation can lead to many negative consequences. Research has shown that this choice of concealment potentially creates stress and anxiety as hiding one’s sexual orientation requires a great deal of effort commonly resulting in feelings of being misunderstood, alienation, and dissatisfaction (Williamson, 1993).

Management Strategy of Tolerance

An additional management strategy this paper proposes openly gay men take within the workplace is to tolerate. By tolerate this paper refers to a situation where the individual simply ignores the discrimination and prejudice he faces within his workplace environment. Individuals utilizing this strategy may believe or, depending on location, may be aware that nothing can be done to confront the workplace discrimination. Findings show that the presence of anti-discriminatory legislation to protect the rights of gay men from being targeted because of their sexual orientation is successful in reducing employer-based discrimination (Tilcsik, 2011).

In regards to a Canadian context, Canada has implemented federal legislation to

outlaw discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation under the Canadian Human Rights Act of 1996, thereby protecting the rights of LGBT individuals within the workforce (www.pch.gc.ca). However, this extent of federal legal protection is not evident among many countries leaving many non-heterosexual workers vulnerable. For example, there are no federal policies outlawing sexual orientation based discrimination within the United States, as protective legislation varies from state to state (Lewis, 1997). The United States, being a country culturally and developmentally similar to that of Canada, illustrates the non-uniform legal protection of sexual minorities. Hence, individuals may tolerate the discrimination they face partly due to a lack of legislative protection.

With the absence of anti-discriminatory laws, there may be certain benefits to tolerating the unfair treatment gay men potentially experience within the workplace. Gay men who employ this strategy could possibly view tolerating the hardships they face as providing employment stability, reducing fear of termination. Current research suggests that the homophobic attitudes within heteronormative workplace environments present potential threats to openly gay men in terms of loss of employment, hostile workplace climates, and limitations of job mobility (Dankmeijer, 1993). Perhaps in choosing a less-tolerating approach, such as actively confronting the discrimination they face, may make them an easy target because of the potential lack of legal protection. Therefore, openly gay employees may simply choose to tolerate the discrimination they face in fear of making their workplace environment worse or even losing their job.

Management Strategy to Educate

In considering the relevance of sexual orientation within the public sphere of the workplace, we may be prompted to question if the discussion of sexual orientation is even appropriate within a professional environment. Why is there a concern for the degree of openness of those belonging to sexual minorities within a setting such as the workplace? The reality is conversations concerning the personal nature of things such as spouses; social life, politics, and children are not limited to the private sphere of the home but are very much integrated within the professional dialogue between coworkers. Research on the social interactions between coworkers reveal that these conversational topics are quite common

within daily interactions while on the job. Specifically, regardless of their sexual orientation, employees report experiencing exchanges and discussion related to children, weekend activities, personal sex life, and dating on a daily or weekly basis (Fidas & Cooper, 2014).

As topics involving a personal nature commonly find their way into the workplace, it is clear why one's openness regarding sexual orientation becomes a concern even in the public and professional sphere of the office. In reference to the prejudice and discriminatory views facing gay men discussed in previous sections, it comes to no surprise that one of the most cited reasons for LGBT employees not to disclose their sexual orientation is the possibility of being stereotyped (Fidas & Cooper, 2014). However, recent studies have shown that despite the potential prejudice and discrimination, many gay men choose to disclose their sexual orientation to their coworkers.

The third and final strategy this paper proposes openly gay men use within the workplace involves educating. A proactive strategy where the gay man is open about his sexual orientation, the identity strategy to educate is common among those individuals who confront the obstacles they face as an opportunity to educate coworkers on the effects of prejudice and harmful stereotypes. Badgett (2001), when investigating the factors leading to the decision of a homosexual man to disclose his orientation within the workplace, finds a striking proportion indicated that their decision was influenced by a desire to educate their peers. Specifically, it was found that among those individuals who chose be 'out' in the workplace, the most commonly reported influencing factor was a desire to educate their coworkers on their inaccurate and harmful preconceptions (Badgett, 2001).

Thus, disclosing one's sexual orientation allows the gay employee to proactively challenge and overcome the heterosexism present within the workplace. Furthermore, the decision to not disclose can potentially put the employee at a greater disadvantage as being out allows the possibility to advocate for policy changes (Creed & Scully, 2000). With reference to the tolerating-oriented strategy discussed previously, it is important to note that while both strategies of tolerating and educating involve disclosing one's sexual orientation, the two are fundamentally different. The proactive nature of educating coworkers in the hopes of bringing about change makes this strategy a greater benefit at both the individual and institutional levels. In addition, this educating-based identity strategy is found to benefit

an individual's overall satisfaction both outside and within the workplace (Griffith & Hebl, 2002).

Conclusion

In reference to current literature, this paper has proposed that gay men employ various strategies regarding the disclosure of their sexual identities within the workplace. The first strategy proposed within this paper involved an inactive approach where the homosexual man would conceal his sexual identity for fear of facing prejudice and discrimination. With reference to the second proposed strategy, although not inactive, the tolerance strategy was seen as a more passive identity approach. Although the man has disclosed his homosexuality, fear of various hardships and often lack of legislative protection encourages a 'keep your head down' and tolerant attitude when faced with workplace prejudice. The third and final approach suggested within this paper was a more proactive strategy where gay men, having disclosed their sexual orientation, confront the stigma they face as an opportunity to educate their coworkers on their prejudice and harmful stereotypes.

In review of these three strategies, this paper has outlined the stigma and alienation faced by those belonging to sexual minorities within the workplace. With the potential of educating those around them, the suggestion has been made that the proactive strategy of educating promotes awareness and compassion for LGBT workers. The negative stigma and prejudice associated with those belonging to sexual minorities has been explored, and the claim has been made that the heterosexist and institutionalized discrimination within contemporary workplace environments must be addressed for this potential to be realized.

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