

Forms of Resistance to the Organization's Symbolic Heteronormative Order

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Abstract

This paper presents five challenges that non-heterosexual workers pose to Italian public and private workplaces in order to counteract to the heteronormative hegemony of organizations. The empirical background is based on 34 narrative interviews conducted to self-defined non-heterosexuals who had come out with at least one person in their workplace. Following the stories' analysis about challenging the symbolic gender order in organizations (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007), I identified five ways of resisting to the heteronormative order of workplaces, taking into consideration three features characterizing non-heterosexuals' narratives about work life (the degree of visibility, the commitment showed towards work, and the centrality of sexual identity in the workplace).

Key Words: Sexual identity, heteronormativity, coming out, narrative interviews, Italian workplaces.

Although workplaces could be meant as heteronormative contexts from a structural, discursive, normative and practical point of view, sexual orientation is still an under-research area in work organizations (Ward and Winstanley, 2005) due to the difficulty to access information around themes connected to sexuality. The framework provided by this research produces a significant contribution to our understanding of how minority sexual identity is constructed and managed at work because this paper's aim is to give voice to every individual that doesn't recognize her/himself in a heterosexual definition of her/his orientation, desires, behaviours, emotions, and identities. In order to do so, I will present five forms of resistance to the organization's symbolic heteronormative order that still represents the bias of workplaces.

The organizational change that will be the object of this paper is therefore the result of five challenges that non heterosexual workers pose to Italian public and private workplaces in order to counteract to the heteronormative hegemony of organizational contexts.

1. Theoretical Background

The field of organizational studies offers an interesting starting point in dismantling taken-for-granted notions about sexuality, since

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“organizational cultures are sexualized and their claims not to be it derive from the fact that they have a moral commitment toward an ethic of universality” (Gherardi, 1995, 24). In Gherardi's book, *Gender and organizations*, it is clear how in organizations sexuality becomes neutralized in a double meaning: it is erased and made neutral, that means taking heterosexuality as it were universal. Researchers have bonded gender and sexuality into one, shaping “a concept of gender overloaded with meaning while sexuality is rendered invisible and heterosexuality is normalized” (Pringle, 2008, S110). The questions at this point are: in an organizational culture, what is the meaning attached to sexuality and gender, and how are they shaped? Following Ward and Winstanley (2003), there have been few researches that have focused upon the construction of sexual identity in relation to the organizational context: the majority of the studies has considered the term “sexuality” along with other acceptations of the umbrella term “diversity”, analyzing it as an individual property rather than a process determined by the context in which it takes place (Ward and Winstanley, 2006).

One of the topic correlated with my paper is the matrix of domain that permeates relations within organizations, and it is made by three levels: individual, of the group, of the system (Martin, 1994). Following Foucault (1976), I deem sexuality not ad an individual property, but as an available category and a discursive effect of power relations. This is why Foucault (1976) suggests to analyse the genesis of a certain knowledge about sexuality in terms of power, breaking with previous conceptualizations that took into consideration sexuality as a result of repressions and laws.

Therefore, it does exist a model of sexual orientation, legitimized within society, that is learnt and acted within organizational contexts: sexuality, meant as corporal desires, attractions and erotic behaviour (Brewis, 2002), is underwritten within organizational discourse following the norms that organize it within social context, that are heterosexual rules. 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), even though sexuality still represents a taboo argument in organizational contemporary theories (Hancock and Tyler, 2001). Recent studies on gender and sexuality in organizations have underlined how individuals enter their workplaces with a set of corporal 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).

Following the assumption of many studies in organizational research (Martin and Jurik, 1996), I deem 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 judgments of others” (Miller et al., 2003, 357). It is possible to affirm that the hostile attitude of the society towards sexual minorities moves to workplace, making it difficult to come out for people carrying a different kind of sexual orientation, and to make research in this particular field of studies (Ward and Winstanley, 2003), since sexual orientation is an invisible stigma that a person can decide not to reveal.

Studying how sexual identity is created, constructed and maintained implies referring to the wider reference setting, that is the Occidental culture, where homosexual experience is still considered a transgression from THE norm: the heterosexual norm. This goal becomes even more essential since we are witnessing an attempt to keep under silence, as they did not exist, patterns of existence different from the heterosexual ones. This prevarication rests upon non-explicit power dynamics that need to be revealed since “we are struck by the intractable and enduring nature of organizational power structures and the shocking inequalities they perpetuate in our society” (Macalpine and Marsh, 2005).

Heteronormativity is defined as the practices and institutions “that legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and “natural” within society” (Cohen, 2005, 24). The assumption of every research on sexuality in the workplace is that the context in which workers are embedded is shaped by heteronormativity and heterosexuality: in organizational studies, heterosexuality is presented as the natural order of things (Humphrey, 1999) that reinforces the domain of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980), whose power is given by a principle of “non examined heterocentrality” (Rich, 1989). This assumption of heterosexuality means that, unless it is demonstrated the contrary, every individual that interacts in the workplace is considered to be heterosexual. Therefore, the construction of other sexual identities brings to light the heterosexual character of workplaces, making it necessary to analyse “the ways in which heterosexuality, discursively, structurally and institutionally, is reproduced and perpetuated in the workplace” (McDermott, 2006, 194).

One of the approaches undertaken by my research is that of queer theory, which explores “what has been rendered “abnormal” during processes of normalization (Lee et al., 2008, 150). With the concept of “normalization” I refer to those notions of normality that manage daily life of people’s activities and expression of selfhood. Thanks to queer theories is then possible to discover “diverse reading strategies and multiple interpretative stances” that facilitate “resistance to regimes of the normal” (Hall, 2003,

XXVI). Sexuality identity is then studied as a performative act (staged by non heterosexual workers with the collaboration of other actors) that has effects on the organizational culture by producing some kind of change, as it will be showed in the section about the main findings of the research.

2. Research Design and Methodology

The empirical background of my PhD research is based on 32 narrative interviews conducted to non-heterosexual people working in the public and private sectors. According to Glazer and Strauss (1967), this research has followed a theoretical sampling: this non-probability sample was not representative in a qualitative sense, but nor it intended to be, given the qualitative approach of the study (Silverman, 2001). Thus, sampling was selected trying to collect qualitative data concerning different ways of constructing and managing sexual identities at work. Through a snowball sampling, people were selected because they have come out at least once in their workplace. Moreover, I interviewed two gay men that didn't come out at all in the workplace, but I realized it just during the interview. It was after the research was finished that I realized the importance of this two interviews: they represent the "point 0" of the process of coming out conceived as a continuum. In fact, this kind of analysis is possible just if we conceive coming out not as a single event that happens once, as Seidman (2002) explains it in *Beyond the closet*. Coming out is then defined as a process, being a performative act that doesn't happen just once but it is reiterated (Ward and Winstanley, 2005), following Butler's definition of performance as a reiterated ritual (Butler, 1993). This is one of the reasons why, following Spradley (1979), the interview design consisted of a wide open generating question about the subject's working life, followed by framing and focused questions; nevertheless, a high degree of flexibility was retained in order to allow the conversation to flow in directions decided by the person interviewed.

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

One of the main strength of this methodological work is due to the empathic dimensions of narrative interviews. In social sciences, the narrative turn is attributed to Lyotard (1979) and Bruner (1986): Lyotard made clear the polyphonic, fragmented and dissonant qualities of a postmodern narration, while Bruner saw in narrations the perfect instrument to understand how subjects give meaning to their experience and how they make sense of their social world. The first goal of a "good interview" is to create a trustworthy climate with the interviewee, which needs to rely on the interviewer in order to talk freely about his/her intimate experience in an heteronormative workplace.

3. Challenges to the workplace's heteronormative order

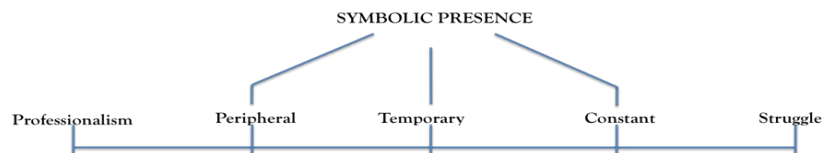
I use a reading described by Gherardi and Poggio's analysis about challenging the symbolic gender order in organizations (2007). When women enter male workplaces, they activate a double challenge to the symbolic order represented by hegemonic masculinity: they identify themselves as women but, at the same time, they distinct themselves from women in the same organization but with lower positions.

I've then interpreted my interviews on the basis of a double challenge that non heterosexual subjects pose when they enter a heteronormative workplace: they have to constantly negotiate an ambivalence toward their sexual identity, and this ambivalence is translated in forms of distinctions and identification with the identity that represents a rupture with the heteronormative symbolic order of the workplace.

First of all, I've recognized three distinctive features characterizing non-heterosexuals' narratives about working life:

- a. the degree of visibility (coming out stories);
- b. the commitment showed towards work;
- c. the centrality of sexual identity in the workplace.

Challenges to the workplace's heteronormative order



As it is possible to see from the picture, there are two challenges that are at the opposite side of the continuum, and they are the challenge through professionalism and the challenge through struggle. In the middle, the challenge to the workplace's heteronormative order is made possible by the symbolic presence that can be peripheral, temporary or constant, as we will see more in detail below.

3.1 Challenge through professionalism

This challenge characterizes men occupied in managerial positions that give value to a sharp division between private and professional sphere. They usually try to silence their sexual identity at work, while presenting a high level of commitment and alignment to the heteronormative structure of workplaces, showing a stereotypical vision of homosexuality: they openly declare to be different from "other" homosexuals.

People can accept homosexuals like me: I get up at 7 to go to work and I come back home at nine in the evening after 15 hours of work. They see that I'm honest, that I'm a good seller, that I have a quiet way of living. (Christian, entrepreneur, 28)

A central issue of these narratives regards the fact of "knowing how to present oneself": to be accepted, men whose challenge is made possible through professionalism adhere to the hegemonic masculinity of the workplace, that is an heteronormative masculinity. This attitude, though, contributes to create a hierarchy between honourable and unrespectable homosexuals. Talking about rights, this attitude is at the core of the debate about sexual citizenship, whose main lack is represented by this taken for granted primacy of subjects whose desire is homologation to the hegemonic discourse.

At the same time, though, resistance is made possible thanks to the creation of a community of practices based on sexual identity: this process will be better understood through the concept of "sexuality switching", that is that they constantly switch between their professional identity and their sexual identity

3.2 Challenge through the peripheral symbolic presence

This challenge is performed by workers that have a high degree of commitment and try to manage both professional and relational satisfaction by coming out only with colleagues that they trust. It's a strategy that doesn't posit a direct challenge to the heteronormative order, but there is an attempt to negotiate their sexual identity only with some of the colleagues.

[The advice I would give to an homosexual colleague is] not to come out because it is not necessary. It would be provoking. I can't see the need to come out. (Marta, technical saleswoman, 50)

The strategy adopted is that of a selective coming out that is made only with a few colleagues that are considered friends.

3.3 Challenge through the temporary symbolic presence

This challenge is characterized by a lower commitment, since work is presented as a way of obtaining economic independence, not as a path to personal fulfilment. These workers have come out with everybody in the organizational context because they hope for a surpassing of gender and sexual identity (more from an egalitarian point of view than from a queer approach).

I don't like to put a line between homosexuals and heterosexuals. The most wonderful thing is when you start to be nothing, that is that you are considered as anyone else. Then you realize that people have accepted you, you are invisible as the rest of humanity, and it is a great experience. (Eva, call centre employee, 33)

3.4 Challenge through the constant symbolic presence

The challenge through the constant symbolic presence aims to completely change the organizational culture through practice and explicit reference to non-heterosexual way of living.

I tell you something...we usually say that there are three phases in homosexuality: the “?-phase” is when you ask yourself which sexual orientation you have; the “!-phase” is when you would like to tell everybody; the “...-phase” is when you get used to it, and it is the best phase ever! (Lino, cruise ship's shop manager, 46)

Visibility has been reached gradually after evaluating how workplace could have reacted to coming out: at the same time, as you can imagine from the excerpt, there is a gradually path of self-acceptance. The commitment is high because work is invested with an emotional meaning, as well. The conflict with the heteronormative workplace is not direct, but it is constantly carried out through daily work oriented to spread the positive reading of homosexuality.

3.5 Challenge as struggle

The challenge through struggle is carried out by workers that take a stand daily toward discrimination. Coming out has been made with everybody in the organization because these interviewee don't want to silence any aspect of their identity, especially at work.

How do I consider my attitude? Of struggle. If a person attacks me, I react. Because if you don't react, you'll die. It's my experience. (Alberto, policeman, 29)

I live my being lesbian as a daily struggle. (Viola, public sector employee, 34)

The level of commitment presented by these interviewees is high, since work is considered as an important and satisfactory sphere of their life: thanks to work, these workers have been able to become economically independent and, consequently, to affirm their identity.

4. Conclusive thoughts

The empirical field that I have presented took place in Italy, a country where there doesn't exist a clear anti-discriminatory legislation against homophobia: this is the reason why the majority of respondents report having looked for personal solutions such as interactional strategies instead of posing an open political conflict. In order to avoid these personal strategies, coming out should be read as a process that regards not only workers who perform it, but as a process that involves any subject that works in the organization.

In this sense, my contribution aims at reading sexual identity not in terms of a property but in terms of a performance in order to counteract the discursive construction of sexual identity based on the dichotomy of heterosexuality/homosexuality. In fact, this essentialist reading reproduces the disposal of power that defines the second term as hierarchically inferior. To me, reading the process of coming out as a performance is a way of surpassing this dichotomy.

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