The Sound of Silence. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Discrimination in 'Inclusive Organizations'*

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Most studies on diversity and discrimination in the workplace have focused on 'visible' minorities such as gender or race, often neglecting the experiences of invisible minorities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) workers. In this paper we explore the practices of inclusion/exclusion of LGBTs in the workplace in Italian social cooperatives, which are specifically founded to create employment for people who are disadvantaged in the labour market. The study examines how organizations, which have an ethos focused on inclusion and mainly employ workers from specific social minority groups, manage the inclusion of LGBT workers. We also explore the experience of LGBT workers within these organizations. The paper reports that the culture of silence existing in the five organizations studied prevents LGBT employees from constructing a work identity which encompasses their sexual identity and prevents the organizations from achieving their aim of being fully inclusive workplaces.

Introduction

Research into diversity and inclusion in the workplace has focused on the further understanding of processes such as diversity management policies and practices (e.g. Bell, 2007; Healey *et al.*, 2010; Konrad, Prasad and Pringle, 2006; Özbilgin, 2009), minority employees' management of identity (e.g. Bell and Nkomo, 2003; Bowring and Brewis, 2009) and employee voice and silence (e.g. Rank, 2009; Trau, Härtel and Härtel, 2013) among others. Although such research has more recently widened its scope, we can still observe that most studies have focused on 'visible' minorities in the workplace, such as gender or race, and have neglected researching the experiences of invisible minorities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual

and transgender (LGBT[1]) workers. Not only is sexuality an under-researched area within diversity at work but it is also one of the most difficult to research because LGBT people have to play an active role in the 'acknowledgement' process through coming out with the researcher and/or colleagues (Ward and Winstanley, 2005). Such a process, though, is fraught with complexity due to the fact that organizations have traditionally been represented as rational, sexless realms (Hall, 1989; Martin, 1992), where any reference to gender

[1]The expression LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) is only one of the many terms/acronyms used; different categories (such as asexual, pansexual and polysexual) and new acronyms such as QUILTBAG (queer/questioning, undecided, intersex, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, asexual and gay) are emerging. We used the acronym LGBT because it is widely used and the homosexuals we talked to defined themselves according to the categories included here. We consider it important that research on sexuality embraces the varieties of people's sexual orientations.

work is based on 'heterogender' (Pringle, 2008) defined as the process by which gender obscures the place of sexuality in men and women's identity creating a heterosexual imaginary (Ingraham, 2005, in Pringle, 2008). In general, 'heterogender' is grounded on heteronormativity, defined as the expectations, demands and constraints produced when heterosexuality is taken as normative within a society and thus when biological gender roles fit with sexuality.

In the context of culturally accepted norms that represent heterosexuality as the prescribed standard, heteronormativity is naturalized through performances and dominant discourses (Butler, 1997), which 'act as mechanisms of power and control, limiting the ability of gay and lesbian people to construct and talk about their own homosexual identities at work' (Reingardė, 2010, p. 85). As Foucault (1976) highlighted, the dominant heterosexual discourse reproduces unequal power relationships between the heterosexual majority and non-heterosexual minority groups, in that heteronormativity silences minorities and the act of silencing is an agent of power in its own right.

In taking for granted the alignment of sex, gender and sexuality, heteronormativity limits those people who do not recognize themselves in the normative model of heterosexuality (Butler, 1990) and therefore leads them to construct separate 'sexual' and 'work' identities. In fact, as several studies have highlighted (e.g. Gusmano, 2008, 2010; Reingardė, 2010), many homosexual workers think of coming out as a private matter, irrelevant to their work life and as an 'unprofessional' act (Woods and Lucas, 1993), thus further contributing to undermine the importance of sexuality at work. Discrimination against homosexual and transgender people is more difficult to detect and address than other forms of discrimination because it is generally based on moral or religious values, which are embedded in national cultures and are less susceptible to negotiation (e.g. Colgan *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore in some national contexts the absence of legal protection and the relative lack of organizational equality policies (particularly in small organizations) and trade union support exacerbate the climate of silence. Specifically, in Italy, although sexual orientation is included in the legislation on employment discrimination, no legislation exists against homophobia; harassments and aggressions based on sexual orientation are not considered in the penal code.[2]

The empirical focus of this paper is on privately owned Italian social cooperatives, specifically founded to create employment for people who are disadvantaged in the labour market. The study aims to investigate how organizations attempting to support the work and social inclusion of specific social minority groups manage and practise the inclusion of LGBT workers. Particular reference will be placed on investigating in practice the theoretical concept of heteronormativity through the exploration of the silencing practices in place at these organizations. The research provides a significant contribution to a currently under-researched area in that it analyses inclusion in the daily practices of organizational management by exploring the views and actions of managers and the perspectives of LGBT employees (the majority of these worked at managerial level). It does this in an organizational context which is becoming important but is still currently under-explored, namely that of social firms which, in this specific case, have as their core social aim that of supporting the social and work integration of disadvantaged groups.[3] We feel that this specific setting is of particular interest because such organizations work 'against normativity' employing socially marginalized people who do not fit within the normative standards of the 'typical worker', whatever this definition might be. Our interest is therefore to observe how these organizations extend their core aim of inclusion to a specific source of workplace discrimination such as homosexuality (which is not among the criteria of disadvantage they explicitly focus on such as disability, addictions and criminal convictions).

The paper is structured as follows. First we discuss the theoretical underpinning of the research, focusing on diversity and sexuality in the workplace with a specific focus on the organizational practices that facilitate or inhibit inclusion and sexual disclosure by LGBT workers. We consider these debates in the light of a specific social/national context and the empirical context of Italian social cooperatives, which we expect to be

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[2]At the time of writing, a new law on homophobia is being discussed in the Italian Parliament; however, there is no agreement between different parties and in many cases within each party, regarding the terms of the legislation.
[3]A more detailed explanation on these types of organizations is given in the Research setting section.

more attuned to practices of inclusion. Following on, the research methodology is outlined before reporting the analysis of the data emerging from in-depth individual and group interviews conducted with managers and with LGBT workers from five organizations. In addition, observations of meetings and work activities were also undertaken.

Compulsory heterosexuality: understanding heteronormativity in the workplace

The significance of sexual discrimination in the workplace has been underlined in a growing number of studies that focus on forms, processes and experiences of discrimination. Studies exploring the forms that sexual discrimination takes within the workplace have often focused on two different types of discrimination: formal and informal or interpersonal (Levine and Leonard, 1984; Munoz and Thomas, 2006). While formal discrimination encompasses exclusion during the hiring or promotion processes, lack of access and distribution of resources, interpersonal or informal discrimination includes verbal and nonverbal behaviours limiting the respect, credibility and psychological well-being of sexual minorities. While there is evidence that formal discrimination might currently be less common in the western world (see Colgan *et al.*, 2007, 2008; Giuffrè, Dellinger and Williams, 2008), particularly due to legislation,[4] social change[5] and organization poli-

cies,[6] there is also evidence to suggest that heterosexism and homophobic behaviours, manifested in informal and subtle acts, are still encountered by LGBT workers who feel to be treated differently due to their sexual orientation (Bell *et al.*, 2011; Buddel, 2011; Silverschanz *et al.*, 2008). As the transformation towards fully inclusive workplaces is therefore far from incomplete we feel that a greater focus on the processes that lead to experiences of exclusion is needed.

This study's perspective focuses on understanding the processes and practices that determine the reproduction and institutionalization of heterosexuality in work settings. As Hearn and Parkin (1987) suggested in their pioneering work, heterosexuality is normalized in organizations through cultural norms that prevent an open discussion of gay and lesbian relationships; formal policies privileging the heterosexual family arrangement; and workplace interactions and behaviours that demean homosexuality. Heteronormative work environments contribute to create a climate of silence around homosexual topics and can silence LGBT individuals, forcing them to remain in the closet for fear of discrimination and isolation (Ward and Winstanley, 2003).

The climate of silence around 'peripheral sexualities' represents a fundamental aspect of the discursive explosion on and around sex which has taken place during the last three centuries (Foucault, 1976). According to Foucault, silence itself, as the things one declines to say or that are forbidden, and its functions should become the object of analysis. Specifically, the purpose of a Foucauldian analysis is to understand which discourses are authorized and which are not, which are the discursive regularities, which are the *archives* of all material traces left behind by a particular historical period and culture. There is not one silence but many silences; thus social theorists must try to understand the different ways of 'not saying' certain things, and the dis-

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[4]For example in the UK the 2003 Employment Equality – Sexual Orientation regulation and the 2010 Equality Act; in the EU the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 and the 2000/78 Directive against employment discrimination.

[5]Recent census statistics show a trend towards greater openness in processes of self-classification. The Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (2012) reports that 2.4% of the Italian population identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual (15.6% refused to answer and 5% have answered 'other'). In the USA approximately 9 million adults (approximately 4% of the population) consider themselves LGBT (Williams Institute, 2011). In the UK the Office for National Statistics (2010) published a survey showing that 1.5% of the population categorized itself as LGB (although 2.8% refused to answer or answered 'I don't know'). Other studies report percentages oscillating between 5% and 7%, e.g. Erens *et al.* (2003) suggest that there are 3.7 million LGB people in the UK.

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[6]Among the top 50 Fortune 500 companies, for example, 48 now include sexual orientation in their non-discrimination policies and 88% extend domestic partner benefits, including health insurance, to the same-sex domestic partners of employees. Companies that have adopted these policies report that they improve employee morale and productivity; beyond the business justifications they also report that LGBT policies are consistent with their corporate values of fairness and respect and it is the right thing to have them (Williams Institute, 2011).

tinction between those who can and those who cannot speak of them. Foucault (1961) highlights how Modern Age's will to knowledge about sex is the expression of power as diffused and embodied in discourse. Power is everywhere, comes from everywhere, and is produced by various forms of constraint. 'It must be understood [. . .] as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization' (Foucault, 1976, p. 92). 'General politics' and 'regimes of truth', resulting from scientific discourse and institutions (e.g. educational system, family and work organizations), are strengthened and/or redefined through several systems, one of which is the silencing of sexual minorities.

In progressing from this theoretical articulation of discourses as 'general and prevalent systems for the formation and articulation of ideas in a particular period of time' (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000, p. 1126) to the specific conception of discourse as emergent and locally constructed in organizational practices (discursive),[7] our focus is on the organizational norms of acceptable conducts and the privileging of meanings and interpretation by organizational members. Sexuality in this perspective is silenced because of its power of intruding upon and disrupting the ideal functioning of the organization (Acker, 1990, in Simpson and Lewis, 2005). Therefore the conceptualization of voice in organization studies should not be reduced to a simple act of complaint about perceived injustices; instead voice and silence are processes that can maintain or challenge power relations and can either contribute to the suppression of marginalized groups' visibility and their interests or attempt change (Simpson and Lewis, 2005).

The theoretical concept of heteronormativity is useful in helping to identify the silencing processes through which individuals who do not appear to 'fit' or refuse to 'fit' within the sex/gender bounda-

ries are made invisible and silenced. Heteronormative assumptions and practices regulate the beliefs, behaviours and desires of all, homosexual and heterosexual, in that they restrict the range of possibilities of identification and expression for everyone (Afshar, 2004). Practices of regulation and restriction are integral to creating and maintaining hierarchies of power, which in turn limit the kinds of talks, interactions and performances in the workplace. Therefore the issue of silence goes beyond LGBT issues in that it also concerns how assumptions about heterosexuality, often held unconsciously, are rendered invisible.

Heteronormative organizations and practices block access to full participation to the workplace and undermine the development of an individual's work identity which fully encompasses his/her sexual identity. The demarcation between one's sexual identity and her/his work and professional identity, and the subsequent denial of one to the other, has been assimilated to inhabiting two worlds (Humphrey, 1999). Some LGBTs, in fact, create a façade of conformity with colleagues and managers often constructing a heterosexual partner and a heterosexual life (Özbilgin and Woodward, 2003; Ward and Winstanley, 2003), suppressing the sense of who they are.

With limited research on more inclusive organizations, we questioned whether there might be more opportunities for LGBTs to self-identify within those organizations recognized for their commitment to integration and inclusion. We have therefore chosen to base this research on social cooperatives, with the aim of investigating whether and how the inclusion practices and support mechanisms they have in place to help the integration of specific disadvantaged groups are negotiated during formal and informal interactions to support the inclusion of LGBT workers and the engagement with their needs. In the next section we consider in detail the research context and explore the characteristics of this type of social firm.

The research setting: the Italian diversity management context and the sector of social cooperatives

Whereas much has been written on diversity management by US and Anglo-Saxon scholars, little is known about diversity management practices in

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[7]Alvesson and Karreman (2000) distinguish between Discourse with a capital D, referring to a Foucaldian's approach to discourse as a macro, general and prevalent system, and discourse with a small d as the micro, situated system of meanings existing within a specific setting or context. While a Foucaldian analysis focuses generally on the macro level, Fairclough (2005) suggests that social research should aim at achieving an analysis focused on the macro as well as the micro levels, even when this leads to a compromise in terms of research rigour.

other national contexts. With reference to the Italian context, specific 'regularities' (Foucault, 1969) emerge in the discourses concerning sexual minorities and what can or cannot be said. Italian legislation, for example, has traditionally been silent on issues of sexual orientation; only subsequently to significant social pressures has the EU Directive (2000/78) against employment discrimination based on sexual orientation been transposed into Italian law (initially in 2003[8] and then amended in 2008). The legislation, though, allows the possibility of differential treatment if the stated characteristics 'affect the performance of work or constitute decisive requisites for its carrying out', still thus constructing homosexuality as a potential force for disrupting work functioning.

Furthermore, in relation to diversity management efforts in Italy, gender and disability, and more recently ethnicity, have been given precedence over sexual orientation,[9] which is widely viewed as a personal rather than a social matter. While the country has a tradition of equal treatment formalized by the equality principles contained in the Italian Constitution of 1947, the concept of diversity management is still in its infancy and is mainly viewed as a mechanism to 'protect' a category considered to be weaker than, and 'different from', a hegemonic model, rather than recognizing the 'diversity' of single individuals (Murgia and Poggio, 2010, p. 171). Further evidence of these social 'archives' is provided by several studies concerning the experiences of LGBT workers in Italy (e.g. Barbagli and Colombo, 2007; Bertone *et al.*, 2003; D'Ippoliti and Schuster, 2011; Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2011; Lelleri, Pozzoli and Berardi, 2011), which show a strong tendency by homosexuals to stay in the closet at work due to serious risks of discrimination, particularly informal discrimination.

Within such social and historical context, which silences 'a personal choice' while supporting the development of systems aimed at protecting certain 'weaker' social groups, it is worthwhile highlighting the normalization, in legal terms, of new forms of organizations, namely social firms, aimed directly at stimulating workplace inclusion of disadvantaged individuals and groups. While Italy has been at the forefront of social entrepreneurship, in 1991 social firms were formally regulated to offer public sector support to those private firms involved in social inclusion (Borzaga and Tortia, 2009). This has determined a significant growth of social firms in the country. The legislation ratifies the existence of a specific form of social firm aimed at the creation of social inclusion through employment for certain disadvantaged groups, namely physically or mentally disabled, present or former psychiatric patients, drug addicts, alcoholics and criminal offenders. The perspective of the legislators and government policy makers is founded on the view that, through employment, individuals who are marginalized in society will gain a form of human dignity and, with the right guidance and support, such work inclusion will subsequently facilitate their social inclusion.

Social cooperatives are the most widespread form of social firm in Italy;[10] they are generally small in size and operate at regional level. A significant factor in the growth of social cooperatives has been the linkage to local government's services which in effect are the cooperatives' main customers. By taking on such services social cooperatives have filled the gap left by cuts to the provision of social welfare created by financial constraints and the increase in the demand of public goods and services (Borzaga and Tortia, 2009).

With reference to the specific organizations studied, analysis of the company documents and informal conversations and observations have highlighted that the perspective to social inclusion taken by these organizations reflects that of policy makers. Social exclusion is addressed first and foremost by providing employment to disadvantaged individuals, and then by actively supporting their journey towards full work and social inclusion. The process of work inclusion is seen as a collaborative, organization-wide effort which exists alongside a person-directed and individualized form of workplace counselling. The focus is on helping individuals to develop their capacity to

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[8]With the Legislative Decree no. 216 of 9 July 2003.

[9]For example, positive action has been embedded in gender equality legislation since 1991 and in June 2011 Italy introduced quotas for women on company boards, requiring the boards of listed companies to comprise 20% women by 2012 and 33% by 2015.

[10]In 2005 they numbered 7363, employing approximately 260,000 paid workers and 31,000 volunteers and achieving a turnover of €7 billion (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2007).

be successful and satisfied in their working and social environments. Discussions and participant observations of the workplace revealed the existence of formal processes aimed at supporting the inclusion of disadvantaged workers. Monthly formal group sessions are conducted by the rehabilitation manager with the objective of developing self-awareness and self-analysis and to reflect on the importance of workplace relations and organizational processes. They support individuals in understanding their difficulties and, more generally, in dealing with work and social struggles. Alongside these group sessions, disadvantaged workers are provided with individual counselling sessions generally offered by the on-site psychologist, who draws up an individualized project that considers relational and work objectives. The rehabilitation manager is employed by the consortium and works closely with the director and the deputy director of each of the four cooperatives in providing executive leadership, however formally she focuses on the 'social' (or rehabilitative) aspect of the enterprise. In addition to the executive team the organizational structure includes supervisors or middle managers who work closely with teams of workers.

Research methodology

This research explores processes and practices of LGBT diversity and inclusion at four different Italian social cooperatives, all part of a regional consortium. The cooperatives provide a range of services (see Table 1) to private and public sector companies and employ between 15 and 110 people. We initially made contact with the president of the regional consortium (which acts as an umbrella organization and consists of a board of seven members) who facilitated the contact with four cooperatives. The research took place in 2011 and the data collection phase lasted for approximately 7 months in which time we initially examined the companies' documentation; one of the authors observed work activities and meetings and informally talked to workers at various levels. Subsequently, having developed a clear idea on the approach to inclusion taken by the organizations, we conducted 13 semi-structured in-depth interviews with senior managers and LGBT workers and one focus group with seven supervisors. Specifically we interviewed all executive directors (they use the title of president) and all deputy directors of the four cooperatives, the president of the regional consortium and the rehabilitation manager. During the interviews with the senior managers, two of them declared their homosexuality to us (both are closeted in their organization) and agreed to be interviewed at a later stage in their role as LGBT workers. In addition we interviewed a transgender employee. We had great difficulties in accessing more LGBT workers even though we made formal and informal approaches. We also had difficulty in conducting more focus groups with supervisors and workers; on several occasions, having finalized the arrangements, those who had agreed to participate either did not attend or cancelled at the last minute.

During the interviews we asked participants to reflect on the relevance of sexual orientation in work organizations, to discuss the experiences of discrimination of LGBT employees, to share their views on the meaning of fully inclusive workplaces, and to reflect on the benefits of taking into

Table 1. Overview of the participant organizations

Cooperatives	Activity sector	Number of employees	Typology of disadvantages with percentage compared with non-disadvantaged employees
Cooperative Acacia	Upkeep of public parks and public and private spaces	110	Drug addicts; psychiatric patients; convicts (67%)
Cooperative Melissa	Cleaning services to local government buildings; provision of staff canteens to various organizations	38	Psychiatric patients; under-age convicts (35%)
Cooperative Hibiscus	Logistics, carriers and various technical services to various companies and banks (data entry, customer service)	20	Psychiatric patients (43%)
Cooperative Magnolia	Cleaning services to local government buildings; upkeep of public and private places; concierge service	15	Drug addicts; psychiatric patients; convicts; disabled (33%)

This table excludes the consortium.

account sexual orientation in work practices and organizational policies. The interviews and the focus group's duration varied between 1 and 2 hours. They were transcribed verbatim and all the authors independently examined the transcripts for emerging themes. The epistemological premises of this study reside within critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 2010; Fairclough, 1995, 2001, 2003, 2005) and we have followed Fairclough's (2001) CDA five stages in addressing the research problem. First, CDA focuses on a social problem (e.g. sexual discrimination at work), thus on illuminating the problem that a particular social group is confronted with by forms of social life which generate subjugation or discrimination. In this sense CDA based research has an emancipatory agenda. Second, research explores what obstacles prevent the solution of the problem, specifically how the structure and organization of social life resists change. While this stage focuses on exploring 'orders of discourse' (which is the Discourse at macro level – see footnote 7) it also investigates the ways of using language in interaction (micro level).[11] Third, in considering the necessity of the problem for maintaining the social order, the focus is on the ideological aspect of discourse as contributing to sustaining particular relations of power and domination. The fourth stage of the analysis focuses on the contradictions or failures within the dominant order and might highlight possibilities for change. Finally, the researcher should reflect on whether and how the critique can contribute to social emancipation.

Our analysis thus explores how heteronormativity as order of discourse is represented in the spoken language and the discursive and sociocultural practices as reproduced during the interviews. In operationalizing the analysis, initially the authors independently read the transcripts and categorized the texts into the main themes emerging from the data and entered them in a list with illustrative key quotes. Working together the authors agreed on the themes' denomination and the most illustrative quotes, in an effort to show the different perspectives emerging from the different individuals. Subsequently the authors

focused on specific discourses as particular ways of representing aspects of the organizational world. The discourse of silence, explored in this study, has emerged in several facets and here we have chosen to explore it in general terms and with reference to the specific silencing practices in action at these organizations. We also wanted to give voice to the silenced individuals who have spoken to us and therefore the second part of the analysis presents the experience of three LGBT employees. The analysis that follows focuses on the individual and group interviews. The company documents and the participant observations were mainly used to develop an understanding of the work and social setting and the specific approach to inclusion and rehabilitation used at the participant organizations. Thus, they have specifically informed the previous section and have indirectly favoured our understanding of the interview data.

Data analysis and discussion: managing LGBT issues in social cooperatives

Before presenting the analysis on silence, on the specific practices of silence and on the silenced voices, the session that follows provides an empirical introduction to the social context within which LGBTs (those who have spoken to us and those who have not) work.

An inconceivable reality

The words used by interviewees and focus group participants, and the empty spaces in-between them, revealed not only the low familiarity with LGBT topics but mainly the inconceivability of the non-heterosexual. Participants show uneasiness with LGBT issues and when mentioning specific homosexual individuals with whom they have worked. Many recur to periphrasis avoiding specific terminology (e.g. a senior manager refers to a bisexual woman as 'she was both of them'). Euphemisms are used as substitute for explicit expressions, which might be considered embarrassing. In some cases interviewees do not know the meaning of words associated with LGBT topics: an example of this is the discussion about the meaning of words like transsexual or the acronym LGBT; they also wonder about the

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[11]The method of analysis itself and the level of depth of the linguistic analysis vary and depend on the expertise in linguistics of the researcher and the objectives of the research.

pertinence of labelling lesbians as homosexuals (since in Italian the prefix 'omo' in 'omosessuale' appears to refer to 'uomo' (man), some think that homosexual is right only for homosexual men). This discursive silence highlights the power of heteronormativity in masking that which does not conform and in naturalizing that which does.

The sections that follow explore the various ways in which LGBT issues are perceived, experienced and managed at the organizations studied. The dominant heteronormative culture of these organizations determines a culture of silence around LGBT topics; silence is thus explored in its several features. This is followed by an analysis of the ways in which sexual orientation is silenced (silencing practices) and how LGBTs respond to such practices (silenced voices).

Silence

Most interviewees initially denied having worked with LGBT colleagues, but as talks progressed they explained their reticence by suggesting that the sexual orientation of these colleagues was discovered by chance and that most have never spoken directly about their sexual orientation. Silence is explained and justified as a sign of respect and as motivated by the irrelevance of sexuality in the workplace:

> *Roberto*: Why should I be interested that he is married to a man? He went to get married in France . . . or in Spain . . . and then? Why should I be interested? I'm married to my wife and I don't worry about what others think; therefore I cannot understand why he should be worried about what I think . . . he went to Spain to get married with a handsome guy, and then? I got married to a woman . . .

Such view constructs equality as the lack of difference, while denying the different conditions that homosexual people live in in both social and organizational contexts. Discrimination and different opportunities for LGBT people, including the impossibility of legally formalizing their relationships in their own country or qualifying for employment benefits, are minimized.[12] As Martin (1992) noticed, just as men work with men and come to believe that they work in a gender-neutral

world rather than one where men dominate, heterosexuals also come to believe that they work in a sexually neutral world rather than one in which heterosexuals dominate (see also Pringle, 2008). While denying difference represents a rhetorical strategy to remove a problematic phenomenon, it also acts as a silencing mechanism for LGBT employees. Workplace discussion of homosexuality is out of the symbolic space of most participants and thus is viewed as a private matter that 'should not be shouted from the rooftops' (Roberto, supervisor). Talking about homosexual orientation in the workplace is viewed as a personal choice and the existing silence is attributed to the homosexuals' responsibility. The logic emerging is that, if LGBT people choose to 'silence themselves', consequently their heterosexual colleagues are 'forced' to respect their will. The isolation of sexuality from one's public and work life highlights the power of the dominant heterocentric culture which limits the possibility of alternative discourses and makes minorities invisible (Foucault, 1976; Reingardė, 2010).

These organizations are viewed by members as characterized by openness, trust and a high level of employee support; most participants suggest that everyone can express their diversity and that inclusion is part of their ethos. While this view is supported by the existence of safe spaces within the organizations (e.g. group sessions and individual support meetings) where people can express their needs and weaknesses without being judged, there is no formal or informal evidence to show that LGBT workers receive encouragement to talk about their sexuality, including the total absence of anti-discrimination policies. As research shows (e.g. Clair, Beatty and MacLean, 2005), LGBT workers are more likely to reveal their sexual orientation in the presence of concrete supporting measures and positive treatment of others who have revealed their sexual identity. In our interviewees' opinion, colleagues or policies can do little if homosexuals do not accept themselves and 'choose' to remain silent. Such assumptions show the lack of awareness of the heteronormative views held within the organization and the damaging effects of discriminatory behaviours such as irony, jokes and gossip which create a negative and unsafe space for coming out (Reingardė, 2010). As highlighted in other studies (e.g. Buddel, 2011), this can also have a negative impact on psychological well-being (Silverschanz

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[12]It is worth noting that Italy does not legally recognize any type of same-sex union.

et al., 2008), work productivity and satisfaction (Bell et al., 2011) and, in these cases, can affect the work integration of disadvantaged workers.

> *Fabrizia*: Sure . . . he should be the first to talk about it if he wants to . . .
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> [. . .]
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> *Fabrizia*: Sexuality isn't a matter of discussion at work.
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> [. . .]
>
> *Adamo*: Well, it's not a matter of getting the message across [that cooperatives accept LGBT persons]; in my opinion the problem is that these persons [referring to LGBTs] are impressively closed.

The lack of empathy towards LGBT colleagues strongly emerged throughout the focus group and the interviews with all managers, who, astoundingly, are generally professional experts in rehabilitation and social inclusion. Internalized homophobia is the result of living in a heterosexist environment that degrades non-heterosexuals (see also Rostosky and Riggle, 2002). Indeed, the disclosure of one's sexual orientation would be safer in a context that does not define identities in a restricted way and does not stigmatize those who are 'non-heterosexual'. Since heterosexuality represents the norm in society, those who are not heterosexual have exceptional social and personal challenges that influence their identity development and socialization processes (Rostosky and Riggle, 2002); it is therefore the encouragement that they receive within the work environment that can make the difference.

It appeared that, as each interview progressed, participants were more engaged in the topic and themselves further analysed their organizational silence by taking into account mutual interactions and influences and admitting that silence is a vicious cycle on the basis of which the responsibility is attributed to the other part. Only positive interactions could break the cycle of silence sustaining a process of transformation. Emanuela (senior manager), below, shows awareness of this possibility when she recognizes that their closure may have caused a colleague to remain in the closet and wonders whether the demonstration of greater sensitivity on their part would have resulted in more openness and trust on the part of the lesbian colleague.

> *Emanuela*: In our organization there wasn't only silence . . . because she used to talk a lot about her girlfriend; however, she spoke of the problems that they had as friends, not as lovers; she talked about their friendship, not their affair or their relationship as a couple. She didn't speak . . . she didn't speak about it . . . so . . . hmm. . . . I don't know . . . maybe if she felt that we were ready she would have spoken about it . . . I don't know. . . .

Silencing practices

At all organizations studied, LGBT topics are never addressed in formal settings; they are not discussed in meetings or in the group sessions that these organizations regularly conduct to support the work inclusion of the disadvantaged workers. This silence represents an anomaly considering that, within these sessions, discussions focus on the private as well as the working lives of those involved, as became evident when we observed several of them. The rehabilitation manager, who conducts these groups, confirms that she is aware of the presence of some homosexual workers, but she has never addressed LGBT issues during the group work. In her opinion, the difficulty in addressing these issues is due to the fear that some presidents and supervisors would then have to deal with issues that are not within the boundaries of their work. The culture of inclusion, which all these organizations have declared, appears to be flawed. Within a culture of inclusion the 'different voices of a diverse workforce are respected and heard' (Pless and Maak, 2004, p. 131); in these organizations inclusion seems to focus only on very specific characteristics.

In the following excerpt Ottavio, a supervisor, tells the experience of a gay man who spoke to him about his sexual orientation. Ottavio advised him to respect the organization's rules in order to avoid problems and subsequently ignored this aspect of the worker's identity. Inclusion for this manager is consistent with the lack of formal discrimination rather than as the recognition and valuing of being different (Pless and Maak, 2004).

> *Ottavio*: . . . I do have regular one to one meetings, particularly with new starters, then this person . . . after a while with us, told me that he was homo-

sexual, and that he was, even, living with a person; I said 'even' because I didn't ask him anything . . .

[. . .]

Ottavio: We took cognizance of this, . . . we have internal rules that we ask employees to undersign [. . .] I told him that there was no exclusion, that he could work comfortably and be at ease here, that obeying the rules, as everyone else, would be enough [. . .]

Interviewer: Did this person come out with his colleagues?

Ottavio: Yes, then he came out with the colleagues [laughing]; it was a funny situation. I'm laughing because he was also a likeable person, a bit crazy. . . . Someone distanced himself from him, while others on the contrary [. . .]

Interviewer: So, everyone knew it, it was clear, but this area was put aside . . .

Ottavio: Probably because, in my opinion, no one felt the need to talk about it. . . . Because in some cases there is a sort of . . . not respect but . . . of . . . I'll say it frankly: in some places people mind their own business . . . some matters could be embarrassing for somebody and not for someone else . . . for me it isn't embarrassing, but for someone it could be embarrassing, so one avoids . . .

Although Ottavio knows that someone distanced himself from the homosexual colleague and someone else 'turned up his nose', nothing was done to facilitate the integration and inclusion of this worker. Reactions of rejection are minimized as 'nothing happened', admitting that sexual orientation topics can be embarrassing. Ottavio constructs his silence as a form of 'inverted' *pro-social silence* in which the information is withheld and not discussed generally to protect the LGBT friend (Van Dyne, Ang and Botero, 2003). In this case, though, rather than feeling the need to protect the gay subordinate, Ottavio feels obliged to protect those other colleagues who may be embarrassed by homosexual relationships. The organization's response to this specific case makes it more difficult for sexual minorities to construct an ' "out" social identity' (Reingardė, 2010, p. 90). Homosexuals are expected to stay in the closet and talking about sexuality is intrusive. Similarly to other studies (e.g. Ward and Winstanley, 2005), interviewees do not want homosexuality to be 'flaunted in front of

them': they can accept homosexual people as long as they do not remind them that they are homosexuals.

A few other managers admitted to witnessing the difficulties that some of their LGBT colleagues were experiencing and realized how these were impacting on their work. One director, for instance, talks about a very problematic relationship between two female colleagues, and how the organization neglected the colleagues' difficulties despite the social cooperative's mission and objectives. She justifies the organizational silence as respect and lack of intrusiveness.

Emanuela: As a cooperative we didn't do anything, really anything. They were all the time together, they were cohabiting, and then they broke up, and then together again . . . I mean, we witnessed several awful episodes. . . . Because the other girl . . . fell back into her past mistakes which I thought she had left behind her, but . . . she went back to her old ways; indeed she is now in rehab.

As evidenced by the extract, this relationship is constructed as 'wrong' not only according to heteronormative prejudice but because the two women belonged to different social groups and different employee groups (one of them was a 'disadvantaged' worker), evoking the double origin of these women's sense of exclusion. The intersectional analysis (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012) of these two categories helps us to understand the power behind the culture of silence in that it exposes the process behind which people hide judgement about homosexuality, making it more acceptable to disapprove publicly of relationships among individuals from different social groups rather than individuals from the same sex.

When homosexuality is 'disclosed' or 'discovered' 'nothing changes and everything goes on as normal'. However, contradictions soon emerged when participants reported the comments, mostly derogatory, that took place in the organizations in relation to individuals who came out or were outed.

Interviewer: In your opinion, was this person ever discriminated against?

Giulia: I don't think so . . . not in our organization, not at all. I don't know if she was discriminated in other contexts [. . .]

Interviewer: Can you tell me what happened at the beginning?

Giulia: At the beginning, when the affair [between lesbians] was discovered, people gossiped a bit, obviously they gossiped, saying: 'that's disgusting . . ., and this and that, she's married, she has three children, and she got herself with . . .', in short, usual discourses that people do. Then, slowly . . . people stopped talking about it, I think it stopped anyway. [. . .] Maybe there are many taboos that we aren't ready to accept . . . everyone is able to speak [about equality or tolerance], but when something concerns us more directly, we're a bit . . . we have taboos . . .

Referring to the same relationship as the previous quote, Giulia (senior manager) reveals the use of gossip as the strategy used by organizational members to break the silence. Gossip is constructed as 'obvious' and as a 'usual' aspect of organizational life. In recognizing the existence of taboos and the reluctance to accept 'certain things', she does not concede that gossip and disparaging comments are a practice of discrimination. 'Amusing remarks and mockeries' are aspects of organizational life and part of the status quo, and are viewed as unchallengeable and unchangeable by many interviewees. The use of gossip and sarcasm is a way for re-constituting and re-naturalizing heteronormativity (Butler, 1997) through the repositioning of what is standard in the context of culturally accepted norms and what is outside of the conventional realms.

When asked about how they would address a formalized case of sexual discrimination, managers' answers varied and display the absence of organizational policies and a planned strategy (also evident by the examination of company documents). The rehabilitation manager declares that she would deal with the hypothetical case of discrimination during group sessions; several other participants would deal with the matter in an informal manner by talking with the perpetrators of discriminatory behaviour. Giulia, for instance, says that 'she would tell them off' and she would recommend her team to have a 'normal behaviour'. Piero, on the contrary, during the focus group suggests that managers or supervisors should not intervene because 'a person can't live under a glass jar [. . .] society is like this, and one needs to have guts, if you protect him, he would never develop guts'. All answers mirrored the view widely held in Italy that homosexuality is a personal matter rather than a matter which affects society, institutions or organizations.

Silenced voices

The two homosexual employees suggest that they have chosen to remain closeted due to their organizations' negative attitudes toward homosexuality. While they do not use deliberate actions to pass as heterosexual (see also Ward and Winstanley, 2003), they actively maintain their sexual life and sexual identity separate from their work life and work identity. In the opinion of the lesbian, her colleagues know that she is homosexual and they gossip about it; however, she has never talked about her homosexuality at work because she prefers to keep her private life separate from work (see also Gusmano, 2008; Reingardė, 2010) and does not view her colleagues as open-minded. Recognizing that this split between her sexual identity and her workplace identity affects her emotional well-being, Sara has created a small space within which to preserve some 'authenticity' and thus openly talks about her private life with the few colleagues with whom she has a friendship. The heteronormative work cultures can lead homosexual workers to keep a distinction between public and private, and between professional relations and intimate workplace friendship (Rumens, 2008). Sara is a senior manager and recognizes that she is partly guilty for the organizational climate of silence because she has never done anything to change the situation.

Sara: In my case, I've never thought to disclose my homosexuality because on several occasions, and at different levels, I felt really as if there were walls, judgements, so it wasn't easy for me. I must point out that I'm a very discrete person, I mean, I prefer to stay in my role, and this has always been my choice . . . I have a different relationship with some people, a closer relationship, so I don't have any problem to talk with them about my sexual orientation. [. . .] The conditions for being open have never existed, but, I've never gone beyond my role, though I never talked with them about it, I think they know.

Interviewer: How do you think visibility could be encouraged in workplaces? Would it be beneficial in your opinion?

Sara: Yes, it would, really, it would be very beneficial. I mean [. . .] in a workplace if a person leaves out a part of his/her history, of his/her life, this is not something easy to manage from an emotional point of view and also affects his/her professional fulfilment. [. . .] If personally I'd have done something to create a different context, probably now I would feel more serene. I don't think that it is only the responsibility of those who don't accept or don't speak, but I, myself, have done nothing to change this situation.

Similarly to Sara, Luca, a gay senior manager, tells that he has never talked about his sexual orientation because of the heterosexist culture of the cooperatives and, since he thinks that his colleagues view homosexuality as a diversion from normality, he is afraid that revealing his sexual orientation could have negative effects on his authority.

Luca: I've never talked about my homosexuality because I'm in a totally masculine and heterosexist context . . . where homosexuality is considered . . . how can I say . . . is despised. I think that they have the idea that homosexuality is a misdeed. . . . I'm their role model, and I think that if they know that I'm gay they could use this trait of mine as an excuse for not following my lead or the example that I represent for them. I'm afraid to lose my authority. I am in a context where one of the main tools is the example that we represent for them and since I think that they view homosexuality as a diversion from normality, they would perceive me in a negative way. In my opinion, all of them have the same idea, not only the workers, but even middle and senior managers . . . well, except some of them.

In representing his organization as masculine, Luca equals masculine to male and to leadership; in disclosing his homosexuality he feels that he would lose his masculine credentials which, as a consequence, would undermine his leadership. In choosing to disclose their sexuality only to a few individuals they trust, both Sara and Luca cleave the workplace into two environments based on the type of relationship they have with colleagues. While this strategy might allow them some space for personal authenticity, it does not posit a direct challenge to the heteronormative order (Gusmano, 2010) and contributes to maintaining the status quo.

The transgender employee positions herself differently; she admits that she has never talked with her colleagues about her sexual identity, but she has tried to introduce the topic lightly with humorous references. Although she thinks that her colleagues have understood she is transgender she perceives that they would rather avoid the topic of her sexuality, missing the opportunity to embed sexual diversity within the organizational discourses. In Chiara's opinion, talking frankly could be useful for challenging stereotypes and prejudices (see also Humphrey, 1999) about transgender identity, but the hegemonic heterosexual culture precludes the possibility of an open discussion.

Chiara started work at the organization during our data collection and her employment at the cooperative Magnolia raised the issue of bringing LGBT topics into the open. Indeed, the transgender person further highlights the differences between the straight world and the LGBT one; she forces all to deal with the importance of sexuality in work and organizations in a way that gays and lesbians cannot do because they are invisible.

Conclusions

The organizations studied have in place several formal systems which give voice to the disadvantaged groups of workers. While such formal practices are focused on disadvantage, they could also represent mechanisms which give voice to workers who might experience discrimination in other ways. However, what appears to be lacking is the explicit commitment of management to LGBT issues, which currently supports the culture of silence existing in all social firms investigated. Sexual orientation equality has never been openly integrated in management efforts and has never been proactively considered as an issue to be discussed at the organizational level, even in those cases where sexuality was evidently part of someone's disadvantage (as in the case of the transgender employee). In spite of the cooperatives' ethos of inclusion, discriminatory practices such as silence, gossip and derogatory comments are common and described as *normal*, revealing a deeply rooted heterosexist culture. The solution to this ambiguity is the denial of both the importance of sexual orientation in the workplace and the discrimination that LGBT employees are subjected to.

These organizations are constructed as sexually neutral worlds (Martin, 1992) where silencing

mechanisms of non-heterosexual employees are strongly present but not recognized. Alternative discourses about sexual orientation are limited by the separation between private and public life that contributes to making sexual minorities invisible (Foucault, 1976). The difficulties we had in involving more LGBT workers are a further confirmation of this. The majority of interviewees do not recognize a personal responsibility for the climate of silence: in the heterosexuals' opinions LGBT workers choose to stay in the closet forcing the straight part to respect their will. Conversely, LGBTs report the organizations' negative attitude toward homosexuality. The discourses of heterosexism and heterocentrism embedded in these organization's cultures prohibit any openness allowing the possibilities of constructing a reality within which LGBTs can discuss their sexual identity.

We feel that our presence in the organization has played a role in nurturing a possibility for homosexuality to become part of the organizational discourses. The process of questioning by the interviewer has not only promoted the co-creation of homosexuality as a possibility of discourse and generated new awareness, it has also determined a feeling of regret and the appreciation of the missed opportunities in inclusion practices. While on one level such reflection by organizational members may be constructed as an emancipatory outcome, on the other, resistance to change was also evident in the articulation of several difficulties, such as lack of cultural readiness and practical logistics which participants constructed as insuperable. Furthermore the difficulty in moving from the level of possibility to the level of actualization is also exemplified by Chiara's experience. During the first interview with the directors of the cooperative Magnolia they expressed the intention to openly address homosexuality in the workplace in the light of Chiara's imminent employment; however, a few months after Chiara's induction, during the follow-up interview, it emerged that this initial intention had not been acted upon. Despite the fact that Chiara makes diversity visible, the organization is not yet planning specific strategies or interventions to manage sexual diversity. As the rehabilitation manager asserted, 'they will wait to see what happens with time'.

Previous research has shown examples of workplace practices which support culture change such as the existence of a workplace policy (Clair, Beatty and MacLean, 2005); the establishment of an LGBT group; the presence of visible senior LGBT staff (Colgan *et al.*, 2007); the extent to which homophobia is proactively challenged at work (Rostosky and Riggle, 2002); and the existence of voice mechanisms for employees in the 'articulation of individual dissatisfaction' and the 'contribution to decision making' (see Bell *et al.*, 2011, p. 140). Such practices, often studied in the context of large organizations, may not necessarily be implementable in specific organizations such as those which are small in size and have specific structure and social aims. In the social firms studied informal and *ad hoc* practices and systems of communication prevail over formal systems and policies, and discriminatory practices are concealed by silencing strategies that maintain a dominant heterosexual discourse with a rhetoric of an 'inclusive and safe space'.

It would be desirable, on one level, to sensitize organizational members (heterosexual and not) to focus on the limits deriving from heteronormative discourses (Gusmano, 2008). On a national level, a critical and reflexive debate aimed at the construction of difference in a socio-political manner could influence social practice as well as legislation against homophobia (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000). This would support a mainstreaming, rather than an isolationist approach, and give sound to the silence.

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