

## DISRUPTING THE (HETERO)NORMATIVE: COMING-OUT IN THE WORKPLACE IN LITHUANIA

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### INTRODUCTION

The question surrounding discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation at the workplace is a new theme in Lithuanian social and political discourse on equal opportunities in working life.<sup>1</sup> It is mostly discussed as a gendered or, sometimes, ageist issue, while a more elaborated intersectional approach towards the discrimination of homosexual people is clearly lacking. There is a lack of information on what the issues actually are and contextualized research into the experiences of silence and coming out, and how these experiences impact identity and relationship with others at work. One of the reasons for this is that sexual minorities at work have not been noticed. As Martin (1992) puts it, just as men work with men and come to believe that they work in a gender-neutral world rather than in one where men dominate, heterosexuals also, by working with other heterosexuals, come to believe that they work in a sexually neutral world, rather than in one in which heterosexuals dominate. Because sexual minorities are socially invisible, sexual orientation is not perceived to be relevant, as if gay people have a sexual orientation, but straight people do not.

According to the results of the European Value Study Surveys,<sup>2</sup> Lithuania which is one of the most homophobic societies in Europe, provides a unique context to grasp the severity of the heterosexism and how it shapes the identity of sexual minorities in the workplace. Since these results present only a very general picture, we draw our analysis of homophobia in Lithuania from the results of a survey on the public attitudes towards homosexuality in Lithuania in 2006.<sup>3</sup> According to the find-

<sup>1</sup> The authors are very grateful to the informants who kindly agreed to give interviews. Special thanks to our colleagues Artūras Tereškinas, Skirmantė Česienė and student Vaiva Vinciūnaitė for their work in conducting interviews, transcription, analysis and their contributions and ideas throughout the course of the research project.

<sup>2</sup> See <[www.europeanvalues.nl](http://www.europeanvalues.nl)>.

<sup>3</sup> Representative sample, N = 1005—The survey was based on a multi-level random sample and direct interviewing in 20 cities and 63 villages, representing the attitudes of the Lithuanian population (aged 16–74).

ings of this survey, on the one hand 70% of respondents “would never personally approve of discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation,” but on the other hand, 61% of them “would not like to belong to any organization which has homosexuals amongst its members.”<sup>4</sup>

In the article homophobia refers not only to the fear of homosexuals and the fear of heterosexual people (especially men) to be called homosexuals (see Herek 2004), but also to a process of socialization, and the structure and stratification of heteronormative society where anything that is non-heterosexual is not desired and subjected to discrimination. We use the term “sexual minorities” and “minority sexual identity” in order to emphasize the contexts and especially power relationships in working environments in which lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender/transsexual people (LGBT) find themselves as subordinated, marginalized, stigmatized and excluded.<sup>5</sup> However, we are aware of the fact that those generalized concepts such as “minorities,” “subcultures,” “marginal groups” and even “queers” are very much associated with categorising individuals and thus is subject to manipulation in the public sphere as it was in the case of “deviants” and related concept such as “deviance” which some critical sociology now seems to reject as theoretical mistaken (see Sumner 1996; Zdanevičius 2001). In the Lithuanian public discourse “sexual minorities” is used in order to underline the normative aspects of homosexuality (being inferior to heterosexuality), but in the academic literature this concept also has a sociological sense according to which a minority is a group which tends to be more vulnerable to social exclusion as in the cases of ethnic, religious and other minorities. Terms like “homosexuals” or “LGBT people” are also used as synonyms because in the case of bisexual and transgender people it is their homosexual desire and homosexual acts which are subjected to heteronormativity. However, in our view it is more favourable to use the more inclusive abbreviated term of “LGBT” which includes transgender and transsexual people, too.

<sup>4</sup> The survey—which was conducted by sociologists of the Vytautas Magnus University and the UAB Vilmorus company in the framework of the ATVIRI IR SAUGUS DARBE (Open and save at work) project, funded by the European Community Initiative EQUAL and the Lithuanian Government—indicated very controversial results which can be explained by the fact that “normative” homophobia (the normative attitudes towards homosexuality) is changing but “empirical” homophobia (which is related to value orientations of individuals) is still prevalent among the Lithuanian population. More details on the project can be found at <[www.atviri.lt](http://www.atviri.lt)>.

<sup>5</sup> In Lithuanian public discourse the term “sexual minorities” is often misused as it may include not only LGBT people, but also other groups such as prostitutes, paedophiles, exhibitionists—sexual groups that have not received a “legal status” of belonging to sexual minorities recognised by the state.

This study is based on thirty-eight in-depth interviews with LGBT people in Lithuania, carried out within the framework of the project “Open and Safe at Work,” supported by the European Union and the Lithuanian Government (EQUAL Initiative). The analysis below aims to explore how people of “non-traditional sexual orientation” construct their sexual identity at work and what their personal experiences of survival are in heteronormative working environments. Furthermore, we analyze how non-heterosexual identities are reflected in their choices of whether to *come out* (i.e. openly revealing their lesbian or gay identifications) or to *stay in the closet* (i.e. not to come out and hiding their sexual identities). The major complication in carrying out research into sexual minorities in organizations is related to the question of how to gather data when silence surrounds them.

LGBT people and their problems are very much under-researched in Lithuania, because silence prevails and it is very difficult to get people to talk about the subject. We have striven to include the experiences of both people who are openly gay and those who keep the fact secret, as well as homosexuals of different genders, age groups (21–55) and from different geographical locations (Vilnius, Kaunas, Druskininkai and Šiauliai). The informants were selected by applying the “snowball method.” Some of our informants agreed to be interviewed themselves after reading our advertisements on the Internet. The general profile of participants can be summarized as follows: twenty-five gay men, ten lesbian women, two bisexual men and one transgender person. Eight gay men and four lesbians work in career-oriented “masculine professions” (as ICT expert, engineers, self-employed, security guards, high level managers), twenty-five (19 men and 6 women) participants work in women-dominated professions (such as health care, education, services) and one transgender person was unemployed for one year. In only seven cases are the informants totally open about their sexuality at work, in ten cases—they are open to only “selected” individuals, in the remaining twenty-one cases their identity is kept hidden.

### THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The silencing of minority sexual identity is the major factor in the lives of LGBT people. The splitting or separation between self-identity (“who am I”) and social identity (how am I perceived by the others), especially maintained through silence, is particularly pertinent to the study of sexual identity. The focus of much discussion about the ontology of sexual identity is the dialectic of the essentialist versus constructionist debate. As

Seidman (1997) and Butler (1990) put it, the essentialist view does not adequately deal with the power/knowledge regime of *compulsive heterosexuality*, nor does it explain how compulsive heterosexuality is created in organizations. The significant development in this area was Foucault's radical challenge to our understanding of sexuality ([1976] 1999), and his notion that homosexuality should be viewed as a category of knowledge rather than a discovered or discrete identity. It was this view that led onto post-structuralist approaches, conceptualizing individual sexual identity as multiple, fragmented and fluid, constructed and reconstructed through different discursive processes in organizations.

Foucault ([1976] 1999) has also suggested that silenced sexual identity is an agent of power in its own right. This is an important starting point for discussion. The hegemonic heterosexual discourse precludes open discussions of the experiences of sexual minorities at work, implying that knowledge of this taboo is present in the discourse even if it is not talked about: "the make up of discourse has to be pieced together, with things both said and unsaid, with required and forbidden speech" (Foucault [1976] 1999, 133). Things that remain unsaid are equally important and can therefore be illustrative of power being articulated, or as a means of resistance.

Another important aspect is that the dominant discourse of heterosexuality puts the dominated discourse of homosexuality under pressure to be silenced, suppressed and eliminated as well as credited a certain limited legitimacy and protection. The minority is tolerated and accepted rather than put on an equal footing. It is impossible not to recognize the unequal power relationship between the homosexual minority and the heterosexual majority. The critical approach to organizational discourse asserts that it is the hegemonic discourse of heteronormativity, which determines and constitutes the subject's sexual identity, with the subject being trapped in discursive structures. One of the manifestations of that is the lack of congruence between the subjectivity (private notions of the self that may be left publicly undisclosed) and the public subject position available for the individual to take up at work.

In the analysis presented here we also argue that heteronormative discourse can be used as a mechanism of power and control to limit the ability of LGBT people to talk and construct their own identities at work; on the other hand, agency is not extinguished entirely, and the discourse can be used to build a power, which can then work against heteronormativity in an act of resistance.

## RESULTS

### SILENCED SEXUALITIES

During the research process some themes recurred and became prominent. One of these was that of silenced sexualities at work. Many of the people we spoke to were still “in the closet,” and being “out” only to a few “right people” to talk to at work. The interview material shows that leading a double life can have a tremendously negative impact on individuals, in terms of their self-esteem, but most importantly being in the closet causes a lot of human suffering:

[T]his is a constant lie, an eternal one. . . . Sometimes I even get confused in my palavers: where I was, what I have been doing or what I have not. I am a very lively person by nature, but when I get to my working place I immediately become something of a dead person. I cannot discuss anything, I cannot tell my stories to anybody, and I feel as if I’m somehow vanishing from the inside. This heteronormativity destroys me from the inside, you understand? I have to destroy myself from the inside in order to please them. So how can one live in that way? And our lives are too short, do you understand? (Rima, lesbian, 36).

The worst is this self-discrimination, when you think about all those norms that you do not accept and then start to apply to yourself, and start to live according to them without being aware of them. This is awful, and all those things [norms] . . . that means that even though you do not agree, you follow them anyway because you want to safeguard the ones that are close to you: your parents, your children and so on. On the other hand, not being able to take a clear position [to come out] makes you feel abnormal. You cannot admit it but somehow you still start to agree that we are evil somehow, that this is abnormal etc. You don’t want it, and you don’t say I am like that—that does not mean that I hate men or that I harass all women. . . . When you don’t question anything, don’t tell [the truth] in their eyes, then it will happen that these norms will stay [immoveable] (Migle, lesbian, 33).

In general, it is very hard to conceal your [sexual] orientation, especially when you reconcile it with yourself and accept it as a concurrent part of your identity. I feel in the same way perhaps as a dissident during the Soviet era who used to live a double life—a public one, more or less complying with the requirements of the regime, and the private—the underground one that is ruled by your own conviction. You always knew that when the truth about your real identity comes out you can always be repressed. Frequently, you cannot even participate in public life, nor be active in certain social movements. I left one organization just because I heard jokes about homosexual people. I realized that I cannot strive for the same aims, nor have something in common with those people because they don’t accept people like me (Dalia, lesbian, 40).

What is prevalent among the researched sexual minorities is the tendencies to suppress the talk of coming out at work and to say that they do not want to “flaunt” (demonstrate) their sexuality at work. As it was

expressed by one of our informants “one’s sexuality is a private issue, thus of no interest to other people at work.” In view of interviewed LGBT people, being open about sexual identity often means the demonstration of something that is not publicly accepted. Splitting public and private life and hiding homosexual identity becomes a dominant survival strategy.

Something that I like at work is that we don’t talk about our families, children, husbands or wives. This is a good atmosphere. In my view, you don’t need to talk about that at work. It is good for me, because I am very different from the others. I think it is most difficult for those who are really visible, I mean, gays who are obviously gay. As much as I discussed that with them, they told me that they don’t need to come out, everybody knows about that anyway. Heterosexuals do not tell about themselves [that they are hetero], why should homosexuals talk about this at work? Many of them [homosexuals] adjust to their working places and they look like everybody else. You don’t scream about what you are, and you live your life OK (Lina, lesbian, 30).

It is without doubt that the most important thing that you are first of all a human being, who is doing some work, and that you are competent in your field and that you can be trusted. I think the competence positively affects anyone’s professional career regardless of sexual orientation. I work in the field of information technology. My work is related to statistical analysis, creation of various tools, multi-dimensional layers etc. And somewhere at the end of the list there is the small fact that I am gay, that I like guys. There is no doubt if I was a gay Andrius, it would be harder than now, when I am simply Andrius, who among other things, is gay. . . . The head of our department knew about me being gay for sure, and this was not an obstacle, because it was simply more important how I was working, and not that a gay is doing that job (Andrius, gay, 23).

Mykolas, a young businessman, owner of a small company, stayed in the closet for many years and thinks that talking about discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation is something like a search for idiosyncrasy that breaks common rules.

[I]f you want some idiosyncrasy, to be exceptional that breaks common rules then you start to scream that you are being discriminated. Simply, sometimes maybe you yourself break those rules. I don’t get any remarks because I never give any grounds for that. I don’t act, I don’t need to act with manners, words, eye-winking. I would not tolerate it myself, if, say, I had those gays [with those effeminate manners] working for me. . . . In my opinion, [homophobia] is very often provoked by these people themselves. Very often, these people act with inadequate manners, they are trying to be very visible in the way that “I don’t care and everybody should get out of my way,” then this sort of public [sexuality] is not acceptable for me. And often it happens like in the [Lithuanian] proverb—they beat themselves and then they scream because of it (Mykolas, gay, 35).

As Fairclough (1995) pointed out, power can control and puts limits on alternative discourses. Having gay people around is acceptable as long as they do not draw attention to their minority sexuality. This can be illustrated by the very familiar public message in Lithuania which could be generally stated as follows: LGBT people have a right to exist as long as they suppress their own identity.<sup>6</sup> Homophobic attitudes in Lithuania even among some LGBT people became some sort of political correctness especially at work. If we consider that displays of heterosexual sexuality are constantly evident, repetitive and naturalized in the work environment, being homophobic and negative towards homosexuality is one of the coping strategies in the highly homophobic work environments in the country, eventually leading to self-marginalization enacted through the suppression of homosexual identity and silence. This contradiction can lead some to feel that it is the homosexual's sexuality that is of no interest to other people at work, rather than sexuality in general. In these cases, silence can be seen as the denial by the informants of the importance of sexuality at work. Eventually, suppression and silencing of discourse renders them invisible and makes it harder for them to develop confidence and power through shared identity (Kirsch 2000).

Another major reason not to disclose sexual orientation at work is a belief that they will be discriminated against. Language used by the colleagues at work or fear of being excluded were indicated to be influential factors towards individuals' decisions to remain silent.

You know, this openness—if only it was so simple that you could come out of the closet: open doors and get out. First, it will not happen, this coming out. I would guarantee that at least sixty or seventy percent of my co-workers suspect me. And yet I am not sure. And that's why I don't want to come out (Edigijus, gay, 24).

Although there were no scientific self-reported studies conducted in Lithuania, the pilot surveys of mainly homosexual males that were carried out in Lithuania indicate that the majority of homosexuals in Lithuania hide their sexual orientation at home and at work.<sup>7</sup> Even if the figures are not accurate, they show that people with homosexual experiences are vulnerable of being discriminated at work. The sexual inequalities experienced by lesbians and gays at work can be constructed as ripple effects of a wider legalized heterosexism. Despite European anti-

<sup>6</sup> Recently a member of the right-wing party at the Lithuanian Parliament publicly announced that "Homosexuals are neither our friends nor our enemies as long as they stay in their clubs and bars, but if they come out of the closet they will become our enemies."

<sup>7</sup> See for example <<http://www.gay.lt>> (5 December 2006).

discriminatory legislation, incorporated into Lithuanian national law before joining the European Union in 2004, the absence of any mention of sexual orientation in the Lithuanian Constitution in respect to discrimination in general continues to be one of the main dimensions of status inequality.

The issue of coping strategies at heteronormative work environments is quite well elaborated by several researchers as well as explored in the empirical material of our research project. Griffin (in Croteau 1996) distinguished four main ways in which lesbians and gay men manage their identity at the workplace, which are described as follows:

**Passing:** the way that sexual minorities maintain the silence through deliberate action on their part to act as heterosexuals, sometimes inventing opposite sex partners (it is a very popular scenario among the informants). This ranges from not giving details about one's private life, referring to friends in a gender neutral way or even making up a heterosexual lifestyle.

**Covering:** not disclosing information (impacted by the homophobic attitudes of colleagues at work, low commitment to organization, etc.).

**Being implicitly out:** using explicit language and artifacts to indicate sexual orientation.

**Affirming identity:** encouraging others to view him or her as gay (this in most cases applies to "selected" colleagues, not to all).

The passing and covering strategies are the most prevalent among our informants:

Can you imagine, we meet on Mondays, everybody is telling their stories: I raised children, I brought my children to McDonald's with my wife, etc. But what can I do? What can I tell them? But this happens, you understand? Everybody talks like nobody cares about your personality. But it only seems like that . . . they are waiting for my story—and what can I tell them about myself? . . . and in this situation I feel very uncomfortable. I cannot tell that I was with my girlfriend. Then you have to become like an actress. But this is too hard, . . . and it sucks. It means that from the beginning you have to become some dead person. . . . I imagine myself that I will change my profession and imagine myself working in a big company and I am already worried about the people there (Rima, lesbian, 36).

The lack of openness causes discomfort. You cannot even tell jokes about your lifestyle. Even if you are in company [at work] you cannot look around. You have to pretend that you are looking at girls. You have to pretend about your family constantly. It is a rule that you have to pretend at work. When you meet with your mates from college, you have to manipulate somehow, because we are not interested in telling the truth. Not in Lithuania. Sometimes, it seems that even if I leave for a foreign country, the same insecurity will stay with me. . . . Sometimes you get accustomed so much and you get used to think, talk, and be silent in that way. [It seems that] nobody should discuss this



with you. You should avoid that. It becomes your habit when you are at work or when you meet your friends (Egidijus, gay, 24).

A relevant finding of the research is that in certain occupations, mostly male-dominated and career-oriented professions, passing and covering are identity management strategies that are followed at work and outside of work. The story of employer Mykolas shows that he develops one identity, a profession-related identity, at work (where there is no space for sexuality), and another one in “off-duty life,” where his homosexual identity is kept secret. When asked about his sexual identity at work, Mykolas was quite strict:

I: I am basically interested in how you feel at work as a gay person?

M: I would not like to talk about such a topic. The more you are connected to people the more you are afraid of it. When you are employed by someone, you don't take the responsibility for the other. But when you are an employer you care about your clients, the common image, about everything. When the clients have to sign contracts, would they care to give work to a faggot? Even this is not so related to work, but why would they need that? Why should I create some unpleasant situations for having business with somebody who is not like everybody else? I separate my personal life from my work. This [being gay] is my private life and it should not be confused with my work. I am “normal” in public life. I am neither fighting with myself nor with society in general (Mykolas, gay, 35).

The commitment to both identities (profession-related and private) and their contradictory manifestations have been observed in several life-stories of the research. Moreover, the male dominated and career oriented work places have also been observed to be highly heteronormative, in which the professional identity acts to suppress the homosexual identities. In the extreme cases, heteronormativity is manifested through the internalized homophobia towards feminine gays, mannerisms, overt demonstration of homosexuality, etc.

The strategies of being implicitly out or affirming identity in most cases apply to only carefully selected individuals at work.

When you communicate with people at work you choose people. You are close to or distant from certain people. Those colleagues that are close know about my orientation and they laugh at me. We talk about it and everything is cool. There are ten co-workers in my company and I can say for sure that half of them know about me. One joke, another joke. After some time, things should be very clear. So I tell jokes about it in order not to offend them. When somebody asks me about that I look into this person's eyes and try to tell as much as he or she can stand (Linas, gay, 22).

I work in several organizations: one of them is very gay-friendly and it is because there are more homosexuals there. Also, in my view, it is because they accept me as I am. . . . Certainly, you choose whom to tell and what to tell them, but in general I work in the environment which is full of educated people, and it is less complicated. In addition, you feel how open people are to you, and then you decide how open you can be to them. When you communicate with persons you make a decision: to tell or not to tell. . . . In reality, not everybody needs to know all the details, and not everybody cares about it. For me, [sexual orientation] is not a very important thing, because this is my private life and I think, not everybody should know about this (Tomas, gay, 22).

Another interesting finding of our research is that the covering or not disclosing one's sexual orientation is not always in one's control. The naming of someone as lesbian or gay, "the divine power of naming" (Butler 1997), does not have to happen with the subject's knowledge. Many informants feel that their colleagues know about their sexual orientation, or feel being "outed," even though they have never made any effort, sometimes on the contrary, carefully tried to protect themselves from disclosure.

I was working at McDonald's in 1996 and somehow they found out about me and it started this shhhh. . . . Once, a girl came to me and asked me if I wanted to have a cup of coffee with her after work. OK, I said, let's go. We went for coffee and she started [interrogating me]—how, when, with whom, how many times? And I say, please tell me why you are asking me all this. She wanted to know about it from her feminine curiosity. And I said "yes, I am lesbian" And our friendship ended after that. We talked and I found out that everybody knew about me. . . . And I started to feel that communication in our team was happening but I did not exist for them any more. We were at a party, but it went on like I was not there. And you feel this silent, passive—alienation (Rima, lesbian, 36).

In summary, there are a number of ways in which the issues of silenced sexualities at work are central to the experience and identities of sexual minorities. Silencing can be interpreted as a means of self-protection as well as suffering. Therefore, it could be argued that social interactions at work and denied subjectivity are dependent on organizational contexts and situational factors.

The silenced sexualities also show deeper incoherencies in our cultural discourses. These can be disentangled with reference to the distinctions between private/public and private/secret, respectively, which are superimposed upon the hierarchy between homosexuality and heterosexuality. According to Goffman (1963) sexual activities and fantasies tend to unfold in the private domain, while sexual identities and orientations are part and parcel of our public persona, and will be routinely deciphered

from appearances, artifacts and interactions. Here, sexual inequality means that it is only LGBT people who are lambasted for flaunting their sexuality when their sexual orientations surface in public places.

### COMING OUT

Work places and public spaces are “two of those social contexts where the closet preserves its oppressive power” (Kuhar 2006, 167). James Ward and Diana Winstanley (2005, 452) talk about coming out at work as a performative act: “Being gay or lesbian is not a truth that is discovered, it is a performance, which is enacted.” Because of the constant presumption of heterosexuality, coming out is something one has to do in everyday life situations. There are a number of reasons why people decide to come out. Humphrey (1999, 138) suggests three main ones. First, there is an issue of honesty and integrity at the personal level; second, there are significant benefits in building open relationships at the professional level. Finally, some people think that it is important to educate various audiences about lesbian and gay existence and to empower lesbian and gay people in the process.

Those who are completely or partially open at work, think about coming out as being significant at the personal as well as the professional levels. The third, political aspect, mentioned by Humphrey, was not overtly articulated by interviewees. However, it is very important to contextualize the actual freedom of individual choice, and to appreciate that from the perspective of LGBT people. For instance, the only unemployed informant that was interviewed during our research was a 47 years old transgendered person of Russian descent who recently started to come out in public giving interviews to different TV channels and newspapers had a clear purpose: to become more visible and to use her sexual identity in order to attract employers and to find a job. Medėja has completed higher education but is now looking for a job as a beautician and wants to become famous using the media because this is the only way to persuade employers to hire her: “I have no choice but to sell my sexuality and I hope that some employers will understand that I will be able to attract more clients,” she said at the end of the interview after the recorder was turned off, and added “Use my real name, don’t be afraid to use it in public. I want everybody to know about my situation.” As this case demonstrates, it could be argued that coming out is more of a survival strategy than an optional luxury.

One of the reactive strategies to coming out was observed to be the silence by the rest. Loreta told the story about how she had brought her

girlfriend to the company's informal party and kept telling everybody about her partnership during the whole night. The lack of interest in her private life made her feel disappointed and excluded.

In other jobs I never concealed my orientation and in principle I did not care too much. But in my current employment I tried to come out, I tried to be more open, but nobody understood me. Our organization holds big celebrations at Christmas every year. The invitation that everybody received said that you are invited with your "other half" [partner]. So I thought that we [my girlfriend and I] could go. Of course, I was nervous, my hands were trembling and if I remember well I had four glasses of champagne in order to have more courage to introduce my girlfriend to everybody. I introduced her as my partner. . . . It was very scary and I was looking at their reactions. And they reacted differently: some of them had big eyes, some of them had curious looks, and some made me feel some delight and easiness. We were sitting and chatting: Oh, this is your partner, how nice!—Some people thought I was joking. We really had a nice time together. . . . That evening I was really happy and I thought that now I will be happier, will live in joy and peace. But after some time I realized that nobody really understood me. Everybody thought that this was not my girlfriend, just a friend. I think they could not understand that somebody would dare to do that—to bring their [same-sex] partner to the party (Loreta, lesbian, 27).

By this reactive silence, the colleagues, whether consciously or not, used silence as a tool of hostility. As Butler (1997) states, injurious language can take the form of silence as well. James Ward and Diana Winstanley (2003) in their study on the absent presence of sexual minorities at work state that "work colleagues create social reality for gay people in the workplace, through the absence of what might be said, and what is left unsaid." It could also be said to be constitutive of social identity and the way in which they are seen by their workmates (Hardy, Palmer, and Philips 2000). By ignoring alternative sexualities, the organization makes it more difficult for sexual minorities to construct an "out" social identity. In this case, silence can be seen as a manifestation of the refusal by the majority to acknowledge the alternative sexualities.

Although concentrating more on discursive practices in terms of talk and social action, we do not suggest that context is not relevant, in fact it surfaced that this is very important. Many studies have unveiled the significant relations between the situational constraints embedded in organizations and occupations, on the one hand, and the coming out decisions made by individual employees, on the other (see Lehtonen and Mustola 2004; Lehtonen 2002; Heikkinen 2002; Sears and Williams 1997). As could be seen from the interview with Gruodis, low commitment to work is one of the consequences of the silence and absent presence and therefore it could be used as an argument when talking to employers

about equal opportunities and the principle of non-discrimination at work.

If this work would last eternally or if I knew that I would work there for the rest of my life, maybe it would be different. I don't know how it would be. But I know that I will leave soon, and I always live with this idea that I will quit this job. This feeling of temporality, I think, made me avoid committing myself to being too open, and to have friends (Grudis, gay, 36).

It is also noticed that in smaller organizations, where there is more interpersonal contact it is harder for people in those organizations to recognize their minority identities or to protect themselves in case of discrimination. On the contrary, as is indicated in Loreta's story, large international companies might be perceived to be more LGBT friendly:

Sometimes I think, if someone [from work] would not like my sexual orientation, and if someone would try to fire me from the company, there are easy possibilities to act against that. It is possible to write letters to foreign partners of the company and I think they would not tolerate such discrimination. . . . In a Lithuanian company things would be different. The previous companies I worked with were small. Everybody knew about everybody. Everything was decided almost at the coffee table etc. [In small companies], I think, there would be no chance to make claims or complaints. There is nobody to protect you (Loreta, lesbian, 27).

James Ward and Diana Winstanley (2003) in their research of individuals at the police and the fire service in UK have also noticed that the close personal relationship also means that the costs are higher for coming out because of potential negative reactions. In bigger organizations with less interpersonal interaction it is easier to be in the closet, and the risks associated with coming out are reduced. The interviews from our study also show commitment and loyalty to organization as well as work attitudes may on their own determine the coming out as well. Gender makeup also matters: the more feminine environments are perceived as being more gay-friendly than career-oriented male organizations.

Colleagues who know about me accept [my sexual orientation] quite well. My boss who is a woman has no problem with that and accepts it normally. She even knows my boyfriend. I don't think hairdressers should have problems with that. Everybody understands that a hairdresser is somehow allowed to do that [to be gay]. . . . There are many gay people working in the beauty industry. In other companies with all kinds of managers, it is more difficult. I think the managers are sitting [in the closet] with their mouths shut and live double lives (Raigardas, gay, 26).

In terms of homosexual women there does not appear to be the marked difference between male- and female-dominated areas of work. On the other hand, lesbian women interviewed during our research feel more vulnerable and exposed to acts of discrimination not only on the grounds of sexual orientation but gender as well. Dalia's viewpoint indicates her solidarity with all women despite of the differences between heterosexual and homosexual women:

Lesbians in our society are in even more closed communities. In general, women are more vulnerable, they cannot feel safe and they have to secure the jobs that they have. They want to live and to love. Apparently they simply understand that to be public [about your sexuality] is to be something like a kamikaze. Our society will not change its attitudes, and there is no point in sacrificing your life. There is also another thing—lesbians are women anyway, and women value personal life and privacy more (Dalia, lesbian, 40).

Gender relations are one of the most significant, if not the most significant structuring factor when it comes to the conditions in which homosexuals work. Furthermore, as could be seen from the cases of lesbian women intersectional and multiple-discrimination could be subject for further research. Most people whom we interviewed and who are in one or another way open at work carefully assess the prevailing organizational climate before disclosing their sexual orientation. Thus, in future studies of sexualities at work, it is really important not just to focus on the actors, but also to describe the working environments.

## CONCLUSION

In this study we examined the construction of minority sexual identity in organizations through the discourse on silent and silenced sexualities. Distinguishing between self- and social identity is an important conceptual distinction to make. The silence that enables this splitting to take place can be evident in a number of ways. Foucault ([1976] 1999) has identified silence as a discursive practice, which contributes to the identity construction of sexual minorities in organizations, as well as being a feature of power relationships between the homosexual minority and the heterosexual majority (Butler 1997). The “absent presence” (Ward and Winstanley 2003) of homosexuals at work emphasizes the importance of all aspects of discourse in exploring sexual identity, because the absence of talk on minority sexual identity is as meaningful as the presence of talk on majority identity. Facing the everyday reality, in which the majority of homosexuals are in the closet, we believe that understanding of the

discourse can be potentially increased by focusing on the silence that exists in and around it.

The coming out process is predicated upon cultural discourses, organizational contexts and practices, which deprive lesbian and gay people from human dignity and integrity. Jill Humphrey (1999, 137) talks about the archetypes of the depraved and diseased homosexuality, which are a part of a collective heritage, so that even when they do not surface so dramatically, they are lurking in the shadows of subconsciousness. Therefore a cloud of vulnerability overhangs all homosexuals—even those who have been out and proud in the workplace. The perpetual angst, in turn generates a form of constant self-surveillance of sexuality and personal dignity. In line with other research findings (Kuhar 2006; Lehtonen 2002; Lehtonen and Mustola 2004) that are focused on the discrimination of LGBT people in the workplace, it seems that in Lithuania heteronormativity at work affects personal lives of gay people tremendously and creates a lot of human suffering. As the closet remains a social structure of oppression, coming out as a rational survival strategy for Lithuanian sexual minorities especially in the very masculine and homophobic working environments might be questioned. Perchance, using Seidman's (2004) words, living *beyond the closet* still lies ahead for many LGBT people in Lithuania.

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