



**STRAIGHT PEOPLE
DON'T TELL,**

NEGOTIATING
THE BOUNDARIES
OF SEXUALITY AND
GENDER AT WORK

DO THEY?



The small but significant difference between Lisa and Larry

When Lisa during a coffee break at work tells her co-workers that she went to the movies with her husband last weekend, few think that she is talking about her heterosexuality – she is talking about her weekend. But when her colleague Larry mentions that he went to the movies with his husband last weekend, not all hear him only speak about his weekend, many think that he is also talking about his homosexuality.

No one advises a dark-skinned fellow employee to leave his or her dark skin at home. Yet many are of the opinion that homosexuals should not bring their sexual orientation to the workplace by speaking about their family, partner, or weekend. Many members of sexual minorities also seem to share this opinion: “After all, straight people don’t tell about their sex life at work, do they?” In the above example, neither Lisa nor Larry were telling about their sex life, they just mentioned their life companion in a discussion.

What about transsexual Matthew, who by means of sex re-assignment process has become Mary – is she called Mary at work, or Matthew as before, or “that one there”. Which service facilities can she use? Will she be invited for coffee or to spend a sauna evening with the other women? Will she be invited to dance at the company’s Christmas party? Or will she, being an expert in gender equity, be elected the workplace equality adviser?

Gender is usually seen as bipolar: we are either men or women. Yet gender – like sexuality – is a continuum. Some place themselves at the extreme ends of the continuum, others at various points in between. Gender and sexuality are not black-and-white, all the colours of the rainbow are present in their diversity.



“Being in a woman’s body, I had to put away the idea of becoming a fireman. Though, since I was growing older, it would hardly ever have been a real option... but how can I know that, if I haven’t had a chance to be a boy.”

Concepts

Sexual minorities

Lesbians, gays, bisexuals and others who have love affairs and sexual relationships with people of their own sex, even if they do not use the above concepts when referring to themselves.

Trans people (gender minorities)

Transsexuals, transvestites and intersexuals, and others, whose gender identification and gender expression challenge the gender division and broaden the conception of gender.

- **Transsexual women** are born in a boy’s body, but feel that they are women and correct their bodily features by means of a sex re-assignment process. They want others to treat them as women.
- **Transsexual men** are born in a girl’s body, but feel that they are men and correct their bodily features by means of a sex re-assignment process. They want others to treat them as men.
- **Transvestites** are in the Finnish culture usually men, who occasionally want to express their femininity by dressing as a woman and acting in a woman’s role.
- **Intersexuals** are people with both male and female congenital physical sex characteristics. Their biological sexual duality is not always noticed in infancy, it may come up only in adolescence. Intersexual persons are often forced into one of the two sexes.

Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is a way of thinking, according to which there are only two kinds of people in the world – women and men – and one person cannot be both. This way of thinking also includes the assumption or wish that all individuals are heterosexual. Men’s heterosexual masculinity and women’s heterosexual femininity are considered to result from biology or nature. The existence of other kinds of sexualities or genders is denied, or they are considered inferior to heterosexuality and the bipolar gender order.

To come out or not to come?

Sexual orientation differs from most other bases of discrimination in that it is not necessarily clearly visible to all. The colour of skin, sex, or accent in speech are qualities which are more difficult to hide. Therefore, direct discrimination based on sexual orientation cannot occur before the sexual orientation is revealed by the person in question or by others. Likewise, transsexuals and transvestites are often not visible in their work community as themselves, but have to hide their gender identification or life history.

Since belonging to a sexual or gender minority is something people do not have to mention at work, coming out is for many, excluding transsexuals, a deliberate, thought-out choice. Openness is a continuum, in which the choice of openness is constantly made anew when facing new people and situations. Half of those who belong to sexual or gender minorities conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity in their work community from all or almost all fellow employees. Transvestites conceal their identity and experience of gender considerably more often than transsexuals.

At work, people constantly discuss matters relating to their family and human relationships, and in these conversations the measure of normality is “natural” and “automatic” heterosexuality and division into two sexes which exclude each other. Because of this, many trans people and those who belong to sexual minorities think carefully and watch what they say and do. Various cover stories, concealing or telling only partly, avoiding close contacts with fellow employees, taking advantage of the assumption of heterosexuality, evasion, changing the subject, walking away from the conversation, and choosing gender-neutral words are features of everyday life for many members of sexual minorities and trans people.

Possible trans and gay jokes round coffee table at work, which employees belonging to sexual and gender minorities feel to be insulting, turn a pleasant conversation over coffee into harassment. Almost half of the over seven hundred respondents belonging to sexual minorities, who participated in the questionnaire of the Equal project, have faced this kind of harassment. Of the

more than a hundred trans people respondents, half have had to listen to insulting jokes at work.

12 per cent of the respondents belonging to sexual minorities have faced direct bullying at work because of their sexual orientation. Eight per cent of them have been called “fags” or other insulting names. Of the more than a hundred trans people respondents, eight per cent have been bullied at work because of their gender identity. Six per cent have been called insulting names.

Conversing at work, members of sexual minorities and trans people often tightrope in middle ground between telling and concealing, assessing in advance their fellow employees’ possible attitudes, tolerance or the lack of it. It is usual to be open with one and secretive with another fellow employee. As to coming out, they are also often considerably more cautious with their superiors, clients, patients, students, and other interest groups. Also, coming out does not always depend on the person in question, rumours go round on their own.

Coming out may in practice have both positive and negative consequences. Staying in the closet can also demonstrate social skills.



50 % have experienced harassment
6 % have been called names
8 % have experienced bullying
50 % have experienced harassment
8 % have been called names
6 % have been called names
12 % have experienced bullying
8 % have been called names
50 % have experienced harassment

“It’s mainly in everyday situations, in which I’m not sure of their attitude. I don’t want to be in the centre of attention all the time – in case people have some negative attitude. That’s why I’m so careful. I think that I can’t stand the pressure, if people become negative somehow... that perhaps it’s easier not to say anything and be a little strange.”



“As a ‘decent straight’ I might already have advanced or be advancing to managerial tasks in my line of business. In this respect, I have discriminated myself, because I haven’t even applied for managerial jobs. I have thought that I can’t or don’t want to – because I’m predominantly homosexual. In many managerial jobs, the spouse also has a role to play.”

Productive work community

Sexuality and gender intertwine with everyday practices at work in many ways.

The heteronormative way of thinking defines, what kind of women and men employees are expected to be, and what kind of expression of sexuality and gender is considered desirable and what undesirable.

All employees regardless of their gender and sexual orientation are part of their workplace's culture. Measures improving the position of employees belonging to sexual and gender minorities affect the work and work satisfaction of other employees, too.

By restricting discrimination, bullying and harassment, a saner atmosphere is created for all employees. When the diversity of people is understood in the networks at the workplace, it can also be more visible – not just as regards the wellbeing of minority groups, but also as regards personalities and individual resources of know-how.

A workplace which supports diversity supports the employees' wellbeing and, consequently, its own productivity.

"I want to tell people about my relationship the same way others do. I don't conceal, but I don't impose it either. I have also decided that what is not deliberately concealed doesn't arouse additional negative interest. Some of my fellow employees who know are like scared rabbits, avoid speaking about my partner and keep their distance."



"After comprehensive school, I chose metal industry, because I thought it could 'cure' me, if I took up a really manly profession. In retrospect, that was the most stupid decision in my life."

Openness at work

According to the heteronormative assumption, all members of the work community are heterosexual and by their gender expression either male or female. These models may seem restricting to anyone, but they are especially distressing from the point of view of many members of sexual minorities and trans people.

How to make room for diversity at work

Traditional beliefs of men's heterosexual masculinity and women's heterosexual femininity should be questioned.

The main responsibility for an atmosphere which accepts openness should not be shifted on to members of sexual minorities or to trans people. For them, discrimination and loss of esteem may be real threats.

The responsibility should rest with those who in general bear the main responsibility for factors affecting work climate: the employers and management.

The employer should know the legislation and the means of improving equal treatment of employees. In information and encouragement, the role of employer organisations is significant.

Positive attitude towards plans combating discrimination and improving equality help and support fair management practices.

Active measures – supervision, reacting rapidly to discrimination, and fair and equal treatment regardless of the employee's partnership or family status – speed up diversification of the workplace.

Legislation

The revised Constitution which entered into force in 1995 and the Constitution of 2000 emphasise equality between people. No one shall without an acceptable reason be treated differently from others on the ground of sex, age, origin, language, religion, conviction, opinion, state of health, disability or other reason that concerns his or her person. According to Government proposal, "some other reason that concerns his or her person" can be, for example, sexual orientation.

The revised Penal Code which entered into force in 1995 and the Contracts of Employment Act which entered into force in 2001 expressly state that discrimination at work or in employment on the basis of sexual orientation is prohibited. According to policy adopted in the EU and Finland, discrimination against transsexuals is prohibited as sex discrimination.

The act on securing equal treatment which entered into force as of the beginning of February 2004 widens and amplifies protection of sexual minorities against discrimination. The objective of the act is to promote and safeguard realisation of equality and to prohibit discrimination based on age, origin, language, religion, conviction, opinion, state of health, disability, sexual orientation, or other personal reason. Protection of trans people against discrimination does not fall within the sphere of the Act on Equal Treatment, its realisation is secured on the basis of the Act on Equality between Women and Men, which is at present in the process of being amended and made more specific on the basis of the directive of the European Parliament and Council on equal treatment of women and men.

Legislation should be further clarified and extended to pay more attention to prevention of discrimination relating to expression of sexual orientation and gender.

"The trade union movement should make it easier to seek help in cases of discrimination etc. It's no use possessing the means to promote the case, when no one dares to do it. The trade union movement should more openly and publicly pay attention to the position of sexual minorities. Changing the general atmosphere is the only way of rooting out discrimination, and the trade union movement could contribute to this."



"My bosses passed remarks about my earrings, polished nails and dyed hair. Said they didn't suit a 'grown-up man'. At that time I was still a 'man'. I had short fixed-term employment relationships and wasn't employed permanently. Then I changed my job. That was a loss to both, because in a way I was a key person in my business."

Facing discrimination

Eight per cent of the male and six per cent of the female representatives of sexual minorities who participated in the survey have faced discrimination at work because of their sexual orientation. Eight per cent of the respondents representing trans people have experienced discrimination because of their gender expression or gender identity.

13 per cent of the members of sexual minorities did not know about the legislation prohibiting discrimination, which entered into force in 1995. Of those members of both sexual and gender minorities who had experienced discrimination, few had contacted their trade union or the labour protection authorities. The members of sexual minorities and trans people are not sufficiently informed of the authorities which could help, or do not trust in their ability to render proper service.

How to act?

It is no use acquiescing in the situation, if you face discrimination at work, during job interviews, or indirectly, e.g., because of negative atmosphere at work. Activity aimed at building an equal and safe working community is everyone's benefit.

Discrimination at work should be handled without delay, or even be prevented. At workplace, support can be sought from the superior, reliable fellow employees, personnel managers, and shop stewards. You can also turn to occupational health care for support.

Support is given by trade unions, whose lawyers help solve judicial problems, and occupational safety inspectorates, whose tasks also include giving assistance in cases of discrimination. The equality adviser gives advice in matters relating to gender equality.

Occupational safety inspectorates

www.doshnet.fi/hallinto

Equality adviser

www.tasa-arvo.fi/ta-valtuut/

Central organisations of trade unions

www.sak.fi, www.sttk.fi, www.akava.fi

EQUAL – on the way to Europe of equality and partnership

The aim of the European Union Equal Programme is to use international co-operation to find new means of preventing marginalisation, discrimination and inequality on the labour market.

Sexual and Gender Minorities at Work is an Equal project focusing on the position of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and



transsexuals in working life. There are almost 1500 Equal projects underway in Europe, of which, in addition to the Finnish project, only three others, two Swedish and one Dutch project are aimed at improving the situation of sexual minorities or trans people in working life. In addition to research work and production of information material, approximately 2000 people have received training within the Equal project.

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"Gender pluriformity has perhaps prevented me from considering myself, for instance, a woman in the sense that I would have expected some wall to arise in front of me because of my womanhood. And on the other hand, I express my genders – or that cocktail of gender characteristics which I feel my own – in ways accepted in our culture to the extent that my gender which deviates from the 'normal' binary opposition has not antagonised me. All things considered, I feel I'm a lucky guy."

"I feel happy. Largely because I'm accepted as I am. I could earn more, if I changed from a small company to a large group. But I don't want to, because the spirit in our work community is so good. I don't want to take the risk that going for higher wages I would end up in a homophobic conservative group."



Websites of the project Sexual and Gender Minorities at Work:

www.valt.helsinki.fi/sosio/tutkimus/equal

Research: Lehtonen, Jukka & Mustola, Kati (eds.)

"Straight people don't tell, do they?"

Negotiating the boundaries of sexuality and gender at work.

www.esr.fi

A guidebook on projects relating to sexual minorities:

www.valt.helsinki.fi/sosio/tutkimus/equal

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