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**Non-heteronormative sexual orientations at work: Disclosure dynamics and the negotiation of boundaries between Lesbian and Gay employees and their co-workers**

### Abstract

This article focuses on the interactional dynamics which take place during disclosure of non-heteronormative sexual orientations at work. Since the disclosure might be considered a process through which lesbian and gay (LG) people share information about their personal life at work, Boundary Theory, which explores how people create boundaries between life domains, allows us to better understand disclosure dynamics. For this purpose, 39 Spanish lesbian and gay employees were interviewed. The results demonstrated that LG employees and their co-workers, affected by the socio-cultural context, are jointly responsible for the integration/segmentation of LG employees' personal and work domains, thus questioning the extent to which management of non-heteronormative sexual orientations is considered a strategic choice under the control of LG employees alone.

Keywords: Boundary Theory, Disclosure dynamics, Lesbian/Gay employees, Qualitative methodology, Sexual identity management, Socio-cultural context.

**Introduction**

Sharing information about personal life at work is the prelude to creating deeper human relationships (Rumens & Broomfield, 2012). Thus, to build stronger relationships at work, lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) employees might wish to disclose their sexual orientation, explicitly or implicitly, breaking down the presumption of heterosexuality. Past research (Clair et al., 2005) considers disclosure as a process dependent on personal and voluntary choices of LGB people, who decide when, where and to what degree to 'come out'. Little evidence (Einarsdóttir et al., 2016; Lyons et al., 2017; Van Laer, 2018; Wax et al., 2018) exists about the role played by the "audience" or third parties, such us of co-workers and supervisors, in positively facilitating and supporting or, alternatively, preventing or making the process more difficult.

We consider disclosure (or non-disclosure) to be part of and facilitated by the successful integration or, alternatively, segmentation process between personal and work domains. The integration/segmentation process is the focus of Boundary Theory, which was first applied to the field of work-personal life balance (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner et al., 2009; Nippert-Eng, 1996). This theoretical framework explains how people create, maintain and modify boundaries between different life domains, merging (integration) or, by contrast, separating (segmentation) cognitive, physical, and behavioral aspects of each domain (thoughts, activities, roles, etc.) (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner et al., 2009). Boundary Theory acknowledges the interactional dynamics of such processes, emphasizing third party roles in constructing boundaries. Since disclosure might be viewed as an integration (or alternatively segmentation) of LGB employees' personal domain at work, Boundary Theory allows us to explore how third parties might facilitate or obstruct this process. Therefore, the aim of this research is to investigate how and to what extent the audience, through interactional

dynamics, is responsible for the co-construction of boundaries between LGB people's personal and work life.

Until now, research (Clair et al., 2005; Ragins, 2008) has largely ignored disclosure in terms of a process involving LGB people and co-workers, primarily focusing attention on LGBs' choice alone. This article overcomes such limitations, offering a new theoretical framework to understand disclosure dynamics at work and the role played by those involved.

To this end, we will focus on the Spanish cultural context where the socio-legal framework to protect and affirm LGB people's rights appears to be one of the most progressive in the world (Soley-Beltran & Coll-Planas, 2011). Nevertheless, the recent history of Spain, characterized by a long dictatorship preceded by a short, very intense period of evolution in terms of individual and social liberties, suggests that acquired rights should not be taken for granted. The existence of reactionary fringes in Spanish politics, such as far-right parties, whose aim is 'turn the clock back' and re-establish an illiberal legislative framework, challenging hard fought equal rights, is worrying (El País, 2021). Moreover, no previous study has documented how values and beliefs, associated with Spanish culture and historical developments, affect the disclosure process.

This article makes several contributions to the debate about the disclosure process: firstly, it emphasizes the interactional nature of disclosure, identifying the dynamics involved and the role played by the audience during this process through the lens of Boundary Theory, thereby challenging a predominant assumption that the disclosure process is largely under the control of lesbian and gay (LG) employees themselves; secondly, it explores strategies used by LG employees to disclose their sexual orientation; thirdly, it frames and further explores these processes within a particular socio-cultural context (Spain), not attempted previously.

**Disclosing of non-heteronormative sexual orientations at work**

Until recently, and remaining in some jurisdictions, LGB people are victims of negative and discriminatory acts (Council of Europe, 2011). Sexual orientations outside a heteronormative schema have been stigmatized (Goffman, 1963), making the revelation of non-heterosexuality at work not an obvious choice (Griffith & Hebl, 2002). Consequently, since the 1990s, scholars from different areas, such as management, work and organizational psychology, sociology, etc., have focused on sexual identity management in the workplace. There are two salient pieces in the reconstruction of this complex topic: understanding what strategies LGB employees use in order to disclose their sexuality (Button, 2004; Griffin, 1992), and the positive and negative effects it produces at the personal, interpersonal, and organizational level (Follmer et al., 2020; Ragins, 2004; Wax et al., 2018). In terms of positive outcomes, we know that disclosing sexual orientation at work enhances well-being and reduces stress and anxiety (King et al., 2017); it increases job satisfaction, commitment, and the perception of organizational support (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Ragins et al., 2007); it improves workplace relationships and reduces withdrawal intentions (Ragins et al., 2007; Sabat et al., 2017). However, researchers pointed out that disclosure might represent a double-edged sword (Griffith & Hebl, 2002): in fact, LGB employees might be victims of subtle or overt discrimination and stigmatization (Arena & Jones, 2017; McFadden & Crowley-Henry, 2018; O'Brien & Kerrigan, 2020).

To establish how LGB employees disclose or indeed cover up their sexual orientation at work, Griffin (1992) identified four strategies they apply to manage their sexual orientation at work: LGB employees might *pass* as heterosexuals, or *cover* their sexuality, avoiding any situations where personal information might be required. By contrast, they might disclose

their sexuality, being *implicitly out,* by revealing information about their personal life (e.g. displaying a photo of their partner) or being *explicitly out*, talking openly about themselves as non-heterosexual.

Recently, comprehensive and more complex models emerged to explain how workplace identity management happens (Croteau et al., 2008). In line with this, Clair and colleagues (2005) and Ragins (2008) adopted Goffman's Stigma Theory (1963), which focuses on the experience of those holding stigmatized or spoiled identities, while Lidderdale and colleagues (2007) apply the Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 2002), which explains how the interconnection of several elements shapes career choices. Individuals' differences in terms of self-monitoring, propensity toward risk-taking, self-efficacy (Lidderdale et al., 2007), personal motivation to reveal their sexuality (Clair et al., 2005) and outcome expectations (Lidderdale et al., 2007; Ragins, 2008), all affect decisions to disclose non-heterosexuality at work.

It is considered that both the context (Clair et al., 2005; Lidderdale et al., 2007) and co-workers' support (Ragins, 2008) play an important role in determining which strategy to use. Altogether, the evaluation of these factors will affect the disclosure *decision* (Ragins, 2008), the LGB person's *choice* (Clair et al., 2005) or *performance* (Lidderdale et al., 2007). In fact, once all these factors are considered, LGB employees are seen as the sole protagonists of a conscious decision-making process regarding disclosing their sexuality at work. Although some studies consider those situations in which the disclosure process is influenced by the presumptions of the audience, i.e. where the LGB person appears to fit a stereotypical gay image (e.g. Einarsdóttir et al., 2016; Priola et al., 2018; Van Laer, 2014), past models do not take third-party behavior or interventions into account. Moreover, even if the situation is not considered favorable for LGB people to disclose, disclosure may be carried out by third

parties, without the knowledge or the consent of LGBs themselves (being 'outed') (Petronio, 2002; Ragins, 2004).

In line with the predominant view, Ragins (2008), who distinguishes between work and non-work settings, suggests that people decide for themselves the degree to which they would disclose their non-heterosexuality across different domains: for example, people who are 'out' to some degree in their private lives, might be open in a different way at work or cover up their sexuality completely, creating a disconnection between their identity states (Lindsey et al., 2020). Alternatively, they might disclose or indeed hide their sexual orientation to the same extent in both domains, successfully integrating their identity states. Although this model sheds light on the relationships between different life domains and takes into account LGBs' perceptions of other actors (e.g. supervisors), it views the degree of disclosure and level of integration as the result of LGB employees' personal choice, discounting the active role played by the audience.

**Negotiating boundaries between personal and work domains**

Boundary Theory is a theoretical framework which refers to what people do to create, maintain and modify boundaries between different life domains, thereby reducing the complexity of the world in which they live (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner et al., 2009; Nippert-Eng, 1996). Boundaries between domains delineate physically and temporally separated arenas and individuals' personal predisposition to play the social role/s required. Traditionally, scholars have studied the construction and the transition between the work and the home/personal life domains and the effects of spreading negative or positive experiences from one domain to another (negative/positive spillover) (e.g. Powell & Greenhous, 2010; Wu et al., 2012).

The relative strength and flexibility of boundaries may vary, depending on personal preferences. Researchers imagine people on an integration-segmentation continuum, highlighting that pure cases rarely exist, because the choice to integrate or segment will depend on every social situation or interaction (Ashforth et al., 2000; Capitano & Greenhous, 2018).

Moreover, a person's desire regarding whether to integrate or segment different domains could be violated by others. Kreiner and colleagues (2009) observed that people who wish to segment their personal and work life frequently have to cope with the intrusion of actors around them who tend to merge different domains (*forced integration*). For example, in some cases people are forced to play roles connected with their job in the personal domain, due to ongoing demands from their supervisors/colleagues/clients; or because of excessive workload requiring them to work at home beyond normal working hours. By contrast, people might wish to integrate their personal life into their work environment, to feel free to talk about personal experiences (leisure activities, partner), but might encounter resistance (*forced segmentation*). Obviously, the work-personal life nexus is not uni-directional: people might wish to integrate/segment their personal life at work and, equally, their work experience at home.

Because of the role played by others, building and maintaining boundaries is not a unilateral process, but a social interaction where "the individual is an active agent in the co-construction of boundaries" (Kreiner et al., 2009, p. 705). Equally, this can be considered work in progress, resulting from a process of negotiation and co-construction during every social interaction. Boundaries might be strong or weak and they are created by (unconscious) negotiation with other actors as well as integration/segmentation of social rules present within an environment (formal and informal) (Capitano & Greenhous, 2018). When the result of the

social interaction/s is not in line with the person's own desire to integrate or segment, it could generate a *distance violation* (the impossibility of integrating different domains due to forced segmentation), or an *intrusion violation* (when people are prevented from segmenting different spheres of their life following interference/imposition by others). Both violations produce work-personal life conflict that affects individuals' well-being (Kreiner et al., 2009).

### Viewing the disclosure process through Boundary Theory

The disclosure of non-heteronormative sexualities at work might result from sharing information about LGB employees' personal life with co-workers. Therefore, the disclosure process might be considered facilitated by, and resulting from, attempts to integrate part of LGB employees' work-life domains. In fact, people might decide to share information about their personal life at work in order to disclose their sexual orientation implicitly (e.g. talking about leisure time, friends, etc.); or disclosure might be the natural outcome of the integration process. For a variety of reasons, e.g. perceptions about their work context and personal characteristics (Clair et al., 2005), LGB employees might decide not to disclose their sexual orientation at work, opting instead for segmenting their personal and work life. However, although LGB employees might have a clear idea about how to manage their sexual identity at work, the audience may play a key role in determining the effectiveness of their initial intention. For instance, co-workers might ignore information offered about their personal life, undermining LGB people's attempts to share their personal life at work, consequently creating a *distance violation*. Alternatively, colleagues might force LGB people who fit stereotypical images of homosexuality to give more details about their personal life, thus generating an *intrusion violation*. In that sense, the boundaries between LGBs' personal and work life are co-constructed by all the actors involved in the interaction and are, therefore, not

the result of their own choices alone. Perhaps for this reason one may argue that it is not entirely correct to define the disclosure process as voluntary or a "choice" (Smith et al., 1998) because, although LGB people may be the main protagonists, retaining most control over this process, workplace social interactions would affect the sexual identity management process.

### The research context

Models of sexual identity management rarely include factors associated with societal values or wider socio-cultural context determined by its historical and socio-political evolution. However, as previous studies showed the relevance of cultural context in shaping the experience of LG people (Compton, 2020), factors associated with recent Spanish history and socio-political development are addressed. In doing so, the paper also addresses the call for further studies on sexuality in "non-Anglo-Saxon" workplaces (Priola et al., 2018).

Over recent decades, Spain has experienced profound political and social transformations. The end of Franco's dictatorship in 1975 represents the symbolic starting point, unlocking democratic transition. His regime was characterized by reduction of freedom at personal and political levels, with the imposition of National-Catholicism, an imperialist ideology strictly anchored within Catholic values (Osborne, 2011). Secularization and social progress during the Second Republic (1933-1936) (Casanova, 2001) was reversed in terms of individual and social rights, prohibiting divorce, and stressing inequality between women and men. The regime's use of religion was part of a political project to control people by means of manipulation of popular sentiment, e.g. shame and guilt (Osborne, 2011), condemning all public behavior considered "frivolous" or "indecent" (Abella, 1996).

Women were relegated to the home to care for their family, for which they received compulsory training. Such measures reinforced gender roles, constructing strict separate

public and private domains, and the range of (in)admissible issues identified with each of them. Sexuality and any public display of affection were relegated to the private sphere, in line with the dominant moralism, condemning women to invisibility in the public domain (Abella, 1996).

Given this premise, LGB people, subjected to legal persecution, survived only by keeping a low profile. Franco's regime oppressed and punished any manifestation of non-heterosexual identity, highlighting the "harmful status" of homosexual people and authorizing public authorities to take measures to "rehabilitate" LGB people (Calvo & Pichardo, 2011).

Despite recent formidable social changes, including in 2005 gender-neutral marriage legalizing same-sex marriage, and simultaneously providing LGB couples with the opportunity to adopt (Law 13/2005, 1 July), the legacy of the recent past is still visible in the heteronormative environment affecting the daily lives of LGB people. The traditional family, comprising a man and a woman, is still the central institution of Spanish society. Moreover, the distinction between public and private spheres remains valid for most LGB people (Velez-Pellegrini, 2008). While (hetero)sexual discourses have moved out of private spheres and entered daily, public conversation, those that allude to a same-sex relationship are often relegated to the private domain, still generating embarrassed reactions (Velez-Pellegrini, 2008). Therefore, in Spain puritanical attitudes towards LGB people remain.

As such contextual factors are likely to affect disclosure dynamics as well as how and to what extent Spanish LGB employees integrate their personal lives at work, they will inform our investigation.

**Materials and Methods**

*Participants*

In order to paint an accurate picture of how Spanish lesbian and gay (LG) employees manage the disclosure process in the workplace, we carried out 39[1] semi-structured interviews, with people in work at the time of the interview or who had been in work within the last six months (table 1). In total, 24 lesbians and 15 gay men participated. Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 57 years (mean age was 36 years); the mean job tenure was 6 years. Participants' employment distribution was as follows: public sector (39.4%); marketing and advertising (12.1%); private education (9.1%); accounting and finance (9.1%); private health care (9.1%); not for profit organizations (6.1%); others (15.1%). A wide range of occupations was represented; and only 4 participants were self-employed. Sociodemographic information was collected thorough a questionnaire at the end of the interview.

[Table 1 near here]

### Data collection

Due to the sensitivity of the issue and the difficulty of identifying participants, people were recruited through a snowballing approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To support this approach, the study outline was sent to the Spanish National LGTB Federation (FELGTB – *Federación Estatal de Lesbianas, Gays, Transexuales y Bisexuales*) which publicized it on their website and circulated information about the study to the Federation's member organizations with a request for individual members to contact the research team. Volunteers assisted in recruiting interviewees among their own personal contacts, overcoming limitations due to bias produced by recruiting people exclusively from LGBT associations (Meyer & Wilson, 2009).

The objective of the interviews was to capture participants' own experience, recognizing at all times, the interactional aspect of the interview and the role played by the researcher during

the process (Cassell, 2005). Following a pilot interview, which helped us test the clarity and relevance of the interview guide (e.g., the question on masculinity had to be modified to make it clearer), the questions were divided into three main sections: first; questions providing information about the participant's work context (e.g. "Tell me about your work"); second; questions related to how they manage their sexual orientation at work, including information about reactions within their work environment (e.g. "How do you perceive your workplace regarding your sexual orientation?"); third; questions exploring social and cultural elements important for the participant's work experience (e.g., religion, colleagues' values) were explored (e.g. "Which features of the Spanish culture affect LG people's experience at work?"). The questions were defined starting by the literature review; they acted as a guide for the interviewer and flexibility and spontaneity were maintained to generate rich data. During the collection of data, and acknowledging the need for reflexitivity (Berger, 2015), the interviewer was conscious about not influencing the flow of the interview with her own previous knowledge and experience. In that sense, the researcher tries to identify and reflect on her prior beliefs and knowledge about sexual identity management. At the same time, she tried to create a safe space for interviewees, where they feel free to share their own experience.

In order to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity, the interviewer met participants in a public space (e.g. a coffee bar), never at their workplace, in order to ensure that interviewees felt free to talk openly about their experiences.

Interviews ranged in length between 60 and 90 minutes. Data collection was stopped when saturation was reached and new interviews did not contribute to generating additional information (Morse, 2000). Data were collected and analyzed in Spanish with significant quotations translated into English by the authors. To check that the original meaning was

preserved a back-translation was undertaken, correcting any mistranslations (Santos et al., 2015).

*Data Analysis*

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and data were analyzed using the software Atlas.ti 7 (Scientific Software Development, 1999). We carried out template analyses (King, 2004), a technique that allows the creation of codes *a priori* as well as *a posteriori*. On the basis of a review of the literature and initially exploring a small sample of interviews, some preliminary codes were identified (for instance, disclosure strategies used by LGB people described by Griffin, 1992). The *a priori* template is comparable with the start list described by Miles and Huberman (1994), which represent a living document that changes *in itinere*, during the data collection and analysis. Hence, template analysis allows balancing the need for structure with the need for flexibility (Brooks et al., 2015). The initial (*a priori)* template includes few initial codes. During the analysis the template is edited (*a posteriori*), eliminating or modifying initial codes and adding emerging ones (King, 2004).

Coding was undertaken by two of the authors separately and any discrepancy resolved through discussion within the full research team. The members of the research team discussed the development of the template at two other stages: after analyzing the first half of the interviews, and following analysis of all interview transcripts. Once agreement on the final template was reached, the full dataset was re-analyzed. Thus, codes gradually became more specific, making it possible to organize them hierarchically, aggregating them into relevant themes (King, 2004).

In the following section, we present the main results of the data analyses. To ensure anonymity, participants' names are fictitious; any information that could be used to identify the individual participant has been removed.

**Results**

Two main themes emerged from the analysis: LG people's personal desires or needs, in terms of disclosure strategies applied at work; and disclosure dynamics, which explores the role played by third parties in the process. Factors affecting the dynamics, forced integration and forced segmentation are described as three sub-themes of disclosure dynamics. The results relating to Spanish cultural features are presented transversally.

*Disclosure strategies applied at work*

In line with previous studies (Ragins, 2008), the interconnection of three factors appears to trigger the decision as to which potential disclosure strategies participants would use: firstly, individual differences (e.g. the centrality of LG identity, the level of self-monitoring, and past experiences); secondly, cost-benefit considerations (e.g. fear of victimization and discrimination; creating stronger relationships with co-workers); and thirdly, the work environment (e.g. working in a male-dominated sector; their relative power reflected by their position or status). However, it soon emerged that the strategies LG people applied did not necessarily depend on their preference alone, but instead were shaped by the interpersonal dynamics of daily interactions between themselves and their co-workers.

Most participants were (implicitly or explicitly) out with some colleagues, thus, integrating their personal experiences at work, while carefully concealing their sexual orientation from others. However, noting that the use of a particular strategy is not clear-cut, but the result of

many daily considerations and choices (Croteau et al., 2008; McDonald et al., 2020), we observed that many LG employees still hide their sexuality in the workplace, or have done so at some point in their working life. Consequently, for these LG employees, not revealing their true sexuality at work would produce a strong boundary between personal and working life (Kreiner et al., 2009), because of the impossibility of talking openly about personal experiences and the people who are important in their lives, whether directly or indirectly associated with their sexual orientation (for instance, talking about a partner or participating in a conference about LGB rights).

Furthermore, the fact that same-sex relationships often tend to be sexualized or "widely perceived only in sexual terms" by many heterosexuals (Herek, 1996, p. 305), is reflected in the perceptions adopted by many LG people, seeing their personal life as an issue "which belongs to their private lives and it's necessary not to confuse what is public and private" (Flora, L). By contrast, due to the "desexualized nature" of heterosexuals' discourses (Herek, 1996), heterosexuals are more able to integrate their personal life at work without breaking the rule of appropriateness, as suggested by Estrella:

There are always some people who are annoyed because they think it isn't necessary to tell *[about sexual orientation]*, right? My colleague talks about his girlfriend, or another says she's made a cake *[for her partner]*, or another one has flirted with a beautiful girl…sometimes they believe telling these things is normal, but when others are homosexual it isn't appropriate, right? (Estrella, L)

Thus, many participants perceive that when they talk about their daily experiences and those associated with them, such as a partner, the sexual side of their relationship becomes the

salient core of the discourses - even if they make no reference to sex at any time. As one participant pointed out, referring to conversations with her supervisor: "she was embarrassed when we talk about my partner" (Marta, L). Such 'embarrassing' situations often produce feelings of guilt, shame or anxiety, all of which could be attributed to the prevailing Catholic ethos, having a strong hold despite the secularization of Spanish society, as here expressed by Patricia: "[…] I declare myself atheist, but I carry inside myself the Christian feeling of guilt. This comes from our Christian and Catholic culture" (Patricia, L). Consequently, many Spanish LG employees prefer to avoid such "embarrassing" situations, avoiding telling anything about their personal life, instead hiding their sexual orientation at work and, thus fail to create strong boundaries between personal and work life.

### *Disclosure dynamics: the role of third parties in the integration/segmentation process*
#### *Looking for clues*

A key factor in determining whether to disclose or not is the establishment of whether the workplace is a supportive and safe environment. Hence, before integrating/segmenting their personal life at work, LG people explore the context, observe their co-workers, and ask questions in order to "test the waters" (Day & Schoenrade, 1997): "It's always the same. You select, observe, test the waters, and see how they can take it in order to decide whether to tell or not to tell" (Alicia, L).

In their assessment many Spanish LG employees ask questions they consider provide vital clues. Given the persecution by the Franco regime, and the Church's condemnation of homosexuality, political views and religious beliefs are seen as salient information because LG employees perceive conservative and religious co-workers being less tolerant. Broadly speaking, obtaining knowledge about colleagues' degree of tolerance, especially towards

minority groups, represents the first step in determining the level of trust that LG workers can place in their co-workers to reveal their sexuality. Therefore, as one participant said, LG people "over the years, acquire tools" through which they are able to extract significant information about other people's general opinions and points of view.

When starting a new work relationship, LG employees need to be acutely observant, assessing to what extent they can integrate their personal life at work. Mercedes, describing the moment when she meets a new employee, especially when this is a man, talks of these dynamics that she defines in terms of "process analysis":

You have to focus more and you start asking questions, of course. Yes, you want to make sense of places he visits and if you understand he would want to flirt with you, but he's a good person and you would want to have a friendship with him, you start to tell things *[about your personal life]*. (Mercedes, L)

Here Mercedes' low visibility plays a decisive role within the disclosure dynamics. Since she does not represent the stereotypical image Spanish heterosexuals have of lesbians, such as "[…] wearing jeans, checked shirt, short hair, masculine, a lumberjack or butch" (Miriam, L), it could be more difficult for others initially to imagine that she might be a lesbian. That said, she describes relationships with men at work as being more problematic because it is difficult to challenge their presumption of heterosexuality. Mercedes points out that sometimes the conversation does not allow her to integrate experiences from her private life. Therefore, to weaken boundaries between different life domains in order to communicate her sexuality, she needs to make a clear statement. Thus, existing stereotypes become part of the dynamics, facilitating or preventing (or indeed covering up) the disclosure process through which the

integration with (or segmentation from) the personal/private lives of participants with their working life takes place.

In the case of Spanish lesbians, it can be argued that religion has reinforced the segmentation and therefore their invisibility in every domain, due to the intersection between gender and sexuality (Hennekam & Ladge, 2017) and society's expectations about gender roles. Interestingly, however, once lesbians disclose their sexual orientation, they appear to be more accepted, and particularly if they also have children, as articulated by Erica: "[…] if you don't question gender roles. Thus, if you are a feminine lesbian, good mother with stable work… you may more easily be accepted, «Well, she's *[only]* lesbian»" (Erica, L). Therefore, Erica explained that the reproduction of heteronormative patterns in terms of procreation and gender roles seemingly reduces the potential negative consequences of disclosing sexual orientation at work, at least for Spanish lesbians. Whilst seemingly a way to integrate different domains more easily, it would be more precise to define it as a partial integration, since the acceptance of traditional gender roles keeps non-heterosexual orientations invisible.

Perceived visibility and stereotypes appear to be central factors affecting disclosure dynamics because they initiate a parallel exploration process driven by the audience. According to participants' perceptions, the audience might be intrigued by the lack of information about LG colleagues who wish to segment work and personal domains (temporarily or permanently, partially or totally) and who do not represent widely held heteronormal feminine/masculine images (Losert, 2008; Van Laer, 2014).

### *Forced integration*

Conforming to stereotypes about LG people might encourage co-workers to engage in disclosure dynamics by asking more direct questions, spreading gossip, or alternatively,

withdrawing from communication with LG colleagues, in order to avoid "embarrassing" situations. The first aspect of this dilemma is articulated by one interviewee, explaining how some colleagues thwarted his effort to segment different domains and pushing him into a *forced integration* (of his personal life with work).

Yes, I feel pressure, from a couple of *[female]* colleagues who wanted a friendship with me, and that somehow they know *[that he is gay]*. I don't know, maybe I'm camp, maybe…I don't know if when I walk on the street people say "This is camp *[mariquita]*" <he laughs> I don't know. Well, there were some colleagues, mainly women, right? […] they wanted me to tell them […] in order to strengthen the friendships […] and I felt… forced. (Javier, G)

According to another participant, direct, or indirect inquisitive questions arise when one does not correspond to the normative masculine image of men. Being effeminate or remaining unmarried, particularly when reaching a certain age, even for heterosexual men, generates curiosity (e.g. Riach et al., 2014).

Moreover, the awareness of the role of stereotypes in such interactional dynamics might also affect future disclosure behaviors, especially if people wish to cover their sexuality, i.e. segmenting work and personal domains: "[…] when you are gay you try to talk as little as possible because if it is obvious *[his gayness]*…you try to move as little as possible, so that you end up becoming wary" (Alejandro, G).

In the quotations above, it is possible to identify the role played by Spanish culture, although similarities are found in other countries (Priola et al., 2018; Stenger & Roulet, 2018). By analyzing participants' words, stereotypes associated with heteronormative masculine behaviors and the visibility that mismatching such stereotypes entails are identified.

As indicated earlier, a radical form of forced integration, is being outed (Ragins, 2004). Sometimes disclosure can result from work gossip. For example, LGs might decide to disclose their sexual orientation to some colleagues (Croteau et al., 2008), perhaps because they have built a closer relationship with them. Some co-workers might then pass this information on and in doing so fail to take account of LG people's decisions not to come out to all colleagues (Petronio, 2002). This scenario applied to several participants who chose a cover strategy but became aware that everybody knew about their true sexual orientation because a colleague had spread the rumor. In this case the 'closet' is transformed into a shop window revealing a "well-known secret" (Alejandro, G) even if nobody talks openly about it.

These experiences of forced integration demonstrate the failure of LG employees to segment their personal life at work, and as such represent *intrusion violations*. In other cases, LG people wish to integrate their personal life at work, but third parties impede the process. This article now turns to such dynamics.

*Forced segmentation*

Disclosure dynamics involving third parties were present when LG employees decided to be more visible, talking openly about their personal life. Having tested the waters, integrating one's personal life is often a gradual process. Initially LG employees might start by giving some clues about themselves and their sexual orientation, even if the audience reaction might pay no attention to their effort, as in the following example:

[…] I was staying abroad and they told me *[her office mates]*, "They have made us remove the poster *[about LGBT rights]*, the one that you put up." So when I went back, I went to talk to her *[the professor in the department who asked for the poster to be removed]*, I said I had

put up the poster and that I wanted to leave it there. Well, I felt frustrated, right? Also, especially at that time, when not everybody knew, right? *[The poster]* was my way of saying "I'm here", right? And putting that poster up there *[in the office]* was like "Ok, you can be lesbian, but nobody is supposed to know, right?" This conversation never happened, they never told me this, but my perception was "Right, we haven't any problem with you, but we don't talk about this issue." (Elisa, L)

In this case, the poster was an attempt by Elisa to be visible to most of her colleagues, integrating an aspect of her personal life (her LGBT activism) at work, but she hit a brick wall, with the audience preventing her attempt to come out at work. The professor's reaction was an example of forced segmentation, preventing Elisa's effort to integrate her personal life at work.

However, even radical and unambiguous attempts to integrate one's personal experiences at work might be insufficient to disclose sexual orientation as Marta's story below suggests:

[…] I began in a natural way, little by little, because I talked about my partner, so I said "I was with Inés… *[her partner]*», so I believed that it was very evident, very clear, right? But obviously it isn't, because there were people that said "*[Inés],* she's your roommate." (Marta, L)

Although many participants had tried to integrate their personal lives at work in a natural way, they were let down by their colleagues, due to the presumption of heterosexuality and, in many cases, the low visibility of LGs not conforming to prevailing stereotypes (Smith et al., 1998). Moreover, even when LG people explicitly state their sexuality, the audience might

encourage a *forced segmentation* (Kreiner et al., 2009), consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly. For example, co-workers might choose to "ignore" or "correct" information about the same-sex partner, indirectly encouraging a *forced segmentation*, as in Dorleta's story:

[…] It seems that what they hear leads them to correct the word or their minds are closed to this possibility. They think that they misheard, I don't know if they think so. So then the same word again comes out *[girlfriend - novia]*, but again they correct it to the masculine *[form of the word - novio]* with regard to me, […] "Ah yes! How are you getting on with your boyfriend?" "How is your boyfriend?", but I have said girlfriend, but they use it again *[the word boyfriend - novio]*. (Dorleta, L)

Dorleta's account conveys a feeling of frustration due to ineffective communication with her colleagues. Similarly, sometimes heterosexual co-workers do not get the message or pretend to ignore what they are told, possibly being afraid that they might have 'misunderstood', wrongly attributing a homosexual orientation to them. Such behaviors hinder LG people's integration process of their personal life at work, resulting in a *distance violation*.

Another third-party reaction is silence (Priola et al., 2018; Ward & Winstanley, 2006). The absence of questions about LG people's partners and/or their personal life may invalidate any effort by them to construct permeable domains:

[…] people know, and also other people tell me that they know, right? But nobody ever – among people who are not very close to me - talks to me, nobody ever asks me, nobody ever asks about my partner. (Elisa, L)

Lack of personal communication impedes the opportunity to build closer relationships and might result in isolation. Therefore, if the audience fails to listen or respond, LG people might fail to successfully integrate different life domains.

Forced segmentation could also be the result of a direct and explicit third-party reaction, sometimes apparently taking on a positive connotation. Thus, co-workers might force LG employees who have talked openly about their personal life to take a step back in order "to protect" them from negative reactions from others. In other cases, co-workers just avoid talking about issues which might be perceived "embarrassing". For instance, one participant reported that having communicated her sexual orientation to the human resources manager, her line-manager, she was advised in a 'vague' manner not to tell their boss. Being pushed back into the closet LG employees are deprived of choice with respect to their disclosure strategy and their desire to integrate their personal life at work.

**Discussion**

This article highlights the complexity of processes involved with the disclosure of non-heterosexuality at work, pointing out that it is neither an all-or-nothing process, as previous research suggested (Ragins, 2008), nor a process solely controlled by LGs. The novelty of this research lies in recognizing disclosure as a process resulting from the interactional dynamics between LG employees and co-workers (third parties/audience). Through the prism of Boundary Theory, we explored the disclosure process in terms of integration/segmentation

between different domains, identifying the active role played by the audience. Our data reveals that LG employees and co-workers are complicit in ongoing negotiation, dynamically shaping the boundaries between LG employees' personal and work domains. The result of these interactions could lead to an *intrusion violation*, when LG employees' desire to segment (avoiding incorporating aspects of their personal life at work) is violated by the audience, or to a *distance violation*, when instead the desire to integrate (talking about their personal life at work) is similarly violated.

This research extends our knowledge of sexual identity management at work, emphasizing the process and the interactional dynamics behind disclosure. Such dynamics are complex and changeable, according to the context and people involved; they are replicated when a new co-worker arrives, whenever LGs are faced with co-workers ignorant of their sexuality or a change of work environment (McDonald et al., 2020; Ward & Winstanley, 2006). Moreover, disclosure and its effectiveness do not solely depend on LG employees' choices about the extent to which they would like to integrate/segment their personal life at work, as the process and its outcomes are also affected by their co-workers' actions and responses, which again may be influenced by conscious or more subtle prejudice and stereotypes (Herek & McLemore, 2013).

Although our research identifies some behaviors which result in "*intrusion violation*" (e.g. persistent questioning about personal life) or "*distance violation*" (e.g. ignoring disclosure), future research should explore which other behaviors might lead to forced integration/segmentation. Thus, future studies should further develop a model of sexual identity management at work which takes into account disclosers' wishes but also disclosees' (re)actions. This might also open the door to exploring further the consequences of forced integration/segmentation at individual and organizational levels.

Given that participants had self-selected and represent a group of LG people with links to the LGBT community, it is interesting to observe that many participants conceal or have concealed their sexual orientation at work at some point during their working life. Being prevented from integrating one's sexuality naturally into daily discourse makes all direct or indirect aspects of LGs' sexual orientation more salient, with LGs engaging in active self-monitoring (Sedlovskaya et al., 2013). When LG employees are victims of a forced integration, we can argue that LG identity is pushed to the centre of their self-perception and identity. In such cases, their desire to segment their personal life at work clashes with being the object of continuous questioning by co-workers. Therefore, LG employees would have to make considerable cognitive effort in terms of controlling information or any clues to their sexual orientation in order to counteract or neutralize co-workers' intrusion violation. Recent studies showed the negative effect on cognitive resources in terms of mental fatigue of cognitive role transition due to integration (e.g. thinking on issues that belong to personal life at work) (Smit et al., 2016). Future lines of investigation might explore the effect of such role transitioning caused by forced integration on LGB employees.

Our findings also show that the socio-cultural context allows clarification of how disclosure dynamics work. From analysis of the interviews, we observe that social values, beliefs, stereotypes, gender-roles, and religion in their own right and jointly, might reduce the possibilities for LG employees to make themselves visible (Priola et al., 2018). Although Spain is seemingly a progressive example in terms of legal protection of LGB rights, our data show that conservative social rules still shape the apparently innocent definition of public and personal spheres and the identification of what are considered appropriate issues associated with each domain. However, our study does not compare data from different cultures. In order

to better isolate the role played by Spanish socio-cultural context, future studies should explore how disclosure dynamics work in other countries/regions.

Our study confirms previous research (Herek, 1996) about the sexualization of LGB employees' personal issues including perceptions of leisure time activities (Hoel et al., 2014) making the line between personal and private spheres indistinguishable for many LGB people. It follows that the range of discourses available to heterosexuals in public is broader than those available to LGBs. Although it is possible to observe similar processes in many countries (e.g. Priola et al., 2018), this might be more pronounced in Spain, due to its particular socio-cultural heritage. Indeed, despite a process of secularization the legacy of puritanism and moralism continues to influence behaviors in post-Franco Spain in terms of feelings of guilt and shame. Future research might explore the concept of appropriateness as established by heterosexual people and to what extent heterosexuals are aware of such issues and the role they play in disclosure dynamics.

New studies might focus on challenging prejudicial and unethical behaviors within organizations, which impede LG integration/segmentation. Moreover, bisexual and transsexual employees, who were not included in this study for methodological reasons, might be involved in other types of dynamics which might require different organizational interventions. Future research might also explore the role played by the organizational (implicit and/or explicit) norms around the process of integration/segmentation of personal domain at work, and defining the type of discourses admitted at work.

We believe this study has several theoretical implications. It adds to theory about disclosure of non-heterosexuality, highlighting the role of third parties. This research builds on, but to some extent deviates from, previous models about disclosure (Clair et al., 2005; Lidderdale et al., 2007; Ragins, 2008) which explain the disclosure process as the result of the

LGB person's choices and decisions, thus overlooking the interactional nature. Hence, in line with some recent studies (Einarsdóttir et al., 2016; McDonald et al., 2020; Van Laer, 2014), our Spanish data supports a view that sexual orientation is not necessarily invisible, with stereotyping playing a greater role in disclosure dynamics than previously envisaged. Uniquely we analyze this process by means of Boundary Theory which provides a useful framework enabling us to identify the complexities and dynamics involved in the construction of boundaries between LG people's personal and work domains emphasizing the role played by the audience. Since the disclosure process brings about integration (or indeed segmentation) of LG people's personal life with (or separation from) work, to a greater or lesser extent, Boundary Theory guides us in understanding how such integration (or segmentation) is carried out and how third parties can impede LG employees' initial desire for integration (or segmentation). Finally, this research shows the importance of acknowledging the influence of the socio-cultural context in the disclosure process, taking the analysis beyond the immediate work environment.

This article also offers suggestions as to how organizations may utilize the new insights about disclosure dynamics and the social values which regulate them, thus bridging the gap between theory and practice. In order to ease disclosure of non-heterosexuality, supporting those who want to be open at work, and respecting those who decide to maintain a separation of their personal and their work life, these dynamics need to be recognized and adopted by organizations as part of managing diversity and social inclusion at work (Ozturk & Tatli, 2016). To become effective such initiatives would combine support for LGBT employees and greater opportunity for voice with longer-term strategies to challenge prejudice and stereotypes as well as heteronormativity (heterosexuality as the norm) (Martinez et al., 2017; Warner, 1991).

Past studies (Bell et al., 2011) argued that the concept of "voice", –any employee's constructive attempt to change their current organizational situation, expressing opinions, ideas, doubts, etc. (e.g., Liang et al., 2012) – should be applied to minorities or protected groups including LGBT people. Although several types of LGBT employees' voice have been identified (Bell et al., 2011), voice as expression of dissatisfaction might be useful for those workers who perceive that their right to integrate or, equally, to segment their personal life at work has been violated. In this respect, ensuring that grievance or complaint procedures or other compliance practices are sensitive to the need for confidentiality, and are considered safe (Liang et al., 2012) as well as fostering an inclusive climate might help encourage LGBT employees to express their voice, even if they are not out at work (McFadden & Crowley-Henry, 2018). In terms of strengthening LGBT voice individually and collectively, organizations should also consider promoting LGBT role models, support the formation of organizational networks of LGBT employees for mutual member support, and providing mentors (using LGBT mentors if desired and available) for career development, as has been suggested for other protected groups (Bell et al., 2011; Colgan & McKearney, 2017). In line with the SAFE theoretical model (Fletcher & Everly, 2021), all these practices can contribute to shape an environment that enhances LGBT people's authenticity through a sense of fit that works at three different levels: at a cognitive level, such practices increase LGBT people's perception of alignment between the work context and their most salient aspects of the self (self-concept fit); at a motivational level, the environment allows them to pursue internalized goals (goal fit); and at a social level, LGBT workers perceive that others validate how they view themselves (social fit). LGBT people's perception of authenticity has been recognized as an important mechanism to improve their well-being (Fletcher & Everly, 2021).

Although prejudices and negative stereotypes about LGBT people which negatively affect the disclosure process may be hard to change, particularly as these operate at an explicit as well as implicit level, with third-parties not necessarily being aware of the consequences of their actions, the status quo can be challenged through various organizational interventions. (Hennekam & Ladge, 2017). First, in terms of training, role-plays and discussion about real life scenarios can be utilized to challenge co-workers' prejudices and stereotypes about LGBT people, creating awareness about implicit bias and the negative consequences for LGBT colleagues, as well as challenging audience understanding of what is considered appropriate.

Second, organizations may encourage the formation of joint networks, in which LGBT employees and heterosexual co-workers get to know each other better and collaboratively support other non-heterosexual colleagues (Colgan & McKearney, 2012; McFadden & Crowley-Henry, 2018). Third, although it may be unrealistic to think that organizations are able to change third parties' values and beliefs in a short period of time, it appears necessary to introduce into the public space a new discourse which includes LGBT people, thus reshaping the concept of appropriateness, supporting those who would like to be open at work about their non-heteronormative sexual orientation. To avoid becoming more than merely paying lip service, introducing such a discourse would challenge the dominance of normative heterosexuality or heteronormativity (Ragins, 2008), which arguably is a precondition for real social inclusion and equality at work for LGBT people. Fourth and finally, strong organizational support manifested in senior management behavior and actions is essential, because none of the above-mentioned initiatives and measures will be effective without management commitment to promote inclusion into the totality of routine organizational practices (Hennekam & Ladge, 2017). In this respect, whilst as in the case of Spain the presence of a legislative framework, which protects LGBT employees against discrimination,

provides a good starting point, recent Spanish reactionary changes in the political climate

questioning acquired rights (e.g., abortion; same-sex marriage) suggest that it is always

possible to reverse progress in the acquisition of social and individual rights, so it is necessary

to keep a watchful eye on social and individual rights. With EU anti-discrimination regulation

on sexual orientation being challenged in several European countries, such awareness seems

of even greater importance (Harari, 2019). For these reasons, organizations have to play a

proactive role, complementing statutory regulations with in-house initiatives, starting with the

education of management and clarifying their roles and responsibilities in the process (e.g.,

Ozturk & Tatli, 2016), with the aim of creating inclusive organizations.


**Conclusion**

Lesbians and gay men's disclosure of their sexual orientation at work is a complex process

and includes acknowledgement of its interactional and dynamic nature. Hence, the disclosure

process does not depend on LGs' decision making alone, but is affected by interactional

dynamics played out by LG employees and their co-workers. In line with Boundary Theory,

these dynamics result in weaker or stronger boundaries respectively between LGs' personal

life and their working life. Moreover, these dynamics are influenced by their context in terms

of social values and beliefs. This study emphasized Spanish social values, such as religion,

family, and gender roles, highlighting the importance they have in determining disclosure

dynamics at work.

Bearing in mind that it is the nature of such dynamics to determine the disclosure

outcomes, and not the process itself (Ozturk & Tatli, 2016), organizations need to recognize

the interactional nature of the disclosure process and all those elements which affect this

process, creating the best possible conditions for LG employees to integrate their personal life at work, or segment, should they so wish.

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Footnotes

[1]One bisexual woman and one transgender woman also participated in the study. Such

interviews were not included in the analyses since previous research demonstrated that

transgender and bisexual people might be perceived by heterosexuals differently (Arena &
Jones, 2017; Worthen, 2013) and might trigger distinct processes due to their specificities
(Williams et al., 2009). The total number of interviews included in the study and analyzed
was 39.

Table 1. Participants' socio-demographic data

| Pseudonym | Sexual orientation | Age | Education | Sector | Occupation | Self-employed/ Employed | Tenure in their current job (years) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Adrián | G | 41 | Postgraduate | Education | Teacher | Employed | 5 |
| Alberto | G | 40 | Postgraduate | Accounting and Finance | Administrative position | Employed | 10 |
| Alejandro | G | 37 | University degree | Civil engineering | Engineer | Employed | 4 |
| Alicia | L | 27 | University degree | - | - | - | -[a] |
| Alvaro | G | 34 | University degree | Communication | Director of communication | Employed | 5 |
| Ángela | L | 55 | Secondary school | Public sector | School janitor | Employed | 28 |
| Cintia | L | 42 | Secondary school | - | - | - | - |
| Cristina | L | 28 | Secondary school | Marketing and advertising | Telemarketing phone operator | Employed | 5 |
| David | G | 57 | Secondary school | Public sector | Logistic specialist | Employed | Retired[b] |
| Diego | G | 47 | University degree | Accounting and Finance | Salesperson | Employed | 4 |
| Dorleta | L | 36 | Postgraduate | Public sector | Doctor | Employed | 3 |
| Elena | L | 45 | University degree | - | - | - | - |
| Elisa | L | 36 | Postgraduate | Public sector | Researcher | Employed | 4 |
| Erica | L | 24 | University degree | Public sector | Researcher | Employed | 1 |
| Estefania | L | 24 | Postgraduate | Health | Secretary | Employed | 1 month |
| Estrella | L | 42 | Postgraduate | Charity, Not for profit | Psychologist | Employed[c] | 9 months |
| Fernando | G | 34 | Secondary school | Accounting and Finance | Administrative position | Employed | 10 |
| Flora | L | 35 | Postgraduate | Charity, Not for profit | Educational developer | Employed | 5 |
| Guillermo | G | 47 | University degree | Public sector | Journalist | Employed | 10 |
| Inés | L | 27 | University degree | Health | Psychologist | Employed[c] | 1 |
| Jaime | G | 27 | University degree | Media and Culture | Logistic specialist | Employed | 6 |
| Javier | G | 56 | University degree | Education | Director of studies/Teacher | Employed | 20 |
| Jorge | G | 36 | University degree | Marketing and advertising | Marketing manager | Self-employed | 10 |
| Lola | L | 43 | Postgraduate | Public sector | Worker representative | Employed | 11 |

| Maite | L | 36 | University degree | Health | Community worker | Employed | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Manuel | G | 33 | Postgraduate | - | - | - | - |
| Marcos | G | 31 | University degree | Public sector | Teacher | Employed | 5 |
| Margarita | L | 33 | University degree | Marketing and advertising | Online seller | Self-employed | 3 |
| Marta | L | 36 | University degree | Public sector | Administrative position | Employed | 7 |
| Mercedes | L | 42 | University degree | Design and Architecture | Architectural technician | Self-employed | 15 |
| Miriam | L | 27 | University degree | - | - | - | - |
| Natalio | G | 33 | University degree | Public sector | Administrative position | Employed | 8 |
| Nuria | L | 35 | University degree | Education | Teacher | Self-employed | 2 |
| Patricia | L | 40 | University degree | Public sector | Logistics and transportation specialist | Employed | 17 |
| Rafael | G | 22 | Secondary school | - | - | - | |
| Sara | L | 25 | University degree | Marketing and advertising | Salesperson | Employed | 4 months |
| Sonia | L | 27 | Secondary school | Transport | Flight operator | Employed | 6 |
| Susana | L | 33 | Postgraduate | Public sector | Researcher | Employed | 8 |
| Violeta | L | 38 | University degree | Public sector | Teacher | Employed | 14 |