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In the closet: a grounded theory of the silence of gays and lesbians in the workplace

Romulo Gomes [1]
Bruno Felix [2]

[1] Universidade Federal do Espirito Santo (UFES) / Programa de Pós-Graduação em Administração, Vitória – ES, Brazil
[2] Fucape Business School (FUCAPE) / Departamento de Administração de Empresas, Vitória – ES, Brazil

Abstract

Previous studies have suggested that concealment of same-sex orientation at work can lead to feelings of inauthenticity, low commitment, and depression. However, there are several people who, after performing a risk-return analysis of the decision to come out as openly gay, decide to conceal. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how the decision to conceal sexual orientation occurs. This study aims to develop a grounded theory about the silence of gays and lesbians in the workplace as a response to threats in the workplace. We conducted semi-structured interviews with gay and lesbian employees and presented a grounded theory in which we maintain that this silence at work is not only explained by rational and calculative motivations but also by less intentional intra and intersubjective processes. The originality of this study lies in its emphasis on the theory of social identity to explain the phenomenon of disclosure of sexual orientation in the workplace. In the constructed model, we identify reasons for silence associated with different levels of the self, characteristics of the gay or lesbian individuals themselves and the people with whom they interact, who tend to influence the decision by silence. In addition, we understand individual tactics adopted in order to increase safety for sharing sexual orientation. Such discoveries contribute to overcoming the problem experienced by gays or lesbians as a result of the concealment of sexual orientation at work.

Keywords: Identity threats. Sexual Orientation. Silence. Voice. Diversity.

O self no armário: uma teoria fundamentada sobre o silêncio de gays e de lésbicas no ambiente de trabalho

Resumo

Estudos anteriores sugerem que a ocultação da orientação homossexual no trabalho pode levar a sentimentos de inautencidade, baixo comprometimento e depressão. Entretanto, diversos são os profissionais homossexuais que, após realizarem uma análise de risco e retorno da decisão de "sair do armário", optam pelo silêncio. Diante disso, mostra-se necessário compreender como ocorre a decisão de ocultar a orientação sexual. Este estudo objetiva desenvolver uma teoria fundamentada sobre o silêncio de gays e lésbicas no ambiente de trabalho como resposta a ameaças ao *self* no cotidiano organizacional. Realizamos entrevistas semiestruturadas com empregados gays e lésbicas, e apresentamos uma teoria fundamentada na qual sustentamos que esse silêncio no trabalho não é explicado somente por motivações de ordem racional e calculativa, mas também por processos menos intencionais intra e intersubjetivos. A originalidade deste estudo reside em sua ênfase na Teoria da Identidade Social para explicar o fenômeno da revelação da orientação sexual no ambiente de trabalho. No modelo construído, identificamos motivos para o silêncio associados a distintos níveis do *self*, características dos próprios indivíduos homossexuais e das pessoas com quem eles interagem que tendem a influenciar a decisão pelo silêncio. Adicionalmente, compreendemos táticas individuais adotadas de modo a aumentar a segurança para a saída do armário. Tais descobertas contribuem para a superação do problema vivenciado por homossexuais em decorrência da ocultação da orientação sexual no trabalho.

Palavras-chave: Ameaças à Identidade. Orientação Sexual. Silêncio. Voz. Diversidade.

El self *en el armario: una teoría fundamentada sobre el silencio de* gays *y de lesbianas en el ambiente de trabajo*

Resumen

Estudios anteriores sugieren que la ocultación de la orientación homosexual en el trabajo puede llevar a sentimientos de inautenticidad, bajo compromiso y depresión. Sin embargo, son varios los profesionales homosexuales que, después de realizar un análisis de riesgo y retorno de la decisión de "salir del armario", optan por el silencio. Por ello, se hace necesario comprender cómo ocurre la decisión de ocultación de la orientación sexual. Este estudio se propone desarrollar una teoría fundamentada sobre el silencio de gays y lesbianas en el ambiente de trabajo como una respuesta a amenazas al *self* en la rutina organizacional. Realizamos entrevistas semiestructuradas con empleados gays y lesbianas, y presentamos una teoría fundamentada en la que sostenemos que ese silencio en el trabajo no es solo explicado por motivaciones de orden racional y calculativo, sino también por procesos menos intencionales intra e intersubjetivos. La originalidad de este estudio reside en su énfasis en la teoría de la identidad social para explicar el fenómeno de la revelación de la orientación sexual en el ambiente de trabajo. En el modelo construido, identificamos motivos para el silencio asociados a distintos niveles del *self*, características de los propios individuos homosexuales y de las personas con quienes estos interactúan que tienden a influir en la decisión por el silencio. Adicionalmente, comprendemos tácticas individuales adoptadas para aumentar la seguridad para "salir del armario". Tales hallazgos contribuyen a la superación del problema vivido por homosexuales como consecuencia de la ocultación de la orientación sexual en el trabajo.

Palabras clave: Amenazas a la identidad. Orientación sexual. Silencio; Voz. Diversidad.

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INTRODUCTION

The intentional disclosure of sexual orientation at work is a theme that is complex and relevant in the contemporary labor context. On the one hand, there are indications that some companies are beginning to become more inclusive of diversity and, more specifically, of the sexual orientation of employees (RUMENS and BROOMFIELD, 2012). On the other hand, there is pressure for silence, as manifested in the maxim "don't ask, don't tell" that inhibit the disclosure of sexual orientation (BELL, ÖZBILGIN, BEAUREGARD et al., 2011; SCHNEIDER, 2016). In this study, a recurrent perspective is adopted by silently understanding the concealment of homosexual orientation (FELIX, MELLO, VON BORELL et al., 2016; PRIOLA, LASIO, SIMONE et al., 2014; MOREIRA and HALLAL, 2017). These opposing forces, which simultaneously motivate the voice and silence of gays and lesbians at work, create a tension that has aroused the interest of academics and practitioners on the subject. If the choice for voicing carries the risk of stigmatization and discrimination (GARCIA and SOUZA, 2010), silence also has unwanted consequences, such as the threats to the sense of self-worth of the individuals in question (RAGINS, 2008).

Given this scenario, the literature on the phenomenon of the silence of homosexuals has presented some dominant characteristics. We note that a relevant part of the studies on the subject is of a quantitative nature and seeks to identify antecedents and consequent of (not) "leaving the closet" (p. ex., SCHNEIDER, 2016; ARANDA, MATTHEWS, HUGHES et al., 2015). In addition, the decision to disclose sexual orientation has often been interpreted as instrumental/rational, in which individuals evaluate the risk/return ratio of such disclosure. The logic found is that the smaller the perceived risks, the more the individual addresses the pole of explicit disclosure on a continuum where the opposite end would be full concealment (BUTTON, 2004). In studies conducted under a qualitative approach, we perceive an openness to face the nuances of the phenomenon in a multifaceted and non-linear view (IRIGARAY and FREITAS, 2013; DUGUAY, 2016).

However, even in these articles, we note a need to better explore the subject from the standpoint of the self, given that identity management processes in the workplace seem to be based on the preservation or promotion of the sense of self-worth of individuals (LEAVITT and SLUSS, 2015; PETRIGLIERI, 2011). Thereby, we understand the self as a socially constructed definition that individuals make about themselves by seeking to understand who is individually and collectively (ASHFORTH and SCHINOFF, 2016). To fill this gap, we aim to develop a theory about the silence of gays and lesbians in the workplace, as a response to threats to the self in the organization's day-to-day. We built a grounded theory (CHARMAZ, 2014), developed from interviews with gays and lesbians with different degrees of public declaration of sexual orientation. We argue here that homosexual individuals seek to adopt tactics to minimize threats to the self in order to increase security for exiting the closet and that silence can manifest itself at different levels of the self (personal, relational and collective).

Based on the theoretical construction developed with a sensitizing basis in the Theory of Social Identity (TAJFEL and TURNER, 1979), this article presents theoretical contributions to the literature on silence in the work environment and practical implications for homosexual employees, managers and organizations. For the literature on the silence of the worker, the study contributes to enable an intra and intersubjective analysis of silence as a socially constructed behavior and by taking a procedural look at how the decision to conceal or reveal sexual orientation is constructed. In practical terms, the study collaborates with gay and lesbian individuals to overcome the problem experienced by the concealment of homosexual orientation in the workplace and assists managers and organizations in achieving their goals in situations and environments negatively affected by the consequences of not revealing the homosexuality of the individuals involved.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Silence of gays and lesbians in the workplace: what do we know so far?

The literature on the silence of gays and lesbians in the work environment develops in two main strands: that of work relations (WR) and organizational behavior (OB). While in the WR literature, silence has been explored as a behavior resulting from the absence or scarcity of voice mechanisms provided in the organizational context (BELL, ÖZBILGIN, BEAUREGARD et al., 2011; PRIOLA, LASIO, SIMONE et al., 2014), in the field of OB it tends to be treated as a discretionary, individual, conscious

and intentional decision (MORRISON, 2011). In line with the recent call for papers that overcome this dichotomization of emphases in structure (WR) or agency (OB) (KAUFMAN, 2015; MOWBRAY, WILKINSON and TSE, 2007), this study adopts an integrative positioning, in which structure and action are seen as interdependent (FELIX, MELLO, VON BORELL et al., 2016), although attention is dominated by the individual aspects of this process.

In the literature of WR, several studies have suggested macro and meso level actions that can be adopted in order to facilitate the disclosure of the sexual orientation of homosexuals in the work environment. The creation of specific legislation for the punishment of discriminatory acts against gays and lesbians is a critical element (COLGAN, CREEGAN, MCKEARNEY et al., 2007), since it can inhibit hostile actions that in recent times would not be treated in a specific way. Despite the improvements already made in the regulation that punishes homophobia, much progress has yet to be made, including in Brazil (ECCEL, SARAIVA and CARRIERI, 2015; SOUZA, MARTINS and SOUZA, 2015; SOUZA and PEREIRA, 2013; FELIX, MELLO, VON BORELL et al., 2016). In the internal environment to the organizations, other actions are also facilitating the disclosure of the sexual orientation of gays and lesbians in the workplace, such as the creation of formal and informal channels of expression of individual and collective dissatisfaction (DUNDON, WILKINSON, MARCHINGTON et al., 2005; PRIOLA, LASIO, SIMONE et al., 2014), an explicit commitment to include gay and lesbian employees in decision-making processes (BELL, ÖZBILGIN, BEAUREGARD et al., 2011; FELIX, MELLO, VON BORELL et al., 2016) and the punishment of homophobic acts by the manager (DINIZ, CARRIERI, GANDRA et al., 2013).

Discrimination based on the disclosure of homosexual orientation at work has also been explored from a micro perspective, especially in the literature on OB. In adopting a rational/calculative perspective, Bell, Özbilgin, Beauregard et al. (2011) suggest that in environments hostile to the disclosure of homosexual orientation, the decision by silence can be considered reasonable, because of the many negative consequences that such disclosure would bring to the individual. However, there is evidence that the concealment of sexual orientation at work also generates undesirable consequences in terms of the psychological well-being of the subjects in question (BELL, ÖZBILGIN, BEAUREGARD et al., 2011). Therefore, we understand that the rational / calculative approach is limited to contribute with alternative theoretical investigations explorations that collaborate to overcome the problem experienced as a result of the concealment of the homosexual orientation in the workplace.

In view of the above, we note preliminary evidence that the intrasubjectivity of the homosexual individual must be more deeply explored in this process. This means that it is necessary to problematize what makes the individual consider a hostile environment or not and how they act in face of such an interpretation. In an interactionist view, we can understand that the hostility of the environment is not an objective and absolute variable, but perceived and that, therefore, depends on interpretations by the individual. For example, Ragins and Cornwell (2001) suggest that individuals have different degrees of perceived discrimination regarding sexual orientation at work and that such a difference influences the decision to leave or stay in the closet. Here, we adopt this lens more directed to the individual to understand the decision to reveal or not the sexual orientation in the workplace.

Revealing sexual orientation: fundamentals for a self-based view

In this topic, we present an argumentative review of concepts that were used as sensitizers for the developed theory. These were derived from the Social Identity Theory (TAJFEL and TURNER, 1979), perspective that is found in the set of theoretical approaches of intergroup relations, which includes concepts such as (self) categorization processes, belonging to the endogroup and the associated favoritism (TAJFEL, 1982). In this article, we are based on the following concepts of the mentioned theory: social identity; motives and levels of self; and threats to the self.

Social identity

We hereby start from the assumption that the corporate environment and the interactions and decisions that occur in it, such as whether or not to reveal sexual orientation, are negotiated through a social identity (HOGG and TERRY, 2000; COLARES and SARAIVA, 2016). In view of the plurality of theoretical perspectives regarding identities, we need to delimit in this review the understanding adopted for the term. We consider only the individual social identity and not the group or collective. In addition, the concept of identity (individual social) is used interchangeably with the term "self", as well as in previous works based on the Theory of Social Identity by Tajfel and Turner (1979) (p. ex., ASHFORTH and SCHINOFF, 2016; LEAVITT and SLUSS,

2015; PETRIGLIERI, 2011). Thus, such identity is a self-definition of the agent, built in its social interactions, in the process of seeking to answer the questions "who am I?" or "who are we?" (ASHFORTH and SCHINOFF, 2016). We understand that individual social identities have three central properties, namely: are sources of self-worth (they seek to increase self-esteem); are multiple (Individuals have different definitions of who they are); and dynamics (change over time) (PETRIGLIERI, 2011).

Self-Motives and levels of self

The process of identity construction and the development of the sense of self-worth arising from it can be influenced by distinct specific motivations. Previous studies have explored the reasons why individuals construct their identities (self-motives) (SLUSS and ASHFORTH, 2007; LEAVITT and SLUSS, 2015).

This investigation by researchers of self-motives reveal the basis of the premise present in the Theory of Social Identity that individuals are defined by three levels of individual identity– or self (LEAVITT and SLUSS, 2015). The first is the personal level, which refers to individual characteristics highly valued by an individual – which gives one personal distinctiveness (COOPER and TATCHER, 2010; BREWER and GARDNER, 1996) –, such as being competent, discreet or authentic (ASHFORTH and MAEL, 1989). The second level is the relational and refers to relationships from which individuals define themselves – which provides a sense of personal belonging (BREWER and GARDNER, 1996) –, such as manager, client and spouse (SLUSS and ASHFORTH, 2007). The third is the collective and refers to the identification with collectivities that have attributes that the individual wishes to harness to themselves, which confers a depersonalized sense of belonging (BREWER and GARDNER, 1996). This level is manifested in the performance of individuals as members of social groups, such as a company, a work team or a church (ASHFORTH and MAEL, 1989).

Threats to self

Is it reasonable to suggest that the self-worth that emerges from individual identities built up at the personal, relational, and collective levels of the self can be affected in some way? The concept of "threats to self", which refers to individual experiences assimilated as potentially harmful to a person's identity and to the self-value that comes from it (PETRIGLIERI, 2011), indicates positive. Such threats can be originated based on the reflections that the individual makes from social interactions (as a criticism or offense) and intrasubjective processes (as a result of self-denials) (LEAVITT and SLUSS, 2015). Whatever the source of the threat to self, if it is not managed, can cause significant damage to the individual's identity, by affecting the stability and value of the definition they make of themselves (ELSBACH and KRAMER, 1996).

We propose that the summarized concepts of the literature of identities in organizations (identity, motives and levels of self and threats to self) serve as sensitizers for the theoretical advance proposed here for literature on worker silence and disclosure of sexual orientation in the work environment. This grounded theory was built on the following research questions (RQ):

- **RQ1:** What forms of silence can be manifested when a homosexual understands that revealing their sexual orientation in the workplace can threaten their self?
- **RQ2:** What individual factors influence the chance that individuals will choose not to reveal their homosexual orientation at work?
- **RQ3:** What characteristics of the social actors with whom homosexual employees interact at work can contribute to choice by silence?
- **RQ4:** What characteristics of the social actors with whom homosexual employees interact at work can contribute to choice by silence? And what are its consequences?

METHODOLOGY

The approach that we adopted in this study was the theory based, as it is a methodological foundation, which adapts to the exploratory character in question. We used the methodological procedures of building a grounded theory (CHARMAZ, 2014) for the processes of collection, codification and theoretical analysis of the data, which we detail in the following paragraphs.

For the initial selection of the interviewees, an invitation was sent to a list of workers who declare themselves to be homosexuals and who work in São Paulo-SP, Rio de Janeiro-RJ and Vitória-ES. This list was built in events of discussion of subjects related to diversity in the work environment carried out by a Higher Education Institution. From this initial contact, 12 interviews were carried out, included in the first round of data analysis. Thereafter, according to the principle of theoretical sampling, we seek to explore the four issues presented in the theoretical framework as guidelines for conducting semi-structured interviews, which became more detailed as the study progressed. The search for new individuals was performed using the so-called snowball technique.

In the consecutive stages of data collection, we searched for individuals of different ages, occupations, gender and market segments; we also sought to interview workers from organizations with explicit inclusion rules for homosexual employees, as well as those without clear rules regarding the sexual orientation of their employees, individuals with different degrees of disclosure of sexual orientation, including from undisclosed gay and lesbian employees in the workplace to workers widely recognized as homosexual. Participants were added until reaching the theoretical sufficiency point (CHARMAZ, 2014), reached in the 37th interview.

A total of 22 men and 15 women were interviewed and the participants' ages ranged from 23 to 49 years. In addition, 13 interviewees held leadership positions and 24 were not in such positions during data collection. The distribution of our sample involved these market segments: technology (5); entertainment (5); health care (4); consumer products (3); advertising (3); manufacturing (3); financial (3); educational (3); construction (2); hospital (2); mining (2); transport (1); and public (1). The interviews took place in places of preference of the interviewees, ranging from a private room in the university where one of the researchers teaches, private work environments and the residence of the interviewees. Because it is a sensitive theme, we always sought to recommend spaces that offered us privacy. The initial moments of the interviews were used to create an atmosphere and a climate of trust that allowed the interviewees to feel free to share delicate and often emotional issues, due to the research option itself. The interviews lasted, on average, 57 minutes and occurred between February and December 2016.

Data analysis was performed using the procedures described by Charmaz (2014) in its constructivist version of the grounded theory. The analysis was performed in three phases. In the first phase, termed as initial coding, the collected data were transcribed and categorized incident by incident in expressions that generally involved verbs in the gerund, in order to preserve the character of the action of the data. These initial codes, adhering to the data, were analyzed and categorized according to the principles of focused coding (GLASER, 1978), which are more conceptual and selective than those obtained in incident-by-incident coding. Next, we perform the theoretical coding, in which we seek to create categories of a higher level of abstraction and organize them into a theoretical model based on propositions that allows us to "tell an analytical story coherently" (CHARMAZ, 2014, p. 94). The derivation of such propositions occurred, after the generation of theoretical codes, evidence in the data regarding how such codes relate (e.g., causality, mediation, moderation, properties, manifestations, context or reinforcement cycle). We present in the following topic the research results.

RESULTS

In this topic, initially, we argue that homosexual individuals, when interpreting the existence of prejudice of other meanings, can experience threats to distinct self-motives and that such threats tend to be managed through concealment of sexual orientation (silence), which is based on the personal, relational and collective levels of self (RQ1). In addition, we point out characteristics of homosexual individuals themselves (RQ2) and the people they interact with (RQ3) which influence the chances that threats to self are managed through silence. Finally, we present some of the anticipatory tactics that homosexual individuals use to mitigate threats to self, and we present their consequences for the decision to disclose sexual orientation at work (RQ4).

Forms of silence as responses to threats to self

To respond to the first RQ, we seek to understand which forms of silence may manifest when a homosexual individual understands that disclosing their sexual orientation at work may threaten their self. In the coding process, we find three self-motives.

First, the data showed occasions in which the sense of individual distinctiveness, need for personal affirmation in front of others from characteristics that awaken in the individual the sense of being unique, was considered as threatened when the disclosure of sexual orientation was considered. In these situations, some reported to understand that self-definitions that were sources of self-worth, as "discreet", "upright" and "religious", could be considered inconsistent if they disclosed their homosexual orientation:

> *I always saw myself as being upright, the "Nerd" of the class, the role model in everything he did. This was what made me special, different. One way or another, I saw that being gay was something that made many people see me as not so upright, the role model boy and such. For these people, they are two incompatible things. And this helped me not to talk* [about sexual orientation] *for many years and I still do not speak in certain professional environments today* (H18, 28 years old, engineer).

In this report, the interviewee defines himself as special and different from the others because he is "upright" and the "Nerd of the class", so that these characteristics make him feel good about himself, generating self-value. However, the perceived incompatibility between the social meaning of being gay and their personal characteristics was interpreted as reducing the self-value of the individual, which led him to opt for silence at any given moment. We grouped similar accounts as *silence based on personal identity*. Thus, we have:

- **Proposition 1a:** When the disclosure of sexual orientation threatens the sense of individual distinctiveness, it increases the chances of adopting silence based on personal identity.

Second, in some interviews, we noticed that the participants understood that the disclosure of sexual orientation could affect the sense of self-worth emanating from role relations (e.g., "*how will my clients react?*") or more specific connections (e.g., "*how will my work colleague, Marcelo, react?*"). In these situations where the relational level of the self was shown to be salient, the disclosure of sexual orientation could affect a person's sense of self-esteem in the relationship with their clients and a specific person. This identity threat was categorized as derived from the personal motive of belonging because it represented a need to feel part of relationships directed at specific people or relationships. The following report illustrates this finding:

> *This boss was my best friend and walking with him made me feel good. I was proud of this friendship, of this bond. But this guy was a bit traditional, the traditional family head of the Brazilian family. I never mentioned at the company, he does not know who I am*. [...]*Because I think I was going to shake up the relationship, and somehow that would leave me a little bit down. I'm not sure he would react like this, but being doubt, I keep things to myself* (M6, 34 years old, administrator).

In similar cases, other interviewees also revealed that this interpretation made them choose to keep their identities based on hidden sexual orientations. Thus, the reports of silence motivated by the preservation of personalized belonging were classified as *silence based on relational identity*. Thus, we have:

- **Proposition 1b:** When disclosure of sexual orientation threatens the sense of personal belonging, the chances of adopting silence based on relational identity increase.

Third, we also find cases where respondents have suggested that their depersonalized sense of belonging, need to develop connections with collectivities that have desirable characteristics for the individual, would be threatened if they disclosed their identities based on sexual orientation. In some of these events, the survey participants suggested that presenting oneself as homosexual could be regarded as incompatible with characteristics of the company in which they worked. This caused some anguish by the fact that they, by assuming their sexual orientation, would challenge their positions of personification of admired collective attributes:

> *Look, I love working here. This bank is kind of traditional, very old fashioned. You just need to see the face of those who work here. Everyone with a straight look, religious, cute hair, straight face, several newlyweds*. [...]*Can you imagine disclosing that I'm gay? It would affect me being part of the group*

> *indeed. So I do not say anything openly in the company and do not try not to send signals. It is a company regarded as being very serious, and I like that it reflects in the view that I have of me too* (H31, 45 years old, administrator).

When faced with a "*traditional, very old fashioned*" collective, interviewee H31, similarly to other participants, said that disclosing their sexual orientation would affect their feeling of being "*part of the group*". Because he see the company as "*serious*" and feels the need to connect to the organization so that this attribute also applies to his definition of himself, leaving the closet could create a conflict between his "serious" and "gay" self-definitions. Thus, we have:

- **Proposition 1c:** When the disclosure of sexual orientation threatens the depersonalized sense of belonging, the chances that he/she will adopt the silence based on the collective identity increases.

It is important to emphasize that the concepts of personalized and depersonalized belonging are found in the literature on levels of identity (COOPER and TATCHER, 2010; BREWER and GARDNER, 1996), for this reason the use of these codes was not employed in the in vivo codes condition, but as sensitizing concepts.

Individual factors

In the second RQ, we seek to explore the characteristics of homosexual individuals that may influence the likelihood that, in the face of the already described threats to the self caused by the possibility of leaving the closet, they opt for silence. The results pointed to two central individual factors: susceptibility to threats to self and the salience of homosexual orientation.

Susceptibility to threats to self

Our data showed that threats to self are a subjective process, which is assimilated by the individual and not objective and concrete. Thus, the processes of self-reflection (intra-subjective) or interaction with other people (intersubjective) which can lead to the perception that revealing sexual orientation could threaten the self vary from person to person. Among those interviewed, some provided evidence that the self would be highly vulnerable if they chose to leave the closet, while others showed low sensitivity to threats at the distinct levels of self, described in Propositions 1a to 1c.

The following case refers to an individual who, over time, became less sensitive to threats to identity that could be derived from the disclosure of sexual orientation. The interviewee reported that he had become "*less sensitive to these things*". Based on cases like these, we may suggest that an individual's tendency to interpret as a threat an event potentially damaging to identity (here coded as susceptibility to threats to self) tends to make him choose silence:

> *For 17 years I worked in 4 offices and had never disclosed. I kept speculating in my head about the blows that I was going to take, and as a result, I just kept to myself. I was really scared. But about 2 years ago I started to see that this was not happening so much. I flicked the I don't care button* [quotation mark with fingers with both hands]*, who saw me, saw me, I was less sensitive to these things. This would not change the way I see myself* (H5, 37 years old, lawyer).

In face of this analysis, we have:

- **Proposition 2a:** Susceptibility to threat to self increases the chances that homosexual individuals will choose silence as a response to threats to self.

Identity Salience Relative to Homosexual Orientation

Individuals have different definitions of who they are and therefore have different identities, which may vary in terms of relative importance. Our data suggest that the identity salience relative to homosexual orientation (degree in which the representative self of "being gay or being lesbian" is considered relatively more important than other selves that the individual constructs) tends to decrease the chances of the subject adopting silence in response to threats to self. According to several interviewees, the saliency of the identity related to the homosexual orientation can vary throughout the life and the more central the position of this self in relation to the others (e.g., "*liking rock*", "*being a street runner*"), the greater the chance

that staying in the closet creates a sense of inauthenticity. Thus, disclosure of sexual orientation becomes more likely because it enables the individual to eliminate the unsustainable feeling of "living a lie":

> *I've never been open at work, and some people have criticized me. They think I should be more open about it. But look, I know there's this argument that we have to talk about, you cannot shut up, this, that. But being a lesbian is not such a big part of my life. I do not just go out with homosexuals, I do not necessarily listen to music from artists engaged in the LGBT cause. Do you understand? Liking to travel or being a street runner are more important to me than being gay* (M20, 31 years old, lawyer, disclosed gay in some professional contexts).

Based on the analysis presented, we have:

- **Proposition 2b:** The salience of homosexual orientation lowers the chances that gays and lesbians will opt for silence in response to threats to self.

Characteristics of the audience

In the third RQ, we seek to explore the characteristics of other meanings with whom gay and lesbian employees interact and who can influence the chance that threats to self are managed through silence. In coding processes a central feature of the audience emerged: the personification of the identity threatened.

Personification of threatened identity

In several cases, respondents revealed that, when the people with whom they interacted at work had dominant characteristics similar to those of their identity that would be threatened if they disclosed their sexual orientation, they tended to choose silence. We grouped the excerpts from interviews in which participants stated that they had experienced this situation under the code personification of the threatened identity. The following report illustrates this category:

> *I only opened up when I came to the company where I work now, because here the staff is very cool and tolerant. In the previous company it was complicated. I was afraid to stop being seen as "Nerdy", dedicated, thing as such. And my bosses were just all this, studious people, from ITA, top notch*. [...] *Disclosing was harder when I was surrounded by people like that* (H18, 28 years old, engineer).

In the fragment presented, the interviewee reports that he feared "*stop being regarded as the 'Nerd', dedicated*" by assuming their sexual orientation to a group with similar characteristics. However, by interacting with more "cool" people, disclosing became simpler. Similar statements have suggested that this is due to the fact that, when interacting with someone who personifies the threatened identity, there is a psychological discomfort with the idea of not meeting the expectations that the individual supposes to be desired by the audience. Portanto, temos a:

- **Proposition 3a:** When the audience is prototypical of the threatened identity by disclosing, the likelihood that homosexual individuals will choose silence as a response to threats to self increases.

Threat to self minimization tactics

In the fourth RQ, we move the focus of the characteristics of the subjects to the process of minimizing the threats to self. In this matter, we seek to identify the behavioral tactics that respondents use to minimize the chances of disclosure of sexual orientation to generate threats to their sense of self-value, as well as the consequences of these actions.

Threat to self minimization tactics are low-risk anticipatory behaviors that individuals use to seek to diminish or eliminate the perception that the declaration of identity will affect the sense of self-value. Three of the four tactics identified seek to construct more favorable conditions for the individual to leave the closet. In the tactic of *resignation of the identity regarding homosexual orientation*, the subjects seek to influence other meanings so that they attribute more positive meanings to "*being gay or being lesbian*", so that, if the disclosure of sexual orientation occurs, it does not generate threats to the individual's identity. In the *prototyping tactic of respect*, it seeks to achieve the same by adopting respectful and inclusive behaviors with people who may also feel compelled to inhibit their identity characteristics for fear of discrimination at work. The intent, in

this case, is to make the source of the threat interpret the socially desirable character of inclusive behaviors of diversity. In the tactic of appeal to authenticity, in turn, the individual seeks to construct the idea that the coherence between discourse and action would be a source of self-value, so that sincerity about who one is, is more valued than what one is or no longer is. Through this tactic, the individuals seek to challenge an alleged hypocrisy on the part of the sources of the threats to the identity related to the homosexual orientation, speculating on the possibility of the existence of actions not revealed by these people (e.g., marital infidelity).

While in these first three tactics the individual seeks to create more adequate conditions for the disclosure of identity, in the fourth tactic the mechanism used to ameliorate or eliminate threats to self is the denial of threatened identity. When feeling that their sense of self is strongly affected by the possibility of disclosure of sexual orientation, some participants reported that they sought to convince themselves that they were not homosexuals. In denying such identity, the individual would eliminate the threat to the self and the resulting psychological discomfort. These results lead us to:

- **Proposition 4a:** Homosexual individuals adopt threat to self minimization tactics, such as the renegotiation of the identity relating to sexual orientation, prototypicity of respect of respect, call for authenticity and denial of identity threatened to ameliorate threats to self.

The four tactics presented seek to minimize threats to self by altering the beliefs of other meanings interpreted as sources of threat or beliefs about "*who am I*". In cases where the use of tactics aimed at influencing the source of the threat was interpreted as successful, participants reported that the threat to self had diminished and therefore, the expression of sexual orientation has become more viable. Because we interviewed only homosexuals who define themselves as such, in none of these cases was the denial of identity threat tactic seen as successful.

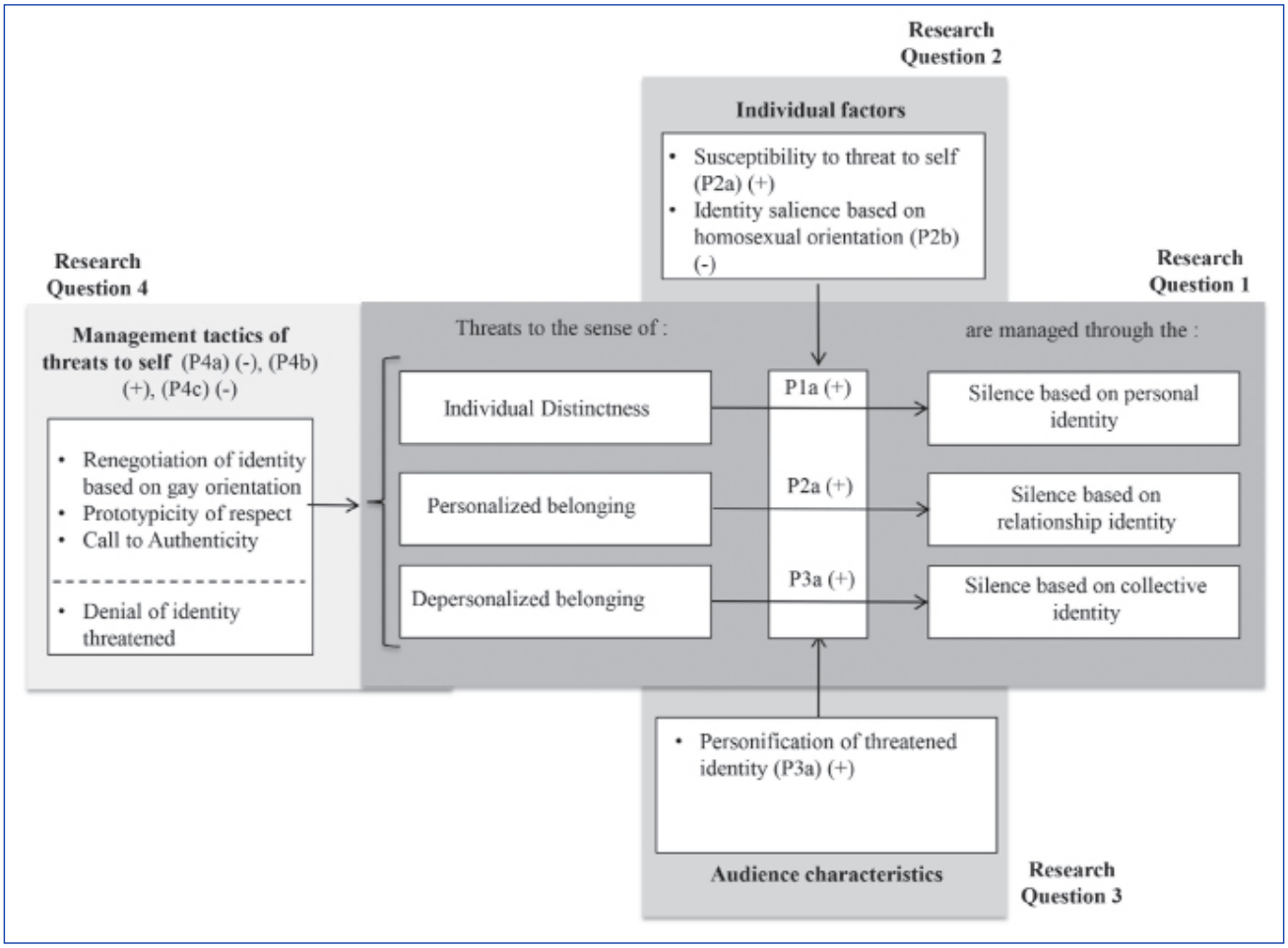
However, the reports include several cases in which the individual interpreted that the beliefs of the social actors involved were not altered and that, therefore, the threat to self remained. In addition, there were also frequent reports of subjects who stated that the attempt to deny identity regarding sexual orientation was unsuccessful, since the individual interpreted that he/she was "*trying to cover the sun with the sieve*" (H22, university professor). In these cases of interpreting the threat as being non-negotiable, a more intense perception of the threat that remained, therefore, that silence was the most appropriate solution (see Proposition 2a and Proposition 3a). The disclosure of sexual orientation only occurred under such conditions when individual and audience factors influenced disclosure. Thus, we have:

- **Proposition 4b:** When threat to self minimization tactics are interpreted as successful, the threat to self is diminished and, as a consequence, the chance of the forms of silence occurring become smaller.
- **Proposition 4c:** When threat to self minimization tactics are interpreted as unsuccessful, the threat to self grows and, as a consequence, the chance of forms of silence occurring become greater.

Figure 1 summarizes the RQ and their respective answers, by means of theoretical propositions (1a to 4c).

Figure 1

Identity-based model on the silence of gays and lesbians in the workplace



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

DISCUSSION

Despite contributions made by the literature on the silence of homosexuals in the workplace, previous studies have left a gap in adopting an essentially instrumental and calculative approach to understanding such subject. In this study, we present a theoretical model built by the approach of a grounded theory (CHARMAZ, 2014), which sought to broaden the understanding of such behaviors of the individual, introducing concepts and propositions about how the silence of homosexuals in the workplace manifests in function of the interpretation of threats to the sense of self. Thereafter, we present four central aspects that synthesize the advances of this research vis-à-vis, which was known about the theme until then.

First, we identify silence as a possible response to threats to self at its different levels. Previous studies about the concealment of homosexual orientation at work have approached the theme by understanding such a decision as grounded in an explicit and rational analysis (PRIOLA, LASIO, SIMONE et al., 2014; BELL, ÖZBILGIN, BEAUREGARD et al., 2011). In this study, by adopting an interactionist view, we contribute by identifying that silence can be influenced not only by rational motivations, but also by intrasubjective and less intentional processes, such as perceived potential risk of damage to individual identity and the sense of self-worth (PETRIGLIERI, 2011). The Theory of Social Identity provided support to identify the sensitizing concepts of the theoretical model developed in this study and they have allowed us to understand and highlight forms of identity-based silence that can manifest themselves when a homosexual individual understands that disclosure of their sexual orientation

at work may threaten their self. Thus, this study extends the understanding of the subject identifying situations and events experienced by such individuals.

Second, previous studies have indicated that different individuals have different degrees of perceived discrimination regarding sexual orientation in the work environment and that such differences influence their decision to disclose their sexual orientation (RAGINS and CORNWELL, 2001). This suggests the need to better understand how the characteristics of homosexual individuals can influence their decision by silence. Thus, by identifying individual characteristics (susceptibility to threats to self and saliency of identity regarding homosexual orientation), which influenced the chances of threats to self to be answered by non-disclosure of sexual orientation, we emphasize the importance of considering intrasubjective factors to understand the silence and introduce theoretical elements underlying the arguments. The concept of susceptibility of threats to self presented itself very recurrently in the interviews as a relevant antecedent of the decision whether or not to leave the closet and, for this reason, can be characterized as a relevant advance for the understanding of the phenomenon studied here.

Third, we explore audience characteristics that influence the chances of individuals opting for non-disclosure of homosexual orientation at work. In the WR literature, silence has been explored as a behavior associated with the presence or absence of speech promotion mechanisms (BELL, ÖZBILGIN, BEAUREGARD et al., 2011; MORRISON, 2011), which contributes to the recognition of organizational actions that influence the expression of voice/silence. Although these studies indicate that, the environment of silence exists when there is a perception that talking is not safe, they limit the approach of building this security vision to the existence of organizational practices and policies. In this study, we broaden this approach by exploring the identity characteristics of the audience, failing to address the already explored organizational practices and policies, which influence the construction of this perception of security and the environment of silence.

Fourth, we have identified behavioral tactics used to minimize threats to self and their consequences for the revelation of homosexual orientation at work. The literature on the silence of gays and lesbians generally suggests that the revelation of homosexual orientation becomes non-harmful to the self when there is a voice in the organization. This research contributes to this discussion by shifting the focus to actions of individual-level that subjects can take in order to create more conditions favorable for the disclosure of sexual orientation. This finding is part of a recent call for studies that discuss the active role of homosexuals in the co-construction of inclusive environments to diversity (FELIX, MELLO, VON BORELL et al., 2016).

Counterintuitively, research has shown that through the use of self-minimizing tactics individuals can create conditions so that disclosure of sexual orientation is non-harmful, but promoting the sense of self-value of homosexuals. Our model also suggests that, at times, the individual may judge that there are insufficient conditions to disclose their identity without severe damage to the self. This finding offers an advance in the literature, based on a procedural vision of the construction of the disclosure of the homosexual orientation, describe the conditions under which the individual can choose silence as a defensive tactic of the self. As done by Bell, Özbilgin, Beauregard et al. (2011), we acknowledge the damaging effects of choice by silence as a tactic to protect individuals' sense of self-value. However, we enrich the literature by providing a theorizing about how individuals deal with the discomfort of the threat to self.

Thus, this research defines silence (as concealment of sexual orientation at work) as a non-linear process, of limited rationality and influenced by both individual and contextual factors. From this integrative view of WR and OB literatures, we aim to provide a theoretical development that bridges both disciplines and avoids the perpetuation of self-sufficient disciplinary silos about employee silence.

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CONCLUSIONS

General conclusion

Going beyond the instrumental/calculative logic to understand the silence of homosexuals in the workplace, through the introduction of an alternative theoretical model, collaborates with the overcoming of the problem experienced as a result of the concealment of the homosexual orientation in the workplace. Recognizing that such concealment as a response to threats to the self is a decision that pervades everyday organizational interactions, motivated by different levels of self, this study contributes to overcoming previous polarized views (see WR and OB literature), providing theoretical advancement about the silence of gays and lesbians at work and practical implications.

Practical implications

This study has practical implications for homosexual employees. The identification of threatening situations and events may contribute to making such a reflection process less revealing about the disclosure of sexual orientation. Moreover, by defining silence as a non-linear and rational process, this study values intersubjective elements (audience characteristics) and intra-subjective (arising from characteristics of the individual) which influence the perception of safety/hostility and provide more elements to promote the compression of silence. Finally, homosexual employees can use the different behavioral tactics identified by this grounded theory if they want to minimize the threats to the self and, consequently, reduce the chances of choice by silence.

The model presented in this study is useful as a framework for analysis not only for gay and lesbian workers, but also for organizations and their managers. Since silence can generate stress and psychological damage, affecting the performance of these workers (BELL, ÖZBILGIN, BEAUREGARD et al., 2011), organizations and their managers should be interested in understanding how this silence in the work environment manifests itself and the elements that influence it. When considering the integrative model introduced by this research, organizations can recognize that only the adoption of structural mechanisms for voice promotion may be insufficient to generate a perception of security.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Although the previous session had practical implications inherent in the theoretical advances introduced by this study, it has limitations. Initially, we emphasize that the grounded theory in question has a substantive character, which means that it reflects a theoretical narrative that is restricted to the context researched. That said, we present, in addition, three limitations of this research and we elaborate some suggestions for future research.

First, the sample of this study was limited to the homosexual orientation, for meeting the objectives defined here; however, in adopting this choice, did not consider other sexual orientations, such as bisexual or transsexual, which also stand as important social groups. Future research may seek to understand specificities of the silence manifested by these other identities based on sexual orientations, since studies claim that there are observable distinctions (BADGETT, LAU, SEARS et al., 2007).

Second, although the theoretical model built based on the data presents some time frame in its results, as a result of the dynamic attribute of social identity, we do not present here a longitudinal research. Thus, future studies may use longitudinal evidence to develop a grounded theory with emphasis on transformations that have occurred over time in the way individuals define themselves and in what ways such changes interfere in the understanding of silence (MARKUS and WURF, 1987).

Third, only homosexual subjects were interviewed, not their co-workers, because of the parsimonious delimitation of the scope of the research. However, new efforts may be undertaken to specifically attempt to explain the intersubjective aspects of the model presented from the standpoint of other meaning with whom respondents interact. More specifically, the category of audience characteristics can be further elaborated in later studies that include the participation of clients, co-workers and hierarchical superiors.

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Rômulo Gomes
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3053-6407

In pursue of a PhD in Business Administration at Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo (PPGADM – UFES). Master of Business Administration at Fucape Business School, Vitória – ES, Brazil. Email: romulogomes@gmail.com

Bruno Felix
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6183-009X

Doctor of Business Administration. Professor at Fucape Business School, Vitória – ES, Brazil. Email: bfelix@fucape.br