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Barriers to Communicating Sexual Orientation Identity at Work

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(TITLE)

BY

Marissa A. Guenzi

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**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in Communication Studies

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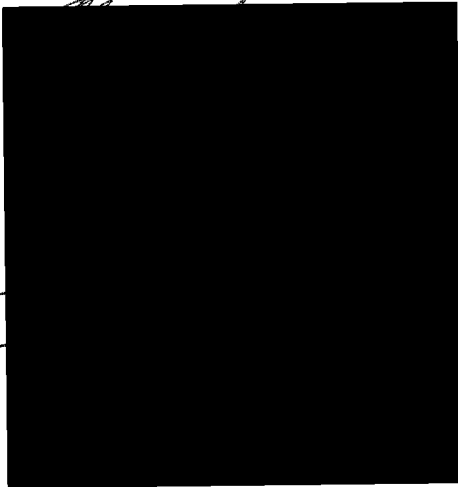
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Running Head: SEXUAL ORIENTATION IDENTITY AT WORK

Barriers to Communicating Sexual Orientation Identity at Work

Marissa A. Guenzi

Eastern Illinois University

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**Abstract**

Previous research emphasizes the benefits associated with having open gay and lesbian employees. However, many gay and lesbian employees still remain in the closet. This project examines barriers preventing gay and lesbian individuals from coming out at work. Four lesbian women and three gay men in the early stages of their careers were interviewed about their experiences of being closeted at work. Analysis reveals four barriers preventing gay and lesbian individuals from coming out at work and explores how these barriers are reinforced by informal organizational communication. Theoretical and practical implications for organizational communication research are discussed, and recommendations for future research are presented.

### **Acknowledgements**

To my advisor, Dr. Matthew Gill, thank you for your direction, patience, and constant encouragement, which proved to be instrumental in forming this project into something I am proud of. Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Sam Szscur and Dr. Richard Jones, for your valuable input and support throughout this process. I truly believe I had the Dream Team of thesis committees for this project!

My fellow graduate students, thank you for your friendship, your contribution to my education, and for making a rigorous two years of graduate school much more enjoyable!

Katie, I am incredibly grateful for your unrelenting support, encouragement, and reassurance that I can accomplish anything I desire.

To my family, I would not be where I am today without your love and support, both emotional and financial. Thank you.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

Organizational communication scholars have studied workplace organizations heavily because most people spend a significant amount of their daily lives at work. Workplace organizations are unique in that many adults must engage with them because they often provide a pathway to fulfill basic human needs and thus people spend a majority of their waking hours in these types of organizations (Lutgen & Sandvik, 2008). Scholars have recognized the great impact these structures have on our lives. According to Du Gay (1996), organizational life greatly impacts how people define and identify themselves. While communicating for the purpose of relaying information or ideas is a vital workplace function, workplace communication is often social and prompts individuals to negotiate aspects of their personal identities. These social interactions can be considered equally as vital to organizational operation as interactions meant to fulfill instrumental goals.

According to Korte and Lin (2012), a new employee's ability to perform their job well and to be satisfied with their work is largely dependent on the quality of the interpersonal relationships they create with existing employees and managers. The authors note that new employees develop these relationships by conversing about topics not related to work. For individuals who did not develop close interpersonal relationships with existing employees or managers, they were less successful in the organization and reported being less satisfied with their positions. However, the authors did not investigate why some new employees had difficulty developing relationships with coworkers and did not mention how personal identities played a

role in relationship development. Our personal identities are important because they influence organizational experiences and the relationships employees form with each other and their managers.

We are more likely than ever before to experience organizational life with people that are *different* from ourselves. According to Mumby (2011), *difference* is socially constructed and has been used to classify people into value-based categories such as gender, race, and class. It is appropriate, then, that there is extensive research on communicating difference in the workplace, especially since one's identity influences his or her organizational experience. However, much of the existing research on difference in organizations focuses on gender and race and has not paid much attention to sexual orientation.

The lack of research on communicating sexual orientation identity in the workplace has been startling considering the increasing visibility of LGBTQ individuals in the media and in social and political conversations across the United States. While some communication scholars have discussed sexual orientation identity as an aspect difference such as Brenda Allen, many have excluded it from their research. For example, Ashcraft (2011) lists gender, race, and class as a category of difference, but does not offer sexual orientation. On the other hand, Dempsey (2011) argues that women's experiences in the workplace are not only gendered, but also raced, classed, and sexualized. Yet, when she expands on the sexualization of women, she fails to mention that women can also be bisexual or lesbian, reinforcing a normative approach to sexual orientation, and failing to identify how holding a minority sexual orientation identity can affect organizational

experiences. In addition to the lack of research on sexuality as a category of difference, there is also a lack of research on LGBTQ issues in workplace organizations.

Ward and Winstanley (2005) state that their research "grew out of a perception that amongst diversity categories, minority sexual orientation continues to be under-researched by organizational researchers, and struggles to be a recognized element of the diversity agenda within organizations" (p. 447). Moreover, Rumens (2008) argues that, "despite scholarly efforts to challenge the dualistic stereotype of men as rational and women as emotional experts, academics have paid little attention to the issues that arise when gay and lesbian sexualities are introduced into such debates" (p. 9). These authors highlight that the experiences of individuals with minority sexual orientations in organizations are under-researched and that sexual orientation still struggles to be recognized as a category of difference.

What research there is regarding sexual orientation identity in the workplace often focuses on individuals' experiences of "coming out" at work (Day & Schoenrade, 1997; 2000; Ward & Winstanley, 2005; Rumens, 2008; Fleming, 2007; Gray, 2013; Schneider, 1986). Coming out is referred to as the assertion of one's sexual orientation identity (Chirrey, 2003). Liang (1997) notes that coming out is not defined by a single event and is better described as a process, one in which individuals must continually participate as they encounter new situations or organizational members. While examining individuals' coming out experiences helps us better understand the process of coming out at work, there is currently no

explanation as to why research has not focused on the issues that prevent individuals, for any length of time, from coming out at work.

In a study on the construction of minority sexual identity in the workplace, Ward and Winstanley (2003) interviewed seventeen participants about their experiences as gay and lesbian employees. The research included stories from participants that were "in the closet" and then "came out," but the authors do little to unpack the issues that prevented the participants from coming out at the start of their employment. The same authors published another study two years later and ninety-two individuals from various fields told their coming out stories (Ward & Winstanley, 2005). The authors included fifteen of the individuals' stories in the paper, yet they do not illuminate the barriers preventing the participants from being open in the workplace prior to their coming out scenarios.

Day and Schoenrade (1997) examined the effect of being open in the workplace on individuals' organizational experiences and the organizations themselves. The data supports their hypothesis that closeted gay and lesbian employees face more negative work attitudes than do openly gay, lesbian, and heterosexual workers. However, the authors barely scratched the surface when attempting to offer an explanation as to why individuals stay closeted at work. They mention that, "the threat of job discrimination causes many gay men and lesbians to keep their sexual orientation secret at work" (p. 147) and add that individuals do not come out in the workplace because they may face ridicule, ostracism, or even job loss. However, they do not offer any evidence that supports these claims, nor do

they provide further information that explains how each of these fears could play out communicatively in the workplace.

The explanation as to why gays and lesbians do not communicate their sexual orientation identity at work is more complicated than these authors make it out to be, especially considering many gays and lesbians are not open about their sexual orientation even in organizations where there are policies that protect them from ridicule, ostracism, or job loss. This suggests that the barriers preventing people from being open about their sexual orientation at work lie in organizational culture rather than policies and are often reinforced in more subtle ways than blatant discrimination or ridicule.

The apparent lack of focus in organizational communication research on these barriers is unfortunate considering existing research emphasizes the positivity associated with being open in the workplace and developing a gay friendly work environment (Ward & Winstanely, 2003; Day & Schoendrade, 1997; Griffith & Hebl, 2002). Though current research makes these arguments, it fails to identify and expand on the reasons why people do not come out at work and how organizations may be reinforcing these barriers. Instead, research focuses on individuals' experiences in organizations before and after coming out without providing insight into what goes on in organizations, or how they are constituted, that keeps individuals from being open about their sexual orientation identity. Individuals and organizations cannot break down the barriers preventing people from coming out in the workplace without recognizing those barriers and how individuals, along with entire organizations, reinforce them.

Although important, focusing solely on coming out at work does not provide an extensive explanation as to why individuals were not open about their sexual orientation identity initially, nor does it address the constant, ongoing negotiation of communicating a non-normalized sexual orientation identity within a work organization. For these reasons, this study investigates why gay and lesbian individuals do not disclose their sexual orientation identity at work. This thesis argues that there are barriers preventing people from communicating their sexual orientation identity in the workplace, and these barriers are often reinforced through informal organizational communication.

The topic of communicating sexual orientation identity at work is becoming increasingly important as many organizations are beginning to implement anti-discrimination policies that include discrimination based on sexual orientation. Although this signifies a major advancement in the LGBTQ equality movement, there is still an uncertainty that lingers over the heads of non-heterosexual individuals in the United States, as there is no federal policy banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

In Kansas, a 2007 executive order by then Governor Kathleen Sebelius made it illegal to discriminate against state employees on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. However, in February 2015 Kansas Governor Sam Brownback issued an executive order to remove those protections for lesbian, gay, and transgendered state employees, arguing that the previous governor should not have implemented the policy without legislative approval. For eight years, state employees in Kansas were assured that they could safely communicate their gay or

lesbian identities only to have the policy reversed, leaving those who did come out in a dangerous situation. While some gay and lesbian state employees may have been comfortable coming out at work because of the state's policy, research suggests that making gays and lesbians feel secure about being open at work is more complex than implementing anti-discrimination policies.

Existing literature suggests that simply implementing policies and touting a "gay friendly" workplace is insufficient to make individuals feel safe to communicate non-normative, sexual orientation identities (Fleming, 2007). Fleming's (2007) research supports that even in supposed "gay friendly" workplaces individuals still experience discrimination and are subjected to homophobic remarks. Since implementing policies is not enough to create and maintain a work environment where gay and lesbian individuals are willing to communicate their sexual orientation identity, it suggests that there are other organizational issues preventing individuals from being open about their sexual orientation identity. This study refers to the "things" taking place within the organization that prevent gay and lesbian individuals from coming out at work as barriers.

By uncovering the barriers to communicating sexual orientation identity at work and understanding how organizational structures and members reinforce these barriers, we can begin to discover what is needed to break them down. This would benefit not only individuals, who endure tremendous amounts of emotional labor when concealing their sexual identity (Ward & Winstanley, 2005), but also the organization. Those who are open about their sexuality at work are more committed and loyal to their organization than those who are not (Day & Schoenrade, 2000).

Moreover, less discrimination and increased openness are linked to increased job satisfaction, productivity, improved workplace relationships and better health among LGBTQ employees (Day & Schoenrade, 1997; 2000). Identifying barriers to communicating sexual orientation identity in the workplace and developing an understanding of how organizational communication reinforces these barriers also helps fill the gap in organizational communication research regarding sexual orientation.

The following chapter provides a review of literature that outlines a framework for understanding the roles difference, identity, and heteronormativity play when discussing sexual orientation in the workplace. Chapter III discusses the methods used to gather data for this study and explains the analysis process. Chapter IV provides an analysis of the data gathered during interviews with five lesbian women and five gay men regarding their experiences as closeted individuals at work. Finally, Chapter V provides a discussion of the significance of the findings, limitations and implications, as well as suggestions for future research.



## **Chapter II**

### **Literature Review**

In order to analyze the ways in which organizational communication reinforces barriers preventing individuals from communicating their sexual orientation identities at work, this chapter reviews literature regarding difference, identity, identity work and heteronormativity in organizations. First, difference and difference in organizational settings is examined to demonstrate the role difference plays in workplace communication. Then, literature regarding identity in the context of the workplace is discussed to develop an understanding of how and why individuals negotiate certain aspects of personal identity at work. A discussion of these two elements warrants a review of literature regarding heteronormativity in order to begin to understand issues that arise when negotiating one's personal life at work with a lesbian or gay sexual orientation identity.

#### **Difference**

Working adults in the United States will likely experience difference. Allen (2009) points out that society in the United States is changing in terms of demographics. The number of ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and elderly citizens are increasing. Allen argues that this change in demographics "can affect communication processes because members of each age cohort or group tend to have differing experiences, values, and interests" (p. 5). She also highlights that an increase in diversity has prompted social identity groups to become more vocal about demanding equal rights. For these reasons and for several others, Allen argues that we, as a society, need to think about how we differ from one another. If

we can learn to value difference we can help fulfill the United States credo of liberty and justice for all. In order to begin to think about and value difference, it is important to first understand difference.

Allen (2009) defines difference as the ways in which we differ from one another regarding socially constructed social identities. Similarly, Orbe and Harris (2001) define difference as "a social construction that has been used to classify human beings into separate value-based categories" and can include categories such as gender, race, class, and sexuality (p. 6). Difference also "typically refers to dispersions among categories or distinctions among members of reference groups" (Putnam, Jahn, & Baker, 2011, p. 31). As such, difference implies a comparison to a focal point, thus the comparison group becomes the other or the outlier (Putnam, Jahn, & Baker, 2011).

Allen (2009) discusses focal point and comparison groups as binaries where one side of the binary is the dominant group (focal point) and the other is the nondominant group (comparison group). Dominant groups tend to have more economical and political power. She explains that when viewing identity categories as binaries, "'different' refers to how an individual or a group varies from, or compares to, the unspoken form of the dominant group" (p. 4). From this perspective, the dominant group is viewed as normative, whereas the nondominant group is viewed as different. Since the dominant group is viewed as the normal, stable group, it is often treated as the superior category where members of the group have more societal advantage than those belonging to the nondominant group.

The focal point is often viewed as the master category to which others are compared and is sometimes seen as superior to the inferior outliers. For example, the focal point for gender would be male and the outlier would be female or any other gender that does not fall within the binary (Butler, 1990). Men, as members of the dominant group, tend to have more societal advantage than woman. Similarly, white would be considered the focal point for race in the United States and any race considered to be non-white would be the other (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Therefore, individuals categorized as white tend to be more advantaged than those with non-white racial identities.

As for sexual orientation, heterosexuality is the focal point to which homosexuality is compared (Yep, 2003). Gays and lesbians face unique challenges in society because of the socially constructed ideology that heterosexuality is normal, and thus, homosexuality is not. Since the master category is viewed as the focal point to which others are compared, their gender, racial, and sexual orientation identities tend to be taken for granted. For this reason, when the words "sexual orientation" are mentioned, many people tend to think of homosexuality rather than heterosexuality, in the same sense as when "race" is mentioned people tend to think only of people of color having a racial identity (Allen, 2009). Putnam, Jahn, and Baker (2011) identify these binaries and discuss the interdependence that exists between the focal point and the outlier as categories. For example, heterosexuality only exists as a category because homosexuality is considered a category. Dempsey (2011) reminds readers that a person is simultaneously gendered, raced, classed, and sexualized and points out that individuals' experience of difference is

dependent upon their social location within the hierarchical structures of these difference categories. Therefore, existing binaries simplify complex constructions of identity, as people can differ in multiple ways, and for this reason Allen (2009) argues that identity should be viewed on a continuum rather than having two polar opposite categories with which to define people.

There are various approaches researchers have taken in studying difference. Putnam, Jahn, and Baker (2011) provide readers with four approaches to studying difference, three of which are prevalent in the literature. These approaches are useful in understanding how difference has been discussed in the literature over time. The first approach is Difference as Deficient. This approach, for example, "treats men and women as binary categories and compares the groups in order to assess deviations from the ideal type, which from this approach would be a masculine model of success" (p. 34). Research from this approach perpetuates the inequality between the dominant and nondominant groups by assuming that anything differing from the master category is inferior or less desirable.

The second approach to studying difference is Difference as Added Value. This approach treats difference as an asset rather than a weakness, however it assumes that people within a category are essentially the same, thus ignoring that individuals can belong to multiple identity categories and can differ in various ways (Dempsey, 2011). The third approach to studying difference is Difference as a Discursive Practice. This approach contends that difference is a socially constructed process, creating categories of difference through discourse and interaction. The

authors argue, "the doing of difference can be both enabling and constraining, and can simultaneously challenge and reproduce power relationships" (p. 36).

The fourth approach to studying difference, Difference as Managing Dialectical Tensions, is a more nuanced approach proposed by the authors that draws on difference as a discursive practice. In this approach,

Difference surfaces in multiple ways: namely, as the social construction of opposites, as a medium in the interplay among tensions, and as a product that results from coping with, acting on, or moving forward amid the tensions. As a product, differences can be denied or ignored (selection), recognized but split in specialized ways (source splitting), alternated between opposites (separation), diluted or merged (integration), transformed or recast (transcendence), and embraced and preserved (connection) (p. 40).

These four approaches help explain how difference has been studied over time and how the conceptualization of difference has changed as research has evolved. This study approaches difference as the Management of Dialectical Tensions. Specifically, it is important to focus on how heteronormative ideals are perpetuated through organizational communication and interaction, thus adding to the pressure felt by gay and lesbian individuals to keep their sexual orientation identities hidden at work.

### **Difference in Organizations**

It is important to study difference in the context of organizations because as society becomes more diverse, so does the workplace (Miller, 2011; Allen, 2009).

There are currently more people than ever in organizations whose experiences differ from that of the white heterosexual male. It is also important to note that the experiences of people in each minority category differ from the experiences of other minorities. Entering the workplace as a member of a minority category presents challenges as many people conceptualize the typical worker as a white heterosexual male (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). For this reason, marginal populations can face discrimination and stereotyping as organizational members may have a difficult time conceptualizing anything but the typical white heterosexual male holding certain positions within organizations (Miller, 2011). Identifying challenges members of minority groups may face when entering organizations is the first step towards eliminating them, which would benefit organizational members and the organization.

According to Cox and Blake (1991), organizations can gain competitive advantages through the management of cultural diversity that extend beyond implementing policies, which would involve behavioral and attitudinal changes as well. They argue that by insightfully managing diversity, organizations can create cost advantages, improve reputation, improve marketing efforts by showing cultural sensitivity, improve the level of creativity with less emphasis on conformity, provide better decision-making and problem-solving through a wider range of perspectives, and create a less standardized system that will improve flexibility in the face of environmental changes (Cox & Blake, 1991). Because having a diverse workforce presents so many advantages organizations, they should work towards creating and maintaining a work environment that is accepting of difference. Although this view

warrants criticism, as it suggests organizations need bottom-line justification to improve the management of diversity and make the workplace safe for gay and lesbian employees, it certainly provides additional incentive for organizations to do so, which ultimately will benefit gays and lesbians at work.

Though research on difference and diversity exists, much of the research focuses on gender and race as difference categories. The lack of research on sexual orientation as a difference category is unfortunate, yet, presents opportunities for researchers to add to the existing literature at a time when views of gay and lesbian individuals are becoming more positive. As views of these individuals become more positive, they are becoming more visible in society, potentially making it easier for researchers to gather data regarding sexual orientation. It is important to study sexual orientation as a distinct category of difference because it influences people's experiences in ways unique from other differences. Ward and Winstanley (2005) state that unlike difference categories such as race and gender, a person's sexual orientation is invisible and is often silent. Several other authors also categorize sexuality as an invisible social identity, unlike race and gender, and claim that it affects people's interactions at work in different ways than those with visible social identities (Herek, 1996; Reimann, 2001; Woods, 1994; Clair, et al., 2005).

Clair et al. (2005) suggest that since gay people belong to an invisible social identity category, they can choose to reveal their sexual orientation at work or to pass as heterosexual and take advantage of the privileges awarded to the dominant group. However, Clair et al. (2005) also state that in order to pass at work, "one must be physically and culturally able to fit into another social identity group and to

hide revealing information about oneself from coworkers" (p. 82). While they label sexual orientation as invisible, stating that in order to pass as heterosexual one must physically and culturally fit the norms of that group may suggest that sexual orientation identity is not entirely invisible.

Suggesting that there are visible physical and cultural signs that people use to determine one's heterosexuality also suggests that there are physical and cultural signs that infer one's gay or lesbian identity. For example, there are certain characteristics that might lead one to believe a coworker is a lesbian based on their understanding of what a lesbian looks like. If the individual conceptualizes a lesbian as having short hair and wearing a certain style of clothing, he or she might assume that a female coworker with those characteristics is a lesbian. Therefore, sexual orientation may *not always* be invisible, though assumptions may be incorrect. Whether a gay or lesbian individual passes as heterosexual or not, they still have the ability to decide whether or not to communicate, or confirm, their sexual orientation identity to others.

Although Clair et al. (2005) argue that there are instances where individuals' racial identities can be invisible, too, it is important to note that a person's sexual orientation identity will influence the way in which they experience the world unique from raced and gendered experiences. This is partly because various marginalized populations are treated differently in society, and issues pertaining to those populations are treated with unequal importance and urgency. For example, there are federal policies protecting gender minorities, racial minorities, and individuals with disabilities from discrimination, but there are no federal policies



prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation in organizations (Miller, 2011).

While some states and individual organizations have implemented their own anti-discrimination policies, without federal protection, states and organizations can easily reverse policies, as was the case for Kansas in February 2015. This demonstrates that sexual orientation is distinct from other difference categories and will affect individuals' experiences in organizations differently than other difference categories like race or gender. Therefore, it is especially important to study sexual orientation identity as a difference category separate from the others. Before expanding on sexual orientation as an identity category, it is useful to first understand what "identity" is, how it is constructed, and how it is communicated within organizations.

### **Identity**

Identity is defined in multiple ways. Guerrero, Anderson, and Afifi (2011) define identity as the person one thinks they are and communicates to others. They state that "identity is the sense of self, the face, the ego, the image we present to others in everyday life" (p. 24). Schlenker (1985) defines identity as the "personal theory of self that is formed and maintained through actual or imagined interpersonal agreement about what the self is like" (p. 67). According to Vignoles et al. (2006), identity is composed of self-esteem, continuity, distinctiveness, and meaning. These definitions of identity highlight that identity is not just who we think we are, but also who we portray ourselves to be. Allen (2009) argues that personal identity and social identity are distinct from one another. She asserts that

one's personal identity is a sense of self made up of elements like personality traits, whereas one's social identity is characterized by the social identity groups to which we belong. She argues that our "real" self is a combination of our sense of self (personal identity) and the collection of social identity groups to which we belong (social identity).

Guerrero, Anderson, and Afifi (2011) state that identity is largely shaped by our interactions with others and offer social identity theory as a way of explaining how our identities are developed. Social identity theory asserts that individuals' identities are, in part, shaped by the groups to which they belong. Therefore, individuals behave in ways that are consistent with in-group behaviors. Through the lens of Social Identity Theory they argue,

Identity does not develop in a vacuum. It unavoidably links to our membership in social groups as broad as our ethnic, sexual, or religious affiliation or as narrow as small cliques... A key principle of social identity theory is that membership is characterized by in-group behaviors that signal membership and define some as being a part of a group or as an outsider and accordingly, promote differential behavior toward that person (p. 24-25).

Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas (2008) argue that Social Identity Theory "examines how people understand and position themselves and others in terms of social group categories (i.e. in-group/out-group)" (p. 13). The theory describes individuals' tendency to label oneself and others based on individual and group identities (Allen, 2009). According to Allen (2009), "Social Identity Theory also contends that

members of social identity groups constantly compare their group with others, and they try to show that their group is positively distinct" (p. 14).

Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas (2008) also provide two more theoretical perspectives as dominant conceptual lenses in the area. The second dominant lens is Identity Work, which they describe as the ongoing mental activity an individual undertakes in constructing an understanding of self that is coherent, distinct, and positively valued. According to the authors, when doing identity work, individuals are prompted by social interaction that raises questions of 'who am I? and 'who are we?' and individuals attempt to answer these questions by crafting self-narratives.

The final major lens of identity research is Identity Control, which focuses on the managerial interest in regulating employees through appeals to self-image, feelings, values and identifications (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008). These perspectives offer insight into how organizational scholars have been studying identity and ways in which we can continue to study identity, specifically in organizations.

Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas (2008) go on to highlight the importance of studying identity, although they do not mention sexual orientation identities explicitly. They offer questions about how scholars might develop studies of identity in the context of organizational life and follow with answers to each question that demonstrate the value in studying identity. The reasons they list for studying identity are to provide solutions, to understand the human organizational experience, and to reveal problems associated with cultural and political irrationalities (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008). This study seeks to touch on all

of these reasons for studying sexual identity in order to improve the organizational experience for sexual minorities. This study seeks to accomplish this by identifying issues that prevent individuals with minority sexual orientations from disclosing their sexual orientation identity at work so that organizational members can work towards creating a more accepting environment. As research has shown, creating an environment that accepts and empowers minorities would be advantageous for individuals and for the organization (Cox & Blake, 1991).

### **Identities at Work**

For decades, work-related identities and non-work-related identities were thought to be separate. At the time, a work identity was associated with work-related characteristics while a non-work identity included characteristics such as age, gender, religion, sexuality, and nationality (Kanter, 1977). Now, however, increased diversity in the workforce, decreased job stability, and the use of computer technologies has made it nearly impossible to view work-related and non-work-related identities as separate from one another (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). Decreased job stability makes it seemingly necessary to utilize non-work identities to make job connections instead of solely relying on work identities, such as using a social networking site to network with professionals. The spread of computer technologies has allowed professionals, for better or worse, to accomplish work-related tasks from anywhere, which has blurred the distinctions between work and personal life even more (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013).

Ramarajan and Reid (2013) argue that, "although women and minorities are making their way into previously homogenous roles and occupations, organizational

and occupational entry, socialization, and promotion processes are often based on the images of previous successful workers" (p. 623). If a worker does not fit into the image of previous successful workers, it may draw attention to the non-work aspects of identity that are not coherent with the desired image (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). Socialization, is a process that new employees go through in order to build relationships with coworkers (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). Mahoney and Stasson (2005) state this process is how new employees become integrated into the organization. They also argue that the degree to which a new employee becomes integrated into the organization is dependent on the level of inclusion, affection, and shared control experienced with existing employees. So, the ability to become integrated into an organization rests on new employees' abilities to develop relationships with existing employees (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Korte, 2010; Korte & Lin, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In a study on newcomer socialization in organizations, Korte and Lin (2010) found that new employees had to first get to know insiders on a personal level before being able to ask them for help with work related tasks. New employees who became the most successfully integrated into their organizations first developed interpersonal relationships with experienced employees, and were thus more likely to receive help. The authors conclude:

The quality of the relationships formed between newcomers and their coworkers and managers largely affected where and how well they fitted into the social structure of the work group. The quality of relationships also affected the quality of their learning and performance (p. 17).

Ultimately, developing relationships with coworkers is key to new employees' abilities to fit into the organizational structure and is tied to how successful new employees will be in an organization. While developing interpersonal relationships with coworkers, then, seems to be the simple solution to smoothly integrating into an organization, it is a more complex task when considering individuals' personal identities' and how others perceive and value difference. It is in this socialization process where conversations about aspects of one's personal life arose, and one's willingness or ability to communicate aspects about her/himself may be dependent on their location in the social hierarchy. For example, Spradlin (1998) accounts her experience as a new organizational member going through the socialization process in which she is frequently asked personal questions. She demonstrates that this process can be especially uncomfortable for a gay or lesbian individual who is trying to negotiate their sexual orientation identity at work, as people of marginalized groups often face unique challenges in the workplace.

When an individual feels a sense of discomfort about communicating aspects of their identity verbally or through actions, the individual is likely to partake in identity work. Identity work is the labor one endures when trying to negotiate their identity, whether it involves concealing or overemphasizing certain aspects (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). The discomfort is often a response to particular encounters, events, transitions, constraints, and experiences that make more visible the quality of the individual's constructed identity. According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002),

Conscious identity work is thus grounded in at least a minimal amount of self-doubt and self-openness, typically contingent upon a mix of psychological-existential worry and the skepticism or inconsistencies faced in encounters with others or with our images of them. Such tensions are stopped, or at least suspended, when a receptiveness to identity-securing positions and routines is matched by corporate and managerial opportunities for investing self in organizing practice (p. 626).

The tensions and insecurities experienced about the self in the workplace are often the result of existing class and status inequalities in society, which are reinforced by management and organizational structures (Collinson, 2003). Understanding how organizational structures lead gay and lesbian individuals to engage in identity work and the problems these individuals endure in organizations helps demonstrate the importance of this study.

### **Sexual Orientation Identity and Organizations**

If individuals do not fit within the expected or accepted identity categories, pressure is felt to engage in identity work in order to regulate or conceal certain aspects of the self. Spradlin (1998) discusses the tremendous effort those who identify as gay and lesbian exert in order to conceal their sexual orientation identity as members of an organization. She defines "passing" as "how one conceals *normal* information about oneself to preserve, sustain, and encourage others' predisposed assumptions about one's identity" (p. 598). She notes the emphasis on the word *normal* in the definition and defines normal information as the information

exchanged between individuals about their primary relationships, friendships, hobbies, interests, and other events that occur outside of the organizational setting.

Spradlin's (1998) work was prompted by her experience of having to unofficially abide by the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy as a lesbian professional in an organizational setting. When she discusses the policy in an organizational context, she is referring to a workplace climate where others will not explicitly ask about one's gay or lesbian identity, and gays and lesbians are not encouraged to disclose those identities either. Since she is not encouraged to talk about her lesbian identity in the workplace, she enables others to believe she is heterosexual in order to avoid potential negative responses to her being a lesbian. She offers strategies to "pass" as heterosexual in conversations when exchanging *normal* information in order to help others understand the pressure gays and lesbians face when interacting in the workplace. She refers to normal information as the type of information exchanged upon initially meeting new coworkers, such as the reason for moving to a new state, living situation, and marital or relationship status. The strategies include distancing, disassociating, dodging, distracting, denying, and deceiving, all of which she used as a way to suppress her sexual orientation identity because of the tendency of organizations to oppress aspects of individuals' identities that do not fall in line with the *normal* expectations of workers (Spradlin, 1998).

Ultimately, Spradlin (1998) finds that the "Price of Passing" is that she has to give up her authentic self at work, forcing her to leave out a significant amount of details about her personal life in order to avoid exposing her lesbian identity, and



thus, she cannot develop close relationships with any of her coworkers. As Korte and Lin (2012) demonstrate, forming these types of interpersonal relationships with coworkers is vital to the socialization process, and without going through the process successfully, one's satisfaction with work and success in the new organization is at risk.

Since Spradlin's piece was published in 1998, the movement toward equality for the LGBTQ community has made tremendous advances, including the legalization of same-sex marriage in thirty-six states and the District of Columbia and the implementation of anti-discrimination policies that include discrimination based on sexual orientation in some states. Although there have been improvements in the rights towards those with minority sexual identities, the pressure for individuals to suppress their sexual orientation identity in organizational settings still exists.

The more recent concept of "gay friendly" workplaces refers to those organizations that have implemented anti-discrimination policies, encourage employees to be open about sexual orientation, and offer benefits for same-sex couples. However, research suggests that simply implementing policies and claiming to be gay friendly is not effective at eliminating discrimination or constructing a supportive culture for gay and lesbian employees. This particular ineffectiveness of policies meant to benefit LGBTQ employees stems from existing heteronormative ideologies that are maintained and reproduced through societal and organizational discourse. Heteronormative ideologies, although taken for granted, are often

noticeable at the beginning of employment when individuals are questioned about their personal lives in attempts to build workplace friendships.

### **Heteronormativity**

When individuals begin employment at an organization, it is likely that they will engage in informal communication where they will be asked about their relationship status and other personal details because a significant amount of socializing takes place during work hours. Spradlin (1998) discussed her fear of being questioned by her coworkers about things such as her reason for moving to Colorado, whether she lived alone, and if she was single. When a person is asked about their relationship status, the assumption is often that a person is straight, unless it is stated otherwise. This is one aspect of *heteronormativity*. Yep (2003) defines heteronormativity as "an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes all non-heterosexual forms of behavior, relationships, or communities" (p. 11). Other queer theory scholars conceptualize a heteronormative individual as being heterosexual, but also white, married, and upper middle class (Brandzel, 2005). Yep adds to the definitions of heteronormativity and describes it as the center of which all things non-heterosexual are compared, which results in the oppression, disempowerment, and marginalization of sexual minorities (Yep, 2003). Heteronormativity appears in everyday interactions but is largely taken for granted because of its deeply rooted existence in society.

McNeill (2013) found in her research on sex education in school that heteronormativity is explicitly promoted and regulated as early as a child's first introduction to sex education. She found that United States' schools' sex education

policies, curricula, and standards link heterosexuality to positive outcomes, whereas homosexuality is linked to negative outcomes, and that this promotion of heteronormativity in policy and curricula legitimizes homophobia. Although children are exposed to heteronormativity before receiving sex education, the perpetuation of the ideology in the education system instills heteronormative ideals in students that remain present long after they finish school and enter the workforce. Non-heterosexual individuals entering an organization have to negotiate their identity as sexual minorities in the face of heteronormativity where they are often oppressed and marginalized. Therefore, the concept will impact an understanding of the barriers present to communicating sexual orientation in the workplace. Identifying barriers that prevent individuals from communicating sexual orientation at work may provide specific ways in which readers can resist heteronormative ideologies through dialogue and action.

In sum, individuals with gay and lesbian sexual orientation identities face decisions of whether to communicate those identities when entering organizations. Gays and lesbians are likely to face barriers to communicating their sexual orientation identity at work because of the taken-for-granted heteronormative ideologies that exist. The barriers preventing gays and lesbians from communicating their sexual identities often result in their engagement in identity work in order to keep their sexual orientation identities concealed. Researchers have argued that an organizational culture that prevents people from communicating their sexual identity is neither productive nor beneficial to the individual or the organization (Ward & Winstanley, 2003; 2005). This study seeks to identify the existing barriers

to communicating sexual identity at work and understand how these barriers are often reinforced by organizational communication. By identifying the barriers facing sexual minorities, organizational members can be more aware of how they take part in reinforcing them in organizations. Thus, they can then aid in breaking down the barriers to create an organizational environment that is truly accepting of openness and diversity. In order to do this, it requires gathering insight from gay and lesbian individuals about their experiences of being closeted at work.

### **Chapter III**

#### **Methodology**

This section provides an explanation of the methods chosen for data collection and analysis for this research study. In this study, participants were interviewed to gain insight into their experiences as closeted gay and lesbian individuals in the workplace. Through analysis of the interview responses, barriers to communicating sexual orientation identity at work are revealed and understanding is created about how these barriers are reinforced by informal organizational communication. Consequently, this study examined two research questions.

RQ1: What are the barriers that prevent gay and lesbian individuals from communicating sexual orientation identity in the workplace?

RQ2: How are barriers preventing gay and lesbian individuals from communicating sexual orientation identity at work reinforced by informal organizational communication?

#### **Rationale**

This study used qualitative research methods because it attempted to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena and to make meaning out of the data, which are important qualitative communication research goals (Flick, 2008; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The purpose of this study is not to generalize the results to the greater population, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of how informal organizational communication reinforces barriers that prevent individuals from

being open about their sexual orientation identity at work. Therefore, a qualitative approach was most suitable.

### **Participants**

In order to qualify for this study, participants had to be at least eighteen years old, be early in their careers, self-identify as lesbian or gay, and had to have kept their sexual orientation hidden while working for a particular organization for any length of time. Although there was not a numerical limitation on the length of time the participants were closeted at work, it was required that the participants' closeted experiences were long enough that it noticeably affected how they communicated about their personal lives at work. The shortest period of time a participant kept their sexual orientation identity hidden at work was one week, which proved to be long enough for this participant to have encountered interactions where they actively concealed their sexual orientation identity. Early career stage was chosen so that participants' closeted experiences were recent in order to ensure that participants could recount their experiences more accurately, as opposed to individuals who may have had to think back many years to recount their closeted experiences. Individuals identifying as bisexual were not included in this study because their experiences of communicating sexual identity are distinct from lesbian and gay individuals (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Brewster & Morati, 2010). Therefore, the experiences of closeted bisexuals in the workplace warrant their own investigation, separate from this study.

The study was comprised of four lesbian women and three gay men. The participants worked in a variety of fields for different organizations throughout the

Midwest. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling. The initial participants were recruited via the researcher's existing social and professional networks, and the remaining participants were recruited by referral from the initial participants. Snowball sampling was chosen as the method to recruit participants because often, those with which they have personal relationships are the only people who know of their sexual orientations. Rather than asking participants to refer participants by name and contact information, the researcher asked participants to inform the referrals of the study and its goals first before putting the researcher in contact with them. This was done to ensure that the referrals' rights to privacy were upheld, and so that their sexual orientation identities were not revealed to the researcher without consent. If the referred individuals agreed to participate in the study, they were asked to either contact the researcher first, or the referrers were asked to show proof that the referred participants gave approval for the researcher to contact them.

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative interviews were conducted to collect data from participants. Interviews were the most effective method for obtaining the detailed responses desired from participants regarding their experiences as closeted organizational members. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), interviews are appropriate for understanding the participants' perspectives and experiences through explanations. They help us gather information about things that cannot be observed effectively by other means and help us understand native conceptualizations of communication.

This study used semi-structured, respondent interviews. Interviews were conducted at locations chosen by the participants to ensure that participants were in a space where they felt comfortable sharing sensitive information regarding their personal identities and experiences at work. Once a time, date, and location was established, the researcher presented a series of interview questions to participants designed to elicit open-ended responses. This particular interview method was effective as it allowed the researcher to ask participants initial questions to provide direction during the interview, but also allowed the researcher to ask additional questions as the interview progressed in order to establish clarity or to elicit more specific responses. This method was also useful because the researcher was able to ask the participants questions throughout the interview process in order to verify that the information provided was both reliable and valid.

Interviews took place from January to March 2015. The interview schedule is attached as Appendix A. All participants were asked to sign a consent form before participating in the study. The consent form informed participants of the purpose of the study, any risks or discomfort that could arise, benefits of participating, and explained that participants had the right to withdrawal from the study at any time. Along with asking participants for consent to participate, the form also asked participants for permission to audio-record interviews. All interviews were recorded using a personal recording device. The audio files were stored on a personal computer safe-guarded with a password. Once the interview process was complete, all interviews were transcribed manually using word processing software.



All identifying information was omitted from the transcripts, and all names of people and organizations were replaced with pseudonyms.

### **Coding and Data Analysis**

After the data was collected and transcribed, it was analyzed to look for themes regarding barriers that prevented the participants' from communicating their sexual orientation identities at work. Instances when organizational members' communication seemingly reinforced those barriers were searched for as well. In order to determine over-arching themes regarding barriers to communicating sexual orientation identity in the workplace, open coding was used. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), open coding is when the researcher scans the data and distinguishes pieces of text that suggest a category.

Open coding allowed categories to develop and be named that were apparent in the data. This was accomplished by scanning the transcripts line by line and noting any instance where a participant gave an explanation for not communicating their lesbian or gay identity at work. These explanations were identified as the "barriers" that prevented the disclosure of sexual orientation identity. The identified barriers to communicating sexual orientation identity at work were then grouped into themes. For instance, when participants reported not wanting to disclose their sexual orientation at work because they feared they would be denied a promotion or lose their job, these were grouped in the "Fear of Discrimination" theme.

After identifying barriers and grouping them into themes the data was revisited to examine where participants shared an explanation for keeping their sexual orientation identity hidden. Each participants' response was scanned and

analyzed for instances when they shared a story of a coworker's communicative act that appeared to reinforce a barrier preventing them from coming out at work. For example, if a participant reported refraining from communicating their sexual orientation identity at work out of fear of losing their job and also mentioned how a superior in the organization had made homophobic comments, it was determined that the superior's behavior was an instance of organizational communication reinforcing barriers that prevent individuals from coming out at work. In the results and analysis chapter of this study, these categories and themes, which formed from the participants' responses, are examined through a critical lens. Such an approach is used to illuminate how dominant ideologies are perpetuated through informal organizational communication, and in this case, reinforce barriers that prevent gay and lesbian individuals from communicating their sexual orientation identities at work.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Analysis**

In this chapter, themes arising from the data are analyzed. Several themes arose from the data and are discussed according to the research question to which they pertain. The four themes that arose regarding barriers preventing individuals from communicating their sexual orientation identity at work are: fear of alienation, fear of losing credibility, lack of control, and fear of job loss. The three themes that arose regarding how these barriers are reinforced by informal organizational communication are: heteronormativity, gay and lesbian invisibility, and gossip. All themes, while distinct, are interrelated, as participants listed multiple ways each barrier was reinforced by informal organizational communication. First, the barriers are discussed.

#### **Barriers to Communicating Sexual Orientation Identities at Work**

The first research question sought to identify barriers that prevent gay and lesbian individuals from communicating sexual orientation identity in the workplace. An analysis revealed that participants did not come out at work because of the fear of being alienated, the fear of losing credibility, lack of control over the information, and the fear of job loss. Participants cited the fear of being alienated as the most important concern when deciding whether or not to come out at work. This barrier illuminates the crucial role developing and maintaining relationships with coworkers plays in organizations.

**Fear of Alienation**

The first theme, or barrier preventing participants from communicating their sexual orientation identities, was overwhelmingly present in all seven participants' responses and supports existing research, which states gays and lesbians do not come out at work at the risk of being ostracized (Day & Schoenrade, 1997). This theme encompasses participants' fears that coworkers may not be interested in developing or maintaining interpersonal relationships after learning of their gay or lesbian identities. It also encompasses participants' fear that if coworkers were not accepting of their gay or lesbian identities, the participants may grow to dislike those coworkers, and therefore, may themselves be unwilling to develop or maintain interpersonal relationships with them. This barrier was present from the beginning of employment and prevailed for some even after coming out to one or more coworkers over time.

At the start of employment, new employees go through a socialization process where they develop interpersonal relationships with coworkers (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). It is during this process that new employees become integrated into the organization (Mahone & Stasson, 2005). The quality of relationships formed with coworkers determines how integrated into the organization a new employee becomes and ultimately determines the new employee's learning, performance, and their overall job satisfaction (Korte & Lin, 2010).

When participants were asked why they did not disclose their sexual orientation identities at work, they first emphasized the importance of liking coworkers and developing relationships with them, and then emphasized how

sharing personal information is vital in developing these relationships. One participant, Erin, a 24-year-old police dispatcher, shared, "Sometimes I'm there [at work] for 18 hours. I am with them [coworkers] a lot. If I'm with them and didn't like them and they didn't like me, that would make my life miserable." Regarding developing friendships with coworkers she shared,

It's hard to go into work and to one, not know people. That's a huge thing - to not know people. And you're trying to get to know people, and then to go into work and to not be able to be honest about what you're doing in your life? How are you supposed to ever really become close to people if you're lying about such a big chunk of yourself?

In this excerpt, Erin expressed the importance developing relationships with coworkers, and also the difficulty in developing those relationships while simultaneously concealing aspects of her identity in order to keep her sexual orientation identity hidden. Jamie, a 26-year-old homeless shelter director, referred to developing friendships with coworkers saying, "Making friendships at work is very important. It's just a part of the work experience. You don't, er, can't just talk about work things all day." Erin and Jamie both emphasized the role informal communication plays at work, especially regarding relationship development. Other participants shared specific examples of how not being open at work affected their ability to develop closer relationships with coworkers. Valerie, a 27-year-old elementary school speech therapist, shared:

A lot of the female coworkers, um, like my first year and second year, they would go to movie nights and go see a chick flick or whatever. And I was invited a couple times, but eh, I just didn't even want to go, because, so it [not being open about being a lesbian] kind of like stops me from going that next step from having an even better relationship with some of the people that I know are good people and I know I would, like, be friends with, but I just, like, keep it professional.

In this instance, Valerie felt that not being open about her sexual orientation identity prevented her from engaging in social activities. Thus, preventing her from developing closer interpersonal relationships with her coworkers.

After emphasizing the importance of liking and being friends with coworkers, participants shared their fears of not being able to accomplish those things after disclosing their gay and lesbian identities. When asked why he did not tell anyone he was gay for the first three months of his current job, Colby, a 26-year-old career specialist at a community college, said:

I would have to say, probably fear of neglect is probably the big one... You never want to alienate yourself, especially in a new situation. I think anyone when going into a new situation, whether you are going to a new school or starting to a new job or moving to a new city, I think you want to feel included as soon as possible, and I think that some people worry that telling someone that information so early might lead them to alienate themselves from you. So that's probably my big main reason why I didn't tell anyone straight away... for fear of being neglected.

Colby was concerned that disclosing his gay identity might actually prevent coworkers from wanting to develop close relationships with him, which he described as resulting in alienation. Thus, it prevented him from coming out at work. In another instance, Shannon, a 26-year-old high school physical education teacher, shared how she anticipated coming out would affect her relationship with a coworker with whom she already considers to be close:

He'd probably be the most shocked if he found out about me. And he probably would kind of be a dick to me, I think. If he heard I could just see him not talking to me. I mean, we're super close. He sits by me at lunch and like we joke and make jokes about certain students. We have a comfortable relationship, but I think if he knew he would be very distant. He probably wouldn't even sit with me at lunch.

In this excerpt, Shannon expresses that one of her coworkers, with whom she has developed a relationship, would no longer be willing to maintain the friendship after finding out about her lesbian identity. In another instance, a participant shares her fears of not being accepted by coworkers and not being able to develop friendships after coming out.

Erin: I just wanted to go in, figure my place out in my work, because I was so new and nervous and I didn't have any friends. I wanted to figure these people out before I throw that out there because God only knows. I mean you don't know. That was my biggest argument when my girlfriend would be like, "why don't you tell people?" I said, "If they don't respond well, they have the power to make my life miserable," and I didn't want that. I didn't wanna go into work and be miserable and then come home and be miserable. 12 hours is a long time to be miserable somewhere. And then, you're gonna bring that home. It totally would reflect on me and my personality. It would then reflect on my relationship because I would be angry and self-conscious.

Researcher: Would it probably affect your job too? Would you be as invested in your job?

Erin: No! Exactly! So, I probably put more into it than I needed to. I probably thought about it more, but that's what I said. I said, "if it doesn't go right, if they don't accept it, if they don't like it, they have the authority and the power to make my life hell. If I don't become friends with them, am I just gonna sit by myself and not talk in a corner for 12 hours? That's not me."

Like the other participants, Erin was concerned about her sexual orientation identity being accepted by her coworkers. Participants linked coworkers' acceptance to the ability to develop friendships. Since participants expressed the importance of developing workplace friendships, an idea supported by organizational communication research, they feared that if coworkers did not accept their sexual orientation identities, they would experience alienation. Therefore, participants did not disclose their sexual orientation identities at work or only disclosed them to coworkers with whom they perceived to be accepting.

**Lack of Control**

Throughout the interview process, participants stressed the importance of determining coworkers' levels of acceptance regarding sexual orientation identity before coming out at work. Participants used various cues to determine how accepting an individual would be once they learned of the participant's gay or lesbian identity. Participants indicated that if they perceived a coworker as being accepting, they were more willing to disclose their sexual orientation identity to that individual. For example, Joshua, a 32-year-old gay male, reflecting on his experience in the hospitality industry, stated, "it's kind of like you do this weird feel and understanding of the place, or, what's going on. You feel it out. And then you may not necessarily come out to everybody. You try to like reserve that part of your life. Just for people that you feel it's appropriate for." However, some participants feared that because of workplace gossip, coming out to one coworker meant coming out to multiple or all coworkers, including coworkers whom they did not perceive to be accepting. Therefore, the data suggests that another barrier to communicating sexual orientation identity at work is having a lack control over information regarding one's identity.

In one instance, Shannon was concerned about rumors regarding her sexual orientation identity circulating, even though she had not yet come out to any coworkers or students at her school. She suspected that a friend from college outed her to another teacher, and the following expresses her concerns:

She's [Mrs. Flaugherty] the one that sent one of these lesbian students to me because I think she knows. She sent me a message on Facebook and was like, "Hey, you and Amber have a lot in common." Well, you're insinuating that we like girls. And, one of my friends from college went to high school at the



school I teach at, and she talks to a couple people, and I'm guessing she said something. And, she's really good friends with Mrs. Flaugherty, and they talk, so it probably started right there. Um. Then, I could hear people talking. I almost went up to my principal's office and told him. I'm just kind of waiting to tell until we re-sign contracts, which is in March.

Shannon was concerned that although her coworker seemed to be accepting of her sexual orientation identity, she suspected that she was telling other students and coworkers, some of which may not be as accepting, including the principal.

Therefore, she refrained from disclosing her lesbian identity to anyone.

In another instance, Erin recounts a positive experience telling a coworker she had a girlfriend, which made her more comfortable to tell another coworker, until her fear of losing control over who knew about her sexual orientation identity was confirmed.

Erin: It made me feel more comfortable so I started to get to know people and feel more comfortable. So then I told the next person. I told her in confidence and told her I didn't want it getting out and getting around and having people talk about me because I heard sitting there how they talk about people. That was the other thing. I hear what they said about people. I was like, "Holy crap, this is kind of a brutal place. They are mean about employees. If they don't like you, they're going to tell you. And so I told her and asked her to keep it confident. And I found out later, she didn't. And that annoyed me.

Researcher: She told other people about you being a lesbian?

Erin: Mhm. I became really good friends with one of the police officers and she told me that the girl I told came up and told her. Like, but it wasn't even like, she said, "it wasn't even like we were talking about you." It was just like, "Oh, did you know she's gay?" That's what I didn't want to happen, and that's exactly what happened. Why does that need to be said?

Researcher: Did that make you then less willing to tell other people at work?

Erin: Yeah! And it pissed me off because maybe if she said, "Oh, I met her girlfriend, she's really sweet." She hasn't met her, doesn't know her, didn't know her name probably at that point. You know what I mean? It was literally just said so that she could tell someone that I am gay. But why does that need to be talked about? Do you know what I mean?

Valerie had similar concerns regarding having control over who knew about her sexual orientation identity. After emphasizing the amount of gossip that takes place among teachers at her school, the following conversation ensued,

Researcher: If people didn't gossip as much at work, do you think you would be more willing?

Valerie: Probably. Or if you knew you could like slowly tell, you know, slowly tell people, choose the people you wanted to tell, and then you could like control how far it went, maybe, but that's not even possible.

Researcher: So you don't feel like you have control over who knows you're a lesbian?

Valerie: No! I mean, I do because I only told people, like the one that I told there is not out either so I knew she wouldn't tell anybody, and then the other one that I told left.

Participants were concerned about not having control over which coworkers knew of their sexual orientation identities. Shannon, Erin, and Valerie expressed the most concern about this, as they indicated high levels of informal communication involved in daily interactions with coworkers, often taking the form of gossip. They feared that their sexual orientations would be a topic of workplace gossip where coworkers would potentially disclose their sexual orientation identities to others without their consent. Thus, leaving them exposed to potential negative reactions such as the possibility that others may not view them as capable to do their jobs because of their sexual orientations. This fear of losing credibility as an employee surfaced as a theme as well and is discussed as the third barrier.

### **Fear of Losing Credibility**

Participants expressed concerns about how their sexual orientation identities might distract coworkers from other identity characteristics important to their organizational lives. They feared only being known for their sexual orientation identities and not other aspects of their identities such as their qualifications, job

skills, or personalities. Some participants were also concerned that their coworkers would consider their sexual orientations when judging whether or not they were capable of doing their jobs. Although increased diversity and technology makes it nearly impossible to view work-related and non-work-related identities as separate (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013), participants expressed a desire to not be defined by their sexual orientation identities for fear that it may overshadow work-related accomplishments.

Erin voiced her concerns about her lesbian identity distracting from her work-related accomplishments in the following excerpt:

Erin: Well, at first when I started, I said this to my girlfriend because she would always ask me, but I wanted it to be about my skills and how I was at my job before people started figured out stuff about my personal life. I didn't think that was important and things they didn't need to know then. I didn't want to be automatically labeled as the lesbian.

Researcher: Why? Were you worried about not being treated fairly because of it?

Erin: I was just nervous, yeah, I was nervous, and like I said, my work gossips a lot. They find things wrong with people because they are jaded sometimes, and that's what I was so concerned about. That that's all they would be able to see, and they wouldn't be able to see passed it, and then it would just be, like, something to talk about. Then, they would never see me for what I am actually good at. People for some reason let that identify you. Like, "oh, she's the gay one." But really, I'm just me still, who's good at my job, but I happen to be dating a girl.

For Erin, the concern that her coworkers may not be able to see past her sexual orientation, and therefore, may not value her as much as a member of the organization, contributed to her silence at work surrounding her sexual orientation identity for the first five months of her employment.

While being concerned with how disclosing her lesbian identity would affect her ability to develop friendships with coworkers, Valerie was also concerned about

how coming out might influence others' perceptions of her ability to do her job, as well as how it might actually affect her ability to work with others.

Researcher: You're just afraid of being uncomfortable at work?

Valerie: Yeah. My first thing would be what, just like, wondering what they're thinking about me. And then, my second thing would be, how's that going to affect my job. Not like being fired, but would parents say, "I don't want my kid to be seen by her, or," I don't even know! I can't even imagine a parent saying that but just like the chance that they might freaks me out!

Researcher: Are you worried about if your coworkers don't receive it well, how it might affect how you're able to work with them?

Valerie: Right. In the position I'm in, I have to have a good working relationship with all of the teachers, because I see most all of their kids. So then I feel like that would then affect the services that I provide. If I can't talk to that teacher or I feel uncomfortable, like I'm to a point now that although there's that wall there, I'm not uncomfortable talking to them, but if I were to tell and I thought they didn't receive it well, I don't feel like I would want to talk to them at all, which would then really affect my ability to do my job.

Valerie feared that disclosing her sexual orientation identity might interfere with her ability to perform her job because students' parents might perceive her as unfit to provide speech therapy to their children because of her non-heterosexual identity. Valerie was not alone in fearing that her sexual orientation identity could be perceived as a factor in determining her ability to do her job.

For one participant, the process of having to negotiate sexual orientation identity and the fear of losing credibility at work began before she had even been hired. During the application process, Erin was subjected to a psychiatric evaluation, which would be used to determine whether or not she had enough mental stability to perform her job duties. The following excerpt demonstrates Erin's fear of losing credibility when asked about her relationship status during the psychiatric evaluation:

Erin: I just remembered though, when I did my, we have to do a psychiatric evaluation for my job, and I lied... about being in a relationship for that, which is probably detrimental to my job so don't let anyone hear that, but totally.

Researcher: Why did you lie?

Erin: Because he was like evaluating me as like my- it was me and a psychiatrist. He was evaluating me for my mental stability to be able to perform my job. He had the power to say yes or no.

Researcher: So were you worried that if you said you were in a relationship, then they would ask if you were gay?

Erin: Yes.

Researcher: And you felt like if you said that you were gay it would reflect on your ability to perform your job?

Erin: I didn't want to let that be a hindrance on whether or not I was able to perform my job duties. The fact that they ask me that, or ask that I'm in a relationship, which I get because you could be in an abusive relationship and that would be a big hindrance on the job, obviously, because you would be pretty wrapped up in the fact that you have a shitty relationship, but I lied. It was bad. It was bad. Don't tell anyone that.

Researcher: Is that something you don't want to be mentioned in the research?

Erin: No you can. You're not going to use my name?

Researcher: No I'm not going to use your name. I just wanted to make sure you were okay with me using it for the study.

Erin: No, it's fine. You're not going to put anyone's name in it that I said, right?

Researcher: No, no one's name will be in it. I'll either replace the name with a pronoun or make up a name.

Erin: Okay. Yeah. I lied. That was a big one. That was a really big one. Because I was dating my girlfriend and I said I was single. He had, he had the power to - Not that I think he would have because he's a psychiatrist and you hope he wouldn't be like that, but it's still a scary thought.

Researcher: He had the power to determine your-

Erin: My livelihood. My livelihood was basically in his hands at that point.

The first part of this excerpt illustrates Erin's fear that her sexual orientation may be perceived as a sign of mental instability. Thus, interfering with her ability to perform the job duties. However, this excerpt also suggests another barrier preventing her from communicating her sexual orientation identity at work, which is the fear of job loss.

### **Fear of Job Loss**

Interestingly, no participant explicitly stated not coming out for fear of losing one's job, which is listed as a reason for lesbian and gay individuals being closeted at work in organizational communication research (Day & Schoenrade, 1997). In fact, many of the participants explicitly stated they did not believe they would be fired because of their sexual orientation identity. Jamie stated, "No, I don't think I would lose my job. I'm not worried about that. It's more like, more just being awkward if they have a problem with it." Valerie also expressed,

I don't see them, I don't foresee being fired over it. That's not why I don't come out in the workplace. It's just, um, the awkwardness or how it would, if it were to affect my relationships with certain people or whatever.

Shannon similarly said, "Do I think my school would fire me if they find out I was gay? No, I don't actually." Erin agreed, "No. I don't think I would lose my job. We have very strict anti-discrimination policies here." Stacy expressed similar views by saying, "No, I wasn't worried about being discriminated against. I mean, at the gym we didn't have any policies like that. We didn't even have a first aid kit. But that wasn't why I didn't tell them."

The other participants did not address the fear of losing their jobs as a barrier to communicating their sexual orientation identities at work at all. However, an in-depth analysis of participants' responses suggested the fear of job loss was very much a factor in being closeted and was even blatant in three particular participants responses, as demonstrated in the following excerpts, despite claims that it was not a concern. Below is an excerpt from Shannon's interview:

Shannon: I'm not afraid to tell him, I'm just kind of waiting to tell him until we re-sign contracts, which is in March. After that I would say something I think, but I want to keep my job. They can come up with any reason to fire you, but they can't say it's because you're gay. But, I think they would use that they wanted to.

Researcher: So even though it's illegal, they could still very easily get away with it?

Shannon: Oh, they would find something else. Yeah. I mean, in my evaluations I've scored really high, but they could just come up with anything. It happens all the time.

Researcher: So they can just fire anyone?

Shannon: I'm not tenure.

Researcher: So if you're not tenure, they can just fire you at any time without a reason and you know that?

Shannon: Oh yeah! You hear people ya know? If they hear of our relationship or they hear that at one point you yelled at a student or you said something wrong to a student, and with coaching too, they can use coaching like, "we didn't like the way you handled situations while you were coaching." Or, just, "we don't think you're a fit for our school." It's just so hard because in the back of your head it's your first job, and I'm so close to March. Once March hits and I find out I'm rehired, then I think I'll probably tell my principal, which I think it'll be helpful.

Researcher: If you were to come up with a list of reasons why you have not come out at work, what would that look like?

Shannon: Keeping my job. Waiting until the March contracts. That's my biggest thing. I'm not, like I said, I'm not worried about what they'll say because I think they'll just be in shock. I'm just worried about it being my first year. It's in the back of my head that I could potentially lose my job so that's what's held me back. After that, I'm all about telling.

Valerie, as a tenure-track employee of an elementary school, expressed similar concerns regarding the ground on which she can be fired without being tenured:

Valerie: No. If you're not tenured then they don't have to give a reason for firing you, and I'm non-tenure, so. Next year will be my tenure year, which is another reason for me to kind of hold off until my tenure year because at least if they fire me they have to give me a reason.

Erin shared interesting insight into how the fear of job loss can be present before the actual job begins. In this case, Erin was concerned with losing her job before she technically even had it:

Erin: I just remembered though, when I did my, we have to do a psych evaluation for my job, and I lied about being in a relationship for that, which is probably detrimental to my job so don't let anyone hear that, but totally.

Researcher: Why did you lie?

Erin: Because he was like evaluating me as like my- it was me and a psychiatrist. He was evaluating me for my mental stability to be able to perform my job. He had the power to say yes or no.

The first two excerpts from Shannon and Valerie, demonstrate that because they do not have tenure, they can be fired without an explanation, and for that reason, they do not want to take the risk of being fired after coming out. In Shannon's case, having her contract re-signed demonstrates the school's commitment to her as a teacher. Therefore, she has indicated that after her contract is re-signed, she plans to be open about her sexual orientation identity at work. As for Valerie, she has been working at her school for three years and has no intention of being open about her sexual orientation identity at work until she is granted tenure because without tenure, she feels she can technically be fired for being a lesbian because the administration does not have to provide an explanation. Erin shared about her experience lying to a psychiatrist about her relationship status, as she feared telling the truth would expose her lesbian identity. Thus, potentially costing her the job.

These participants' responses demonstrate that the fear of losing one's job for having a non-normative sexual orientation identity, while extreme, is still taken into consideration when negotiating a gay or lesbian identity at work despite anti-discrimination laws or policies. While participants brought the fear of job loss and the other barriers with them when entering the workforce, the barriers in many ways appeared to be reinforced by workplace communication.



### **Informal Organizational Communication Reinforcing Barriers**

The second goal of this study was to understand how barriers preventing gay and lesbian individuals from communicating their sexual orientation identities at work are reinforced by informal organizational communication. Data revealed three ways in which communication reinforced the Fear of Alienation, Fear of Losing Credibility, Lack of Control, and Fear of Job Loss. Data supporting the first theme, heteronormativity, demonstrates how these barriers are reinforced by informal communication at work early on in employment.

#### **Heteronormativity**

Five of the seven participants mentioned examples of heteronormativity playing out communicatively in their workplaces. Heteronormativity, or the often taken-for-granted assumption that an individual is straight (Yep, 2003), ultimately reinforced participants' decisions to not come out at work. The data revealed that heteronormativity was most often present in the workplace when participants were questioned regarding their relationship status, but also surfaced in other ways. In the following excerpt, Erin recounted her experience with heteronormativity in the workplace:

Erin: There has been things said to me that make me feel uncomfortable about getting a boyfriend and stuff like that. Like, "Erin, let's get you a boyfriend" or "you can go out with my friend," or "we will set you up on a dating website." They were hounding me on it and I was really uncomfortable. I kept saying, "no it's fine. I don't need a boyfriend. I'm not looking for a boyfriend." And then they would drop it, but then the next night it would be the same thing. It was just constant. They kept bringing it up and they finally, it was the dating website that finally pushed me over the edge. They said, "come on, let's set you up. Let's get you on a dating app." And I said, "no! Seriously, I'm fine. I don't need a boyfriend." Then they said, "wait, you're already with someone aren't you?" And I smiled because I suck at lying, and they were like, "you are! Why didn't you tell us? Who is he? What's

his name?" And I looked and I didn't say anything. I then I said, "I didn't say I was, I didn't say I wasn't." And then they were like, "come on! And one guy said, "What's his name?"

By asking Erin if she had a boyfriend, and concluding that since she did not have a boyfriend she was single, her coworkers assumed that she was straight. Stacy also had a similar experience with heteronormativity at work, although she ultimately did disclose her sexual orientation identity. However, because of heteronormative assumptions, her coworker still did not recognize her non-heteronormative identity:

Researcher: Do you ever get asked if you have a boyfriend or anything like that?

Stacy: Oh yeah! I would say no. It depends on who it is. One time I said, "no, I have a girlfriend" to one lady and she thought I meant a girl that was a friend.

Shannon was also questioned about her relationship status in a heteronormative way.

Shannon: Valentine's Day is coming up and my boss is like, "So, what are you doing?" I was like, "I don't know." He then asked, "what's his name," making jokes, and I'm just sitting there cheesin'. He's just trying to get me to say stuff. Like one time, he was just asking like personal things like, "who's your boyfriend?"

Researcher: So have you told anyone that you work with that you are gay or that you have a girlfriend?

Shannon: No. Nope. The teachers ask me if I have boyfriend, but I just say no. They don't ask me if I have a girlfriend, otherwise I'd say, "yeah." But I just say, "no." That way, I'm not lying.

Shannon's response demonstrates that asking whether someone has a boyfriend/girlfriend prompts individuals to either come out or avoid the subject. In this case, Shannon was able to avoid coming out and avoid lying by simply denying having a boyfriend. By not recognizing the possibility that Shannon could have a

girlfriend, her coworker marginalized Shannon. This instance also resulted in Shannon oppressing her sexual orientation identity. According to Yep (2003), heteronormative assumptions often result in the marginalization and oppression of individuals with non-heterosexual identities.

In another instance, Joshua shares a story about how one of his coworkers made heteronormative assumptions about another coworker, which made him uncertain whether or not she would accept his sexual orientation identity.

Researcher: So she's never asked you if you were married or had a girlfriend?  
 Joshua: No. Because she knows that I'm not. No, she's never asked those questions. Um, she has asked questions to the lesbian haha. So this was, so this is what brought the conversation about her up. So this girl, she's a lesbian, she's a staff member, and we were hiring someone new, and she was like, "go get your, oh he's really cute. Get your hairbrush." And that's like, I know, uhh, she's thinking in her head like, "oh, I have a girlfriend." So that's, like, the things, she would make these assumptions.

Valerie shares how the heteronormative assumptions of her coworkers affected her willingness to interact with them informally.

Researcher: Have you been asked explicitly if you have a boyfriend?  
 Valerie: Oh, yes! Actually, I feel like my first year and maybe my second year people, like, I kind of avoided the lounge because it's just, it's not always work related conversation that goes on so that opens up everyone else to talk about their significant others and everything, and people knew that I lived with someone. Then, when I did say "my roommate" they would say, "Oh, you live with someone?" And, normally, if you were just two friends living with each other you would be very open about it, but I wasn't even very open about that. You know what I mean?

While five participants mentioned some heteronormative interaction with a coworker, some participants stated that the heteronormative assumption that they were straight actually prompted them to lie about their sexual orientation identities, whereas if they had been asked the same question in a non-heteronormative way,

they would have come out, as demonstrated in the excerpt from Shannon's interview above. She stated that if her coworker had attempted to ask if she had a girlfriend instead of a boyfriend, she would have said yes. In another example, Erin explains an interaction with a coworker, who after initially asking if she had a boyfriend approached her again in a non-heteronormative way.

Erin: My trainer was a girl and we became close and she asked me if I had a boyfriend and I said no and then we just didn't really talk about it. Then we went to training together and she's like okay I have to ask you something, "Do you have a girlfriend?" And said "yeah." And she was like, "Okay. I am so sorry. I should never ask that like that to you. I should've asked if you were dating anyone."

In this example, because Erin's coworker was conscious of her heteronormative assumption and corrected it by asking if she had a girlfriend rather than a boyfriend, Erin felt comfortable enough to tell her that she did, in fact, have a girlfriend.

According to Yep (2003) heteronormativity stigmatizes non-normative sexual orientation identities and often leads to the oppression, marginalization, and disempowerment of members identifying with those identity groups. The moments in which coworkers assumed participants' heterosexuality, their non-heterosexual identities were stigmatized because by assuming participants were heterosexual, coworkers regarded all other non-heterosexual options as unviable. Therefore, it is understandable that participants feared experiencing alienation, lack of control, losing credibility, and in some cases, even job loss because of their sexual orientation identities.

### **Gay Invisibility**

Another theme uncovered from the data regarding the second research question is the silence surrounding non-heterosexual identities. While a few

participants mentioned hearing insensitive remarks regarding the LGBTQ community at work, most participants reported an absence of any discussion regarding the LGBTQ community, positive or negative. Participants also mentioned having very few visible gay or lesbian coworkers, if any. When asked what would have made them more comfortable to come out at work, participants indicated that they would have been more comfortable had there been visible gay or lesbian employees or if there was more positive conversation regarding the LGBTQ community in the workplace. The following excerpts demonstrate participants' views regarding the invisibility of non-heterosexual identities in the workplace:

Researcher: What do you think would have to change at your workplace for you to be comfortable?

Valerie: I don't know. Well, if someone else was openly gay, obviously would, or if there were a lot more openly gay people in the community.

Valerie expresses that having more openly gay people at her workplace and in the community would make her feel more comfortable about being open with her own sexual orientation. While Colby also expresses that having more openly gay people in the workplace is comforting, he expresses that employees should have more conversations about the LGBTQ community and display support to make them feel that it is acceptable to talk about their own sexual orientation:

Researcher: So if you could think of, um, if you were going into a new organization, or maybe telling someone else at another organization, what the ideal workplace would be for a lesbian or a gay man going into a new job, what types of things would be important?

Colby: I think that there needs to be definitely some level of compassion and, um, maybe nurturing for people. You know like a compassionate and caring environment. I also think that communication is really key, so that would be something else that I would really hope for in a workplace, um, and then just respect, you know. I think that's obviously kind of a no-brainer, but having a respectful workplace, I think that would kind of be really helpful as well.

Researcher: So when you say more communication, do you mean your coworkers talking more openly about LGBTQ issues and things like that?

Colby: Yeah. So not making someone feel like it's, um, it's weird or awkward to bring up their own views or their own daily lives whether they're straight or gay. Because I think sometimes people automatically assume that it's awkward to talk about those things, but I think just having that open level of communication at work.

Colby: I mean, so with my job at the college that I work at, we have this program called the Safe Zone, which is like an LGBT training program that you can go through, and um, at the end of your training you get a safe zone sticker for your door. Professors can put it on their door so students know it's a safe place to talk. I think that was one of the first things I looked at, to see like, who would be the most accepting, would be like who had those, that certification or whatever you want to call it. Actually, a low number, in my opinion, a low number of employees at the college I work at have actually done the training, so, um, you know I guess I kind of just assumed that if someone went through the training or that has a certificate that they actually were open to the whole thing, so.

Researcher: Okay. That makes sense.

Colby: Yeah, so it's, yeah we actually sign an ally contract, um, like in the first, because it's like a free session training and I'm currently in my second one, so you do sign a contract, I don't know how concrete it is, but you do sign one showing that you do support LGBT.

Researcher: Okay. So when you look for that sticker, that lets you know that that person is most likely accepting, so when you see someone's office that doesn't have a sticker, does that make a more weary to tell them?

Colby: Yeah! I mean, that doesn't mean that I would never tell them, but I would honestly probably rather tell someone who has done the training than someone who hasn't done it.

Erin also agrees with Valerie and Colby that having more openly gay and lesbian coworkers would make her more comfortable about coming out as a lesbian at work because then she could gauge whether or not coworkers would respond positively based on how they interact with others:

Researcher: When you told the first person you were a lesbian at work, you didn't know that there were any other gay people that worked there?

Erin: No.

Researcher: Did that make you feel less comfortable to come out? Not having any visible gay people?

Erin: Yes. If there had been, it would've been a part of everyone's norm. You know what I mean? It wouldn't have been so shocking to them because I'm

the first one. It's like, "woah!" If there were other out people I could gauge how they acted towards them and how they treated them and it would make me feel more comfortable knowing. It's the unknowing of how they would talk about it.

Overall, participants indicated that since discussion about and support for gay and lesbian identities was absent from the workplace, they could not gauge whether or not coworkers would be accepting of their sexual orientation identities. They also indicated that because others were silent about gay and lesbian identities, they should remain silent about their own sexual orientation identity.

### **Gossip**

Developing interpersonal relationships with coworkers is vital to an employee's success and job satisfaction in an organization. New organizational members develop relationships with coworkers at work often through informal talk about aspects of each other's personal lives (Korte & Lin, 2012). As evidenced by data from this study, informal conversations can take the form of gossip. Gossip is evaluative talk about an individual that takes place in informal conversations while the subject of the talk is not present (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Participants indicated that because coworkers often gossip about others and because having a gay or lesbian identity is often stigmatized, they feared they would become subjects of workplace gossip after disclosing their sexual orientation identities. Workplace gossip ultimately reinforced the barriers preventing participants to come out at work. In the following excerpt, Valerie shares her experience with workplace gossip:

Researcher: Since you said that you're worried about how your coworkers will think about you, is there a lot of gossip that goes on there?

Valerie: Yes!

Researcher: Is that why you're so worried, because you know that if someone has something to say about it they'll talk about it when you're not there?

Valerie: Right, and like, like I said, the secretary was one of the ones that expressed her feelings toward a gay man, um, the secretary is like one of the biggest gossip queens, and I feel like if someone were to say, "I'm ok with it. It doesn't bother me," but then if they talked to her, then maybe she might sway their opinion.

Valerie is concerned that her sexual orientation will be a topic of gossip in the workplace and will possibly negatively influence others' views of her lesbian identity. Stacy has similar concerns. She claims that her coworkers talked negatively about other coworkers, and therefore, she felt they would do the same to her because of her sexual orientation:

Researcher: So you would just not tell them everything instead of lying?

Stacy: Yeah. If I did something with my girlfriend I would just not really talk about it at all. Because, I knew that over there, gossip spreads like wildfire, and I didn't want to be a part of it when I left.

Researcher: Well, you said that you weren't close with your coworkers. Do you think one of the reasons you weren't close with them was because you felt like you couldn't share a lot of person things because you didn't want them to know you were gay?

Stacy: I think it's because of the way they talked about other people and stuff made me not want to be close with them. The way they would bash on other people at the gym kind of showed the kind of people that they were, and I didn't want to be a part of it.

Workplace gossip was also closely connected to the lack of control over information about one's sexual orientation identity. Because coworkers often gossiped about others, participants were concerned that by being a subject of workplace gossip, they would not have control over who knew about their sexual orientation identities.

Erin: My work gossips a lot. They find things wrong with people because they are jaded sometimes, and that's what I was so concerned about that. That's all they would be able to see. And they wouldn't be able to see passed it, and then it would just be like something to talk about.



Researcher: The gossip isn't related to work?

Erin: No! It's not related to work. They're just like shooting the shit, talking shit about people basically. You know what I mean? I was worried they would say things like that. There's nothing to say, but they would find something if they wanted to. Granted, I don't know if that would happen, you know what I mean? I don't know if I went and told my older coworkers if they would say that. I don't know if they would. Because I later then found out my supervisor is a lesbian through telling someone I was, and they told me her secret. They were doing exactly what I didn't want them to do.

In this excerpt, Erin shares that after disclosing her lesbian identity to a coworker, that coworker then disclosed her supervisor's lesbian identity. Erin indicated that she was concerned about disclosing her sexual orientation identity to her coworkers because she feared not having control over who knew because of workplace gossip.

The analysis revealed that the barriers preventing gay and lesbian individuals from coming out at work are: fear of alienation, fear of losing credibility, lack of control, and fear of job loss. The analysis also revealed that these barriers were often reinforced by aspects organizational communication such as heteronormativity, gay invisibility, and gossip. Now that these findings have been established, the significance of this study regarding gays and lesbians at work, workplace organizations, and organizational communication research will be discussed.

## **Chapter V**

### **Conclusion**

This study set out to identify barriers preventing gay and lesbian individuals from coming out at work and to understand how they are reinforced by organizational communication. The need for this study stemmed from a gap in organizational communication literature. While research on difference in organizations often mentions race, class, and gender as difference categories, it has failed to consistently recognize sexual orientation as a difference category. (Ashcraft, 2011; Mumby, 2011; Dempsey, 2011). Ward and Winstanley (2005) state that sexual orientation in organizations continues to be under-researched and recognized as an element of diversity.

What research there is regarding sexual orientation identities in organizations has a very limited scope. Many studies focus on employees' coming out experiences (Day & Schoenrade, 1997; 2000; Ward & Winstanley, 2005; Rumens, 2008; Fleming, 2007; Gray, 2013; Schneider, 1986). Other studies highlight the benefits of being open at work and the negativity involved with remaining in the closet (Ward & Winstanely, 2003; Day & Schoendrade, 1997; Griffith & Hebl, 2002). However, very little attention has been paid to understanding why gay and lesbian individuals do not come out at work. In order to develop workplace climates where gay and lesbian employees feel comfortable communicating their sexual orientation identities, we must first determine factors preventing them from coming out. Once these barriers are identified, we can work toward breaking them down. Then,

individuals and organizations can reap the benefits associated with openness and inclusion in the workplace. In order to accomplish this, two questions were asked.

The first research question sought to identify the barriers preventing gay and lesbian individuals from communicating their sexual orientation identities at work. An analysis indicated that there were four major barriers preventing participants from coming out at work: fear of alienation, fear of losing credibility, lack of control, and fear of job loss. Participants overwhelmingly indicated concern regarding how coming out would negatively impact their relationships with coworkers. The fear of being alienated was present both when participants first began employment and were in the early stages of relationship development, and after they had been working there for an extended period of time and had already developed relationships with coworkers. They feared that either coworkers would not want to develop relationships or would not want to maintain relationships after learning of their sexual orientation identities.

Data relating to the first theme supports existing organizational research, which emphasizes the importance of developing relationships at work, especially for new employees (Mahone & Stasson, 2005; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013; Korte & Lin, 2010). Participants indicated that if their interpersonal relationships were negatively affected by coming out, it would likely impact both their ability to perform their jobs well and their overall job satisfaction. Participants also reported feeling less close with coworkers because they withheld a significant amount of personal information while keeping their sexual orientation identities hidden. This is evidence of an unfortunate cycle in which closeted gay and lesbian employees

have difficulty developing close relationships with coworkers because of withholding personal information, yet, if they did disclose their sexual orientation identities, they risked negative reactions, which could have led to alienation. Since developing relationships with coworkers is linked to job performance and satisfaction (Korte & Lin, 2010), being reluctant to come out may further disadvantage gay and lesbian employees. Therefore, it is crucial that organizations construct environments where gay and lesbian employees are ensured their identities are accepted and included.

The second theme, fear of losing credibility, encompassed participants' concerns about being viewed as competent, respectable employees. Participants expressed concern about being viewed as oddities or tokens because of their sexual orientation identities. They did not want to be known for their sexual orientation identities rather than credentials or skills in the workplace. Therefore, they chose to keep their sexual orientation identities hidden to ensure that their credibility as employees was established. This demonstrates the need for all employees to be conscious of the ways in which they communicate with people belonging to minority identity groups to avoid further marginalization. While it is important to recognize and be inclusive of others' identity characteristics, it is also important to be respectful. Then, gay and lesbian employees can feel that their accomplishments and skills are recognized instead of being overlooked because of their sexual orientation identities.

Participants also expressed concern regarding having control over information about their sexual orientation identities. Participants shared going

through a process in which they gauged coworkers' acceptance of gays and lesbians before disclosing their sexual orientation identities. However, they feared that those with whom they confide in might tell other coworkers, including those who may not respond positively. This is significant because it illuminates the need for employees to respect gay and lesbian employees' privacy when negotiating sexual orientation identity at work. Individuals need to be aware of the ways in which the information they pass along can impact others' organizational experiences. Since research suggests individuals with minority identities are often marginalized and disadvantaged (Yep, 2003), it should be left to gay and lesbian individuals to determine whom they will communicate aspects of their identities to until a space is created where all are treated equally.

The final barrier preventing participants from coming out at work involves the fear of losing one's job. While participants indicated explicitly that they were not concerned about losing their jobs, an analysis uncovered that this fear actually did prevent them from coming out. Interestingly, all participants were employed in a state where anti-discrimination laws include discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. However, participants indicated that they did not feel these laws were actually effective at mitigating discrimination, especially for the two participants working in elementary and secondary education. This illuminates a need for lawmakers and organizations to revisit the ways in which they go about protecting non-heterosexual employees from discrimination. The barriers identified in this study suggest that the content of organizational communication plays a vital role in

whether or not gay and lesbian employees come out at work, which is explored in the second research question.

The second research question attempted to uncover how informal organizational communication reinforces the barriers preventing gay and lesbian individuals from coming out at work. Ultimately, the analysis revealed that the four barriers were reinforced by heteronormativity, gay invisibility, and gossip. Most participants mentioned some form of heteronormativity playing out in their organizations, with "do you have a boyfriend/girlfriend" being the most common form in which it arose. The presence of heteronormativity in organizational communication reinforced participants' fears of being alienated at work. This is significant because by not recognizing the possibility of one having a same-sex partner, coworkers communicate to gay and lesbian individuals that their sexual orientation identities are not valid, further marginalizing them. Participants recognized that their coworkers may not have done this intentionally, but in doing so, reinforced the fear of experiencing difficulty developing and maintaining relationships at work because of their disruption of the norm. This demonstrates that the taken-for-granted presence of heteronormativity in informal workplace interactions can contribute to the factors preventing employees from being open about their sexual orientation identities, and thus, having to continue to engage in identity work.

Participants claimed having very few, if any, gay and lesbian coworkers, which made it difficult to judge others' levels of acceptance. Participants also claimed that there was virtually no mention of LGBTQ issues or identities at work.

Therefore, in some cases participants took others' silence as a cue to remain silent about their own sexual orientation identities. Unfortunately, the lack of dialogue regarding LGBTQ identities perpetuates the stigmatization of non-normative sexual orientation identities, and reinforces the barriers preventing gay and lesbian individuals from coming out at work. This theme, along with heteronormativity, illuminates the importance of using inclusive language in the workplace to encourage others to be open about all aspects of their identities in order to benefit individuals and organizations.

While participants reported limited conversation regarding sexual orientation identity, they did report overhearing gossip concerning non-work related information about other employees. Participants feared that their historically stigmatized sexual orientation identities would become a topic of workplace gossip once they came out. Furthermore, they feared this would affect their ability to develop and maintain relationships with coworkers. Workplace gossip can construct an unsupportive climate for gay and lesbian employees, who already often experience insecurities in the workplace regarding their sexual orientation identities because of inequalities in society (Collinson, 2013). Because of the positivity associated with being open in the workplace, organizations need to put effort into finding ways to mitigate destructive communication, like gossip, that reinforces barriers preventing individuals from being themselves at work.

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate the importance of constructing a workplace supportive workplace culture where gay and lesbian employees feel included, safe, comfortable, and respected. Research suggests that

having openly gay and lesbian employees is beneficial for organizational members and to the organization. Therefore, significant attention needs to be paid toward constructing a space where gay and lesbian employees want to be open about their identities. The first step toward creating a supportive culture for gay and lesbian employees is to eliminate factors preventing them from coming out. Now that this study has identified these barriers and the ways in which they are reinforced by organizational communication, we can work toward finding ways to eliminate them. This study suggests that the first step toward doing so is to be more conscious of how our language and communicative actions impact others in the workplace.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The findings of this study add to the literature on difference in organizations, which has often excluded sexual orientation as a category in the past (Rumens, 2008; Ward & Winstanley, 2005). Participants' responses suggest that having a minority sexual orientation significantly impacts one's organizational experience different than other categories of difference such as race or gender, as supported by research (Herek, 1996; Reimann, 2001; Woods, 1994; Clair, et al., 2005). Gay and lesbian individuals have to make decisions regarding whether or not to disclose their sexual orientation identities to certain coworkers, whereas race and gender are often more visible. This negotiation of identity often prompts gays and lesbians to withhold certain aspects of their personal lives or to engage in identity work until they decide to come out. While some of the findings support existing research on difference in organizations, this study helps to fill the gap in literature regarding



barriers to communicating sexual orientation identities at work by providing actual accounts from closeted gay and lesbian employees.

This study also adds to organizational communication literature regarding relationship development and maintenance. Research suggests that all new employees go through a socialization process at the beginning of employment (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). This is the process during which employees become integrated into the organization and involves not only learning information pertaining to the position, but also developing relationships with coworkers. Mahoney and Stasson (2005) claim that the degree to which one becomes integrated into the organization ultimately determines how successful one will be in their position.

The findings of this study demonstrate that gay and lesbian employees who do not feel comfortable expressing their sexual orientation identities at work may experience difficulty becoming integrated into the organization. If they withhold aspects of their personal lives, they may not be as effective at developing relationships with coworkers and thus, possibly influencing their overall success in the organization. This supports existing research, which states that open gay and lesbian employees experience more benefits than do closeted employees (Ward & Winstanely, 2003; Day & Schoendrade, 1997; Griffith & Hebl, 2002). This also suggests that openly gay and lesbian employees may experience more benefits because of their willingness to share personal information, ultimately influencing their ability to develop interpersonal relationships with coworkers. This prompts a discussion of ways in which organizations can work toward eliminating factors

further disadvantaging gay and lesbian employees. Therefore, the practical implications of this study are discussed.

### **Practical Implications**

The practical implications of this study are perhaps the most significant. This study provides individuals and organizations with accounts from gay and lesbian individuals detailing the reasons why they did not come out at work and how those reasons are often reinforced by organizational communication. Organizations can use the findings of this study to construct better workplaces. One way organizations can put these findings into action is by making employees more aware of issues gay and lesbian individuals face when entering a new organization. This can be accomplished by incorporating training on difference into existing training where employees are educated on the ways in which organizational communication impacts others, especially those belonging to minority identity groups. For example, organizations can demonstrate how asking "do you have a boyfriend" to a woman, especially a lesbian woman, could keep her from communicating aspects about her identity at work and could have negative implications for her and the organization. In order to mitigate the ways in which organizational communication negatively impacts the experiences of gay and lesbian individuals at work, employees should be introduced to alternate language in order to be more inclusive of minority identities. Organizations could then provide a more inclusive way of asking the same question, such as suggesting employees use "are you seeing anyone" instead or suggesting employees refrain from asking the question at all.

Another way organizations can use these findings is by showing employees how destructive workplace gossip can be, especially for gay and lesbian individuals. Organizations can educate employees about how gossip can construct a hostile, alienating workplace climate where gays and lesbians do not feel comfortable or safe coming out. Organizations should then encourage employees to speak openly of their support for the LGBTQ community in order to construct a space where gays and lesbians do not feel they have to keep their sexual orientation identities hidden.

The key to putting the findings of this study into action lies in understanding the ways in which communication can negatively impact the organizational experiences of gays and lesbians and shifting the ways in which we communicate with others to construct more inclusive workplaces. This requires being aware of how perpetuating societal norms can be detrimental to others' organizational experiences, and then resisting normative assumptions in order to accommodate and be inclusive of all identity groups. By educating employees about the ways in which communication impacts individuals' experiences and providing more inclusive ways of communicating, organizations can construct climates where gays and lesbians are more willing to come out. Then, gays and lesbians can reap the benefits associated with being open at work, ultimately contributing to more equality for gays and lesbians in a society where they have been historically disadvantaged.

### **Limitations**

While this study yielded satisfactory results, at least one major limitation was experienced during the data collection process. Since this study sought to gain

insight regarding barriers preventing communicating sexual orientation identity at work, the researcher attempted to recruit gay and lesbian individuals who were closeted or had been closeted at work within the last couple years. Finding participants with these qualifications using snowball sampling proved to be difficult, as being closeted at work limited the network of individuals who had knowledge of their sexual orientation identities. Being closeted at work may suggest that individuals are not as open about their sexual orientation identities socially as well. Therefore, it was difficult to access potential participants.

The initial goal was to interview ten participants. However, the researcher was only able to recruit seven. While conducting more interviews could have provided even more data to draw from during the analysis stage, seven interviews proved to be sufficient to develop themes regarding barriers preventing gay and lesbian individuals from coming out at work and understanding how these barriers are reinforced by organizational communication. However, it is important to note that all participants were white, and while some were women, having multiple marginalized social identities, such as being a black lesbian woman, could have resulted in additional explanations for remaining closeted at work. In the future, this limitation can be overcome by utilizing other resources such as LGBTQ support networks in order to recruit more diverse participants with similar qualifications.

### **Future Research**

In order to ensure gay and lesbian employees feel comfortable coming out at work and can experience the benefits associated with openness, future research should focus on exploring gay and lesbian employees' experiences in organizations

that have already attempted to create gay friendly climates. The findings of this study, along with the findings of the recommended study, could provide insight into what organizational practices actually work to construct a gay friendly workplace climate. Findings from these two studies could then provide a guide for other organizations to construct a more ideal workplace climate for gay and lesbian employees or to improve upon the efforts of organizations that have been working toward creating gay friendly climates.

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**Appendix A: Interview Schedule:**

Interview Guide

1. How do you identify yourself in terms of your sexual orientation?
2. How long did you keep your sexual orientation identity hidden at work?
3. How would you describe the climate regarding sexual orientation of the workplace in which you chose to keep your sexual orientation identity hidden?
4. Are you/were you aware of any anti-discrimination policies that included discrimination based on sexual orientation implemented by the organization?
5. Had you ever been questioned by co-workers about your sexual orientation before disclosing your sexual orientation identity in the workplace?
6. Has there ever been a time when a co-worker said something that made you feel self-conscious about your sexuality?
7. Has there ever been a time when a co-worker said something that made you feel it was unsafe to communicate your sexual orientation identity in the workplace?
8. How did being gay affect how you communicated at work before disclosing your sexual orientation?
9. Why did you decide to keep your sexual orientation identity hidden at work?
10. What would be the ideal work environment for a gay or lesbian employee?