Please note this is the authors' version and not the published version.

Please cite as:

Coming Out in the Workplace:

A Comparative Study Between Italy and England

Salvatore Monaco

Free University of Bozen (Italy)

salvatore.monaco@unibz.it

ORCID: 0000-0002-4218-6267

Alfonso Pezzella

Middlesex University London

A.Pezzella@mdx.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0002-2000-5760

Abstract

Introduction: The study aims to analyse the main characteristics and differences relating to the lived experiences of coming out in the workplace in two very different territorial contexts (Italy and England), looking at universities as a case study.

Method: 30 sexual and gender minority university teachers (15 from Italy and 15 from England), ranging from 29 to 56 years of age ($M = 41.66$; $SD = 10.13$), were recruited in 2019 to participate in a qualitative research study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed in line with the assumptions of the six-step thematic analysis approach.

Result: The propensity to come out in the workplace is mainly affected by legislative safeguards. However, policies and the regulatory framework alone are not enough. Results suggested that the cultural context and the working climate have an equally significant impact.

Conclusion: The stigma towards LGBT+ people cannot be eradicated overnight and changing cultural beliefs is a slow process that requires imaginative and creative methods to get students and the university community to interact with LGBT+ people.

Practical implications: Stimulating a bottom-up change within individual institutions can represent a possible strategy to activate a process of change and social inclusion towards the LGBT+ community with an echo on the wider environmental and cultural context.

Keywords: coming out; work; university; heteronormativity; LGBT+; Italy; England.

Introduction

Homosexual, bisexual and transgender men and women, plus anyone who identifies as non-binary or having a fluid sexual or gender identity is likely to have been the victim of negative discrimination and behaviour at some point, since they do not adhere to the widespread binary expectations of society in terms of identities, relationships, practices and culture (e.g. Habarth, 2015; Herek & McLemore, 2013; Hill, 2003; Scandurra et al., 2021; White Hughto et al., 2015). These attitudes could affect their paths of *coming out*. This latter term derives from the English expression 'coming out of the closet' and it has a double meaning.

The first meaning refers to the initial achievement of recognising one's own sexual identity. In other words, coming out primarily refers to concluding an inner process of discovery and arriving at an understanding of one's own sexual identity (e.g. Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Riley, 2010). During this process, a series of factors significantly affect the individual's awareness of their identity, such as personal experiences, personality traits and religious or political affiliations as well as the regulatory and territorial context.

Usually, once the aforementioned first step is complete and the individual has accepted their own sexuality, the so-called external coming out process can occur. In this second meaning, coming out consists of declaring one's own sexual identity to the outside world. The literature on the subject has pointed out that this type of statement is often accompanied by a series of conflicting feelings (e.g. Charbonnier & Graziani, 2016; Grov et al., 2006; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). In fact, it is for many a liberating act, wherein people present their authentic selves to the world (e.g. Allen, 2021; Goodrich & Ginicola, 2017; Pistella et al., 2020; Trahan & Goodrich, 2015), but, at the same time, external coming out could be also characterised by stress, anxiety and sometimes even shame regarding the fear of being judged, rejected or even the victim of psychological or physical violence.

An area of particular interest when talking about coming out concerns the sphere of work, since disclosing their sexual identity could be considered a career-altering decision that many other workers do not have to make (Ward & Winstanley, 2005). Although some studies have highlighted the potential benefits of coming out at work (e.g. Humphrey, 1999; Salter & Sasso, 2021; Wax, Coletti & Ogaz, 2018) – such as being able to build open relationships at the professional level or having the opportunity to educate colleagues about sexual minorities – other research has shown that situations in which workers prefer to omit this part of their identity are not so uncommon, for fear of negative evaluations or adverse reactions that have nothing to do with professional competence (Gray, 2013; Gusmano, 2008; Monaco, 2020).

The present study aims to analyse the main characteristics and differences relating to the coming out experience at work in two very different territorial contexts (Italy and England), looking at universities as a case study in order to offer the reader a comparative perspective of the phenomenon.

In the collective imagination, *university* is considered an inclusive place, a space of intercultural contact for the frequent exchange of knowledge and skills. Consequently, it is usually pictured as a place where there is great personal freedom and the respectful exchange of ideas as well as the acceptance of different identities (Iconis, 2010). Specifically referring to issues related to sexuality, universities often provide a forum for intergenerational LGBT+ solidarity through inclusive curricula and training on LGBT-specific issues (e.g. Baiocco et al., 2021; Domínguez-Martínez & Robles, 2019; Higgins et al., 2019; Pezzella et al., 2022; Scandurra et al., 2017; Sekoni et al., 2017). However, some research conducted within universities has found that negative attitudes towards differences persist at a number of campuses, confirming the idea that despite efforts, in some cases, education can still be ideological apparatus for perpetuating the status quo, in Althusser's sense (1970).

Therefore, universities are not always perceived nor experienced by LGBT+ people as safe spaces where they can be open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. (e.g. Arndt & De Bruin, 2006; Brown et al., 2004; Ellis, 2009; Monaco, 2018).

D'Augelli (1989) highlighted, for example, that many lesbian, gay and bisexual students had been victims of verbal abuse (27%) and threats (77%). Some ambiguities in this area have been highlighted also by Gates (2011), who revealed that not only have LGBT+ students experienced episodes of discrimination but also university staff. Thus, arguing about coming out in the university environment, the author underlined the benefits for teachers in terms of practices and relationship with scholars but also mentioned the possible risks related to homophobic responses from some students or backlash from colleagues.

According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, globally only about 40% of employees in 2019 declared that they had come out to their work colleagues due to the fear of hampering their career progression or experiencing discrimination and ridicule, potentially from students (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2020). Notably, there were substantial differences in attitudes to coming out at work from one European country to another.

Current Study

Background

The scenario just described is the background to the research presented in this current study. A group of scholars (composed of sociologists, psychologists and social workers) prepared a comparative research study between Italy and England to study the experiences of LGBT+ people in the university work context, with a particular focus on the propensity to come out at work and on their perceptions of the aftermath, in order to understand the impact of the normative, social and cultural context and the working climate.

The working group chose to compare Italy and England since they are very different from a cultural and regulatory point of view regarding LGBT+ issues. Indeed, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the struggle for the rights of sexual and gender minorities in England has gained more and more support, and they have strengthened. In 2015, research conducted by ILGA-Europe on LGBT+ rights awarded the United Kingdom (UK) the highest score in the whole of Europe, with 86% progress towards 'respect for human rights and full social equality' (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association [ILGA-Europe], 2016).

LGBT+ rights organisations and many large LGBT+ communities have been established across the UK, most notably in Brighton, which is widely regarded as Britain's unofficial gay capital, with other large communities in London, Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Edinburgh, all hosting a gay village and annual Gay Pride parties.

Meanwhile Italy lags behind other European countries; progress has been stalled on the basis of ideological and cultural issues (Corbisiero & Monaco, 2021b; Gusmeroli & Trappolin, 2019). LGBT+ people still face legal obstacles not encountered by non-LGBT citizens with regards to protection against discrimination and family and parenting rights (Monaco & Nothdurfter, 2021). For example, after 30 years of proposals in parliament, in 2016 the Italian Senate approved a law on civil unions that allowed same-sex couples to legally unite and have their rights respected. However, same-sex partners cannot adopt or resort to assisted reproduction techniques. Similarly, the Italian state evaluates the parental capacity of Italian parents who want to transition from one gender to another. Finally, even if in Italy, the legislative decree n. 216/2003 (regulation of transposition in Italy of the EU Directive 2000/78) contains the prohibition of discrimination in the workplace of LGBT+ people and the related sanctions, there is still no national law condemning homo- and

transphobic crimes. After a long parliamentary battle, in 2021 a bill proposed by the Democratic Party to punish (through ad hoc criminal regulations) hate crimes committed against LGBT+ subjects was rejected in the Senate.

For these gaps in Italy's legislation, the ILGA ranks Italy thirty-third out of 49 European countries when it comes to protecting LGBT+ people's rights (ILGA-Europe, 2022). As for the world of work, research conducted worldwide in 2018 revealed that in Western Europe, Italy has the second highest percentage of undeclared LGBT+ employees at work, equal to about 80% of the LGBT+ working population (BCG, 2018).

Material and Methods

Selection Criteria

Based on the aim of the study, participant recruitment criteria included (a) identifying as a member of a gender or sexual minority, (b) being 18 years of age or older and (c) working in one of the two sampled universities as a teacher.

Since there is no list of LGBT+ working people in universities, to recruit participants, the researchers used the university mailing list. They sent an email that included a brief description of the study, the research objectives and information about the research methods.

Ethical approval to collect data in England was granted by the Social Work and Mental Health Research Ethics Committee at Middlesex University London. With regards to Italy, the research was conducted by the Osservatorio LGBT, a research centre within the Department of Social Sciences of the University of Naples Federico II.

Interview

A semi-structured interview protocol made up of 40 open questions was developed in order to allow all participants to reflect openly on their subjective experience.

The study considered five main dimensions to investigate. The first related to the respondents' profiles. More specifically, the questions within the first section aimed to capture the socio-demographic profiles of the respondents. In particular, the questions concerned the respondents' age, residence, income, gender and sexual orientation. No questions were provided with pre-coded answers. The questions were structured so that each respondent could answer as freely as possible.

The second dimension centred on current and past working experiences. The specific set of questions on this topic was prepared to reconstruct the respondents' work history, up to their current work experience within the university, particularly focusing on interpersonal relationships with colleagues and superiors.

Assessing the working environment in consideration of their sexual identity was the main focus of the third section. In this part, the questions were designed to capture the respondents' perceptions of the working climate, including the level of inclusion and knowledge of LGBT+ issues. More in-depth specific questions on coming out were asked, relating to factors that encourage and hinder the decision to declare one's sexual identity, negative reactions from colleagues, problems encountered and resources to support coming out.

The next set of questions aimed to assess the respondents' mental health and well-being at work in relation to their sexual identity. The investigated aspects were individuated in order to focus on the one hand, on their sense of self and professionalism and, on the other, on their sense of well-being at work. In this fourth section, respondents were also asked to refer to specific incidents where they felt discomfort in relation to their sexual identity, situations where they felt discriminated against or threatened.

The closing part of the interview addressed intimate relationship. Keeping in mind the literature review on couple relationships, specific questions were posed, for example, how

many years have they been in a relationship and how this has affected their experience of coming out. They were also asked whether they had a supportive family environment in relation to their sexuality and if this affected their decision to come out or not at work. Lastly, respondents were whether disclosing or not disclosing their sexual identity had a positive or negative effect on their mental health and well-being.

Data Collection

The comparative nature of the research was a challenge for the study. Indeed, Italy and England are culturally, normatively and socially different. Consequently, even if it was decided to use the same tool and the same method of analysis to capture the phenomenon of coming out in the workspace, researchers had to consider different aspects in the research design.

For example, in Italy the reduced social inclusion and visibility of the LGBT+ community makes the study of sexuality a very sensitive field of research, whereas in countries like England research is more common and widespread. This is one of the reason why the researchers proceeded with different data collection methods.

In England, the research group administered the interviews face-to-face as participants were willing to meet in person. On the contrary, in Italy (given the low initial adhesion rate), the research group decided not to carry out face-to-face interviews to maximise confidentiality and also in order to intercept people who had not come out explicitly. Therefore, the Italian interviews were conducted online.

Participants

A total of 30 university teachers (15 living in Italy and 15 living in England) decided to

voluntarily join the research. The average age of the interviewees was 41.66 years ($SD =$

10.13) (within a range between 29 and 57 years). As reported in Table 1, half of the

participants ($n = 15$) were cisgender men, followed by 12 cisgender women. Looking at their

provenance, it is possible to note that the cisgender women were mainly from England ($n =$

10), while the respondent cisgender men were mainly Italian ($n = 11$). In the sample there

were also a non-binary person (from England) and two transgender respondents (from Italy).

The transgender man was the only participant to define his own sexual orientation as

heterosexual. Most of the sample consisted of people who described their orientation as

homosexual ($n = 22$), while seven participants identified as bisexual.

Table 1

Main participants' socio-demographic characteristics

Characteristic	No. (Italy)	No. (England)	No. (Total)
Gender			
Cisgender woman	2	10	12
Transgender woman	1		1
Cisgender man	11	4	15
Transgender man	1		1
Non-binary		1	1
Sexual orientation			
Bisexual	4	3	7
Homosexual	10	12	22
Heterosexual	1		1
Age group			
20–30	2	3	5
31–40	1		1
41–50	7	8	15
51–60	5	4	9
Have come out at work			
Yes	5	12	17
No	10	3	13
Currently in a relationship			
Yes	7	11	18

No	8	4	12

Analytic Procedure

The qualitative material collected was analysed in line with the assumptions of the six-step thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis can be defined as an effective method to identify, organise and offer insights on different elements present in qualitative data (Nikitas et al., 2018). Specifically, the analysis procedure included 1) the full interview transcript, 2) an open coding of the textual material, 3) the research of the main themes starting from a coding activity, 4) a revision and reorganisation of the themes, 5) a definition of the themes and 6) the drafting of the analysis, making sure to associate each theme with the textual citations.

As Nikitas et al. (2019) point out, it is important to emphasise that the themes were not constructed to justify a wealth of textual evidence but, instead, to identify structures within the data that had an explanatory capacity.

To ensure reliability and avoid bias, two researchers from each country proceeded independently with the data analysis. Subsequently, in each country they compared and synthesised their independent coding analyses. Finally, the four researchers from Italy and England met to jointly analyse the data and produce a unique thematic analysis. During this final synthesis phase, the researchers reached a consensus on 90% of the themes.

The interconnection with history, territorial, regulatory and cultural contexts and with the implications these contexts have on people's lives were elements the analysis considered. In this sense, to give a better understanding of coming out while working at a university in a comparative way, quantitative data and context information integrated the overall picture of the phenomenon in order to delineate its full context.

Findings

Even though most of the respondents described coming out as one of the most subjectively

relevant acts within the process of building their own identity (27 out of 30), the data analysis

revealed a disparate distribution of coming out at work between Italian and English teachers.

More specially, 12 out of the 15 people living in England had come out at their university,

while the number of respondents living in Italy who had come out to their colleagues was

lower (five out of 15).

From the thematic analysis of the data (see Table 2), four main dimensions emerged

that allow a better understanding of this numerical disparity and other aspects. The four

dimensions are 1) fears about coming out at work, 2) push factors for coming out, 3)

relationships with colleagues and 4) positive effects of coming out at work.

Table 2

Summary scheme of the thematic analysis

Theme	Synthesis	No. of quotations (Italy)	No. of quotations (England)	No. of quotations (Total)
1	Fears about coming out at work			
	Worries that coming out may have consequences on one's career	20	5	25
2	Push factors for coming out			
	Awareness of the existence of elements that can support the coming out process	6	15	21
3	Relationships with colleagues			
	Influence of colleagues and their judgement on the predisposition to reveal one's sexual identity in the workplace	14	16	30
4	Positive effects of coming out at work			

Benefits and opportunities that can follow coming out at work	4	13	17

Fears about Coming Out at Work

Regarding the first theme, the fear of coming out at work was expressed much more by the

participants living in Italy. In particular, they stressed that the lack of an inclusive regulatory

and political framework for sexual and gender minorities is a major concern for them:

> In Italy, people think that saying gay or lesbian to a person as an insult is acceptable.
>
> Sometimes, I hear my colleagues joking with each other using these terms without
>
> realising how offensive it can be. However, I think this is understandable, as the law
>
> does not recognise homophobia as a punishable crime. (IT4, gay man, Italy)
>
> Few people are aware of my sexuality. I don't want openly to talk about it because of
>
> the various negative comments I hear in everyday life at the university but also in
>
> other public places. Unfortunately, there is still a lot of ignorance about LGBT issues,
>
> and politics is not helping us first. (IT9, lesbian woman, Italy)
>
> Based on these experiences, some Italian teachers fear that their eventual coming out

could have negative repercussions on their working life.

> My colleagues and my superiors don't know I'm gay. I don't feel like declaring my
>
> sexual orientation openly. I don't know how they might react and, in particular, if my
>
> coming out could have negative consequences on my career. In Italy, there are no
>
> laws that could protect me from such discrimination. When in doubt, I prefer to avoid
>
> talking about these things. (IT14, gay man, Italy)
>
> The main concerns regarding negative consequences of discrimination included the

fear of losing their job or having repercussions on their career, of being a victim of bullying

or simply of appearing different in the eyes of others. This has led to 10 out of the 15 Italian respondents deciding against coming out at their university.

Push Factors for Coming Out

The situation in England is quite different. The English teachers declared that they feel more at peace about coming out, given that they feel protected by current legislation. In effect, anti-discrimination protections regarding sexual identity have existed since 1999.

In addition, the Equality Act 2010 received royal assent on 8 April 2010 to unify the complex and numerous series of acts and regulations that formed the basis of the UK's antidiscrimination law, including the Equal Pay Act 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, the Race Relations Act 1976, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and other laws that protected against employment discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, sexual orientation and age.

These kind of legal protections have provided people with a series of *vaccines* – a form of inoculation against discrimination (Pezzella, 2018).

Indeed, the participants reported that they had fought all their lives for their place in society and experienced stigma in different contexts, but knowing they were protected by the law somehow led them to no longer worry about disclosing their sexual identity:

I don't care what other people think about me anymore ... This is who I am. (EN1, gay man, England)

In addition, some respondents pointed out that in recent years, coming out at work was encouraged by the fact that many contexts implemented policies aimed at enhancing diversity in the workplace, so much so that diversity management policies have been placed front and centre in many working organisations (e.g. Colgan, 2011; Corbisiero & Monaco, 2021a; Hossain et al, 2020; Ng & Rumens, 2017).

Relationships with Colleagues

The third theme to emerge from the analysis of the interviews concerned relationships with colleagues and those relationships' influence on people's coming out processes.

In particular, regardless of the country of origin, the respondents stated that the corporate climate and the level of openness of their colleagues towards sexual and gender minorities was a factor that significantly affected their decision to come out.

In this sense, the research revealed that in addition to the regulatory framework, the cultural and working climate can also affect the decision to come out at university. For example, even if the regulatory framework is perceived as hostile, some Italian workers declared that they felt free to come out to colleagues who had shown themselves well-disposed and welcoming to them.

On the contrary, both in Italy and in England, many teachers claimed that they arbitrarily decided not to come out because they felt that their colleagues were close-minded, ignorant or prejudiced regarding LGBT issues.

> Colleagues in the office think I am straight, so they are constantly talking about girlfriends and making comments on those gay boys who can't get a bird. (EN2, gay man, England)

> I heard two female colleagues talking to each other, and they were talking about masculinity and one of them said 'there are no real men around here', and they both started to laugh. (EN3, bisexual man, England)

> My colleagues are anchored to a very stereotypical view of reality. They really have a lot of prejudices about bisexual people. They do not know about the issue and therefore think that we are continually obsessed with sex or, even worse, that our

> sexual orientation is confused or promiscuous. How could I ever come out to them? (IT5, bisexual woman, Italy)

Thus, the research data suggests that coming out does not depend only on an internal motivation but is influenced by the individual's context and culture. For some respondents, their sexual identity is still a sensitive issue, which cannot be addressed with anyone. Openly exposing oneself, one's identity and preferences therefore still seems to be a privilege that few can enjoy.

Positive Effects of Coming Out at Work

The last theme concerned the consequences of coming out. Research data shows that people who reported coming out experienced a range of benefits, most notably feeling free to talk about themselves and their private life, being more self-expressive and authentic.

Furthermore, a consideration that emerged exclusively from the analysis of the interviews of participants living in England concerned the unexpected role assumed by the those who had come out as role models and moral supports to other LGBT+ colleagues and even students:

> ... I think they definitely need role models ... I think if there isn't an LGBT+ society, I would be quite a disappointment ... some people need that, they need to join it and they need to have support. (EN4, lesbian woman, England)

> In my career, LGBT+ students came to those who were LGBT+, because they felt it was important that students knew that, you know, members of staff were gay, and it was a bit of 'help' for them to know who to go and have someone to talk to for support of interests … but I haven't done that here yet. (EN5, lesbian woman, England)

Even if it is an unforeseen consequence of coming out at work, being a point of reference for people who have not (yet) come out makes the action a gesture of solidarity and an opportunity to inform others, to help those struggling with their sexual identity and to teach people who are not part or are ignorant of the LGBT+ community a different point of view.

Discussion

From this comparative study conducted on coming out at the university, it is possible to adduce at least two considerations: first, it is abundantly evident that the propensity to come out is largely affected by the existence of legislative safeguards. The most successful and positive experiences of coming out were reported by respondents living in England, where LGBT+ rights are currently among the most advanced in Europe. In England, LGBT+ citizens have most of the same legal rights as non-LGBT+ citizens, and the UK provides one of the highest degrees of liberty in the world for its LGBT+ communities. Consequently, since England has implemented several LGBT+ liberal reforms, LGBT+ workers feel more comfortable coming out in the workplace.

Since attitudes towards and regulations protecting LGBT+ people differ so greatly from country to country (ILGA, 2022), it is safe to say that the propensity to come out or not in the workplace remains something that cannot be taken for granted and varies according to the context (Kade, 2021; Rosati et al., 2020; Shen, 2011; Wang, 2017).

The research also highlights that policies and regulatory frameworks alone are not enough. In fact, the cultural context and the working climate also have an important impact on the decision of whether to disclose one's sexual identity or not (Brewster et al., 2012). On this topic, for example, participants living in Italy who came out declared that they had exposed themselves because they could count on their colleagues' support and understanding, despite the regulatory gap.

In England, on the contrary, for five of the respondents, legal protections were not considered sufficient to encourage coming out due to the lack of knowledge and stigma towards sexual and gender minorities expressed by colleagues and students. Despite the progression in society in relation to LGBT+ rights and responsibilities and the level of education, promotion and awareness of the same, many of the younger generations are still uncomfortable with or unsure about gender and sexual minorities (Risman, 2018; Sharpe, 2002).

On the basis of the empirical evidence, two paths to be implemented appear to be necessary: the first concerns the creation of inclusive work environments for sexual and gender minorities. In other words, it would be desirable for the university to provide training courses, awareness and workshops regarding the recognition and respect of diversity aimed at teachers, students and administrative employees. To date in England, many employers are slowly starting to address sexuality and LGBT+ needs by making progress in managing diversity in the workplace. Several companies strive for national recognition as 'champions of diversity' and to top Stonewall's workplace equality index, an annual guide to the UK's 100 most gay-friendly employers. At the same time, some companies in the UK have deregistered from Stonewall's index, demonstrating that the development of inclusion and diversity programmes is a nonlinear process and is still in progress.

From this perspective, awareness-raising seminars and educational material for staff and students could also be useful tools to prevent prejudice and challenge personal beliefs and stereotypes, beyond the regulatory context. The same goes for Italy. While waiting for new laws to be implemented to promote greater citizenship rights for LGBT+ people, social and work contexts can make a difference, promoting social inclusion and justice in everyday and working life.

Second, in both territories, universities should strive to guarantee their LGBT+ employees the peace of mind of being able to express themselves freely through internal policies that indicate what to do in the event of discrimination. In this sense, LGBT+ people need to feel confident in challenging or reporting discriminatory behaviour towards their gender or sexual identity.

Social, Cultural and Clinical Significance

Although the issue of diversity management is gaining traction on a large scale in many companies, the results of this comparative study show that in the university context LGBT+ people do not always feel protected.

These results fit with various core themes found in other coming out literature that has detected a wide range of concerns about the possibility of social disapproval, hurting others, losing friendships or colleagues' esteem.

However, a proportion of the participants reported increased positive feelings after they came out. This finding aligns with studies that underline the connection between sexual identity disclosure and feeling more authentic, with consequential a series of benefits on one's well-being as a worker and on one's mental health (Kranz & Pierrard, 2018; Legate et al., 2012; Stevens, 2004). Thus, these findings contribute to a growing body of literature that suggests that LGBT+ people may experience social and mental health benefits as a result of their experiences of coming out to others.

So that the positive effects of coming out can also affect the university working environment on the empirical level, a possible strategy to be implemented could be to replicate the corporate approach in the academic setting, whereby university organisations actively make efforts to engage in recruiting for equality and monitoring diversity within the composition of their workforce. In fact, most organisations already collect their employees' demographic data, such as ethnicity, age, gender and disability. Monitoring sexual orientation

can help organisations identify, address and prevent discrimination against LGBT+ staff, which can affect job performance and productivity (Stonewall, 2021).

Regardless of monitoring actions, the research underlines that it is essential for organisations to support LGBT+ employees and foster a welcoming working environment. The stigma towards LGBT+ people cannot be eradicated overnight, and changing cultural beliefs is a slow process that requires imaginative and creative methods to get students and the wider community involved in getting to know LGBT+ people.

Possible further implications of the above results can include other possible paths. For example, universities should promote exposure to LGBT+ people through seminars, training and awareness campaigns. These kinds of activities, both for professionals and students, could facilitate this process (Pezzella, 2018). Additionally, universities should also work to improve LGBT+ self-acceptance, by facilitating activities aimed at enhancing contact among LGBT+ people in order to reduce feelings of loneliness and enhance the well-being of people who could suffer from internalised homophobia, feeling closeted, isolation and sexual unhappiness.

These integrated actions can make the advances recorded at the regulatory level have an empirical return in the context of everyday life. Stimulating a bottom-up change within individual institutions and workplaces can represent a possible strategy to activate a process of change and social inclusion towards the LGBT+ community with an echo on the wider environmental and cultural context. This could be a useful tool to deconstruct heteronormative ideas at a broader level, such as considering only cisgender heterosexual relationships as normative (e.g. Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Gilbert, 2009; Martino, 2000; Myers & Raymond, 2010; Tolman, 2006). In this sense, heteronormativity can be defined as a social construct inextricably linked to the way in which male hegemony is

locally constructed and widespread. Thus, its level of pervasion and depth varies from one territorial context to another.

According to research on publicly communicating one's sexual identity, it is important to work to fight heteronormativity, since it can affect also the coming out process (e.g. Cassar & Grima Sultana, 2016; Gerena, 2021; Mosher, 2001).

Limitations

The authors acknowledge that the present comparative study has its limitations. Although it was intended to critically analyse the coming out process of LGBT+ people, the group of respondents who took part in the study does not cover the entire spectrum of identities contained in the acronym.

In this sense, future perspectives could analyse the coming out process for other sexual orientations (such as pansexual and/or asexual).

However, the present study offers a snapshot view of the current cultural and institutional differences affecting the ability to come out within university settings. Moreover, it should be specified that more research is needed in this field. In fact, case studies on these phenomena are necessary to help political decision makers and to devise and implement policy guidelines within specific working realities.

Implicitly, further research on these issues may also prove useful to organisations in terms of staff and student retention, effective communication of equality policy information, legal compliance and institutional reputation.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

Allen, J. L. (2021). The typology and content of parent–gay son communication about sexual identity: A qualitative content analysis. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, *33*(4), 533–560.

Althusser, L. (1970). *Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'état (Notes pour une recherche).* [Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation)]. La Pensée.

Arndt, M., & De Bruin, G. (2006). Attitudes Toward lesbians and gay men relations with gender, race and religion among university students. *Psychology in Society*, *33*, 16–30.

Baiocco, R., Pezzella, A., Pistella, J., Kouta, C., Rousou, E., Rocamora-Perez, P., et al. (2021). LGBT+ training needs for health and social care professionals: A cross-cultural comparison among seven European countries. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, *19*(1), 22–36.

BCG (2019). *Out at work*. The Boston Consulting Group.

Bilodeau, B. L., & Renn, K. A. (2005). Analysis of LGBT identity development models and implications for practice. *New Directions for Student Services*, *111*, 25–39.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.

Brewster, M., Velez, B., De Blaere, C., & Moradi, B. (2012). Transgender individuals' workplace experiences: The applicability of sexual minority measures and models. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, *59*(1), 60–70.

Brown, R., Clarke, B., Gortmaker, V., & Robinson-Keilig, R. (2004). Assessing the campus climate for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students using a multiple perspectives approach. *Journal of College Student Development*, *45*(1), 8–26.

Cassar, J., & Grima Sultana, M. (2016). Sex is a minor thing: Parents of gay sons negotiating the social influences of coming out. *Sexuality & Culture*, *20*(4), 987–1002.

Charbonnier, E., & Graziani, P. (2016). The stress associated with the coming out process in the young adult population. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, *20*(4), 319–328.

Colgan, F. (2011). Equality, diversity and corporate responsibility: Sexual orientation and diversity management in the UK private sector. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, *30*(8), 719–734.

Connell, R., & Messerschmidt, J. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, *19*, 829–859.

Corbisiero, F., & Monaco, S. (2021a). *Analisi e contrasto delle discriminazioni sociali. indagine sociologica in un'area del Napoletano* [Analysis and contrast of social discrimination. sociological survey in a Neapolitan area]. Franco Angeli.

Corbisiero, F., & Monaco S. (2021b). *Omosessuali contemporanei. identità, culture, spazi LGBT+* [Contemporary homosexual people. LGBT+ identities, cultures, spaces]. Franco Angeli.

D'Augelli, A. R. (1989). Lesbians' and gay men's experiences of discrimination and harassment in a university community. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *17*, 317–321.

Domínguez-Martínez, T., & Robles, R. (2019). Preventing transphobic bullying and promoting inclusive educational environments: Literature review and implementing recommendations. *Archives of Medical Research*, *50*(8), 543–555.

Ellis, S. J. (2009). Diversity and inclusivity at university: A survey of the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) students in the UK. *Higher Education*, *57*(6), 723–739.

European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA]. (2020). *European LGBTI survey 2020*. Publications Office of the European Union.

Gates, G. J. (2011). How Many People are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender?. The Williams Institute.

Gerena, C. E. (2021). The coming out experience of Latino gay men. *Families in Society*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/10443894211039836

Gilbert, M. A. (2009). Defeating bigenderism: Changing gender assumptions in the twenty-first century. *Hypatia*, *24*(3), 93–112.

Goodrich, K. M. & Ginicola, M. M. (2017). Identity development, coming out, and family adjustment. In M. M. Ginicola, C. Smith, & J. M. Filmore, (Eds.) *Affirmative counseling with LGBTQI+ people* (pp. 61–73). John Wiley & Sons.

Gray, E. M. (2013). Coming out as a lesbian, gay or bisexual teacher: Negotiating private and professional worlds. *Sex Education*, *13*(6), 702–714.

Grov, C., Bimbi, D. S., Nanin J. E., & Parsons J. T. (2006). Race, ethnicity, gender and generational factors associated with the coming-out process among gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals. *The Journal of Sex Research*, *43*(2), 115–121.

Gusmano, B. (2008). Coming out or not? How non-heterosexual people manage their sexual identity at work. *Journal of Workplace Rights*, *13*(4), 473–496.

Gusmeroli, P., & Trappolin L. (2019). *Raccontare l'omofobia in Italia. Genesi e sviluppi di una parola chiave* [Telling homophobia in Italy. Genesis and development of a keyword]. Rosenberg & Sellier.

Habarth, J. M. (2015). Development of the heteronormative attitudes and beliefs scale. *Psychology & Sexuality*, *6*(2), 166–188.

Herek, G. M., & McLemore, K. A. (2013). Sexual prejudice. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *64*(1), 309–333.

Higgins, A., Downes, C., Sheaf, G., Bus, E., Connell, S., Hafford- Letchfield, T., & Urek, M. (2019). Pedagogical principles and methods underpinning education of health and social care practitioners on experiences and needs of older LGBT+ people: Findings from a systematic review. *Nurse Education in Practice*, *40*, 102625.

Hill, D. B. (2003). Genderism, transphobia, and gender bashing: A framework for interpreting anti-transgender violence. In B. C. Wallace, & R. T. Carter (Eds.) *Understanding and dealing with violence: A multicultural approach* (pp. 113–136). Sage.

Hossain, M., Atif, M., Ahmed, A., & Mia, L. (2020). Do LGBT workplace diversity policies create value for firms?. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *167*(4), 775–791.

Humphrey J. C. (1999). Organizing sexualities, organized inequalities: Lesbians and gay men in public service occupations. *Gender, Work and Organization*, *6*(3), 134–151.

Iconis, R. (2010). Reducing homophobia within the college community. *Contemporary Issues in Educational Research*, *3*, 67–70.

International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association [ILGA]. (2022). *Annual review 2021*. International Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans and Intersex Association.

International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association-Europe [ILGA-Europe]. (2016). *Rainbow Europe 2015*. International Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans and Intersex Association.

International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association-Europe [ILGA-Europe]. (2022). *Rainbow Europe 2021*. International Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans and Intersex Association.

Kade, T. (2021). 'Hey, by the way, I'm transgender': transgender disclosures as coming out stories in social contexts among trans men. *Socius*, *7*, 1–12.

Kranz, D., & Pierrard, M. (2018). Beyond coming out: Relations between lesbian and gay identity formation and psychosocial well-being in young and middle adulthood. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, *5*(3), 283.

Legate, N., Ryan, R. M., & Weinstein, N. (2012). Is coming out always a 'good thing'? Exploring the relations of autonomy support, outness, and wellness for lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. *Social Psychological & Personality Science*, *3*, 145–152.

Martino, W. (2000). Policing masculinities: Investigating the tole of homophobia and heteronormativity in the lives of adolescent school boys. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, *8*(2), 213–236.

Monaco, S. (2018). Alla corte di Federico II. conoscenze e percezioni dei giovani universitari su HIV e AIDS [At the court of Frederick II. young university students' knowledge and perceptions of HIV and AIDS]. In F. Corbisiero, & G. F. Ranisio (Eds.) *From curing to caring. quality of life and longevity in patients with HIV in Italy* (pp. 165–178). PM Edizioni.

Monaco, S. (2020). Being bisexual in contemporary Italy: Between stigma and desire of visibility. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, *5/6*, 673–688.

Monaco, S., & Nothdurfter, U. (2021). Discovered, made visible, constructed, and left out: LGBT+ Parenting in the Italian sociological debate. *Journal of Family Studies*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2021.1935299

Mosher, C. M. (2001). The social implications of sexual identity formation and the coming-out process: A review of the theoretical and empirical literature. *The Family Journal*, *9*(2), 164–173.

Myers, K., & Raymond, L. (2010). Elementary school girls and heteronormativity. *Gender & Society*, *24*(2), 167–188.

Ng, E., & Rumens, N. (2017). Diversity and inclusion for LGBT workers: Current issues and new horizons for research. *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences*, *34*(2), 109–120.

Nikitas, A., Avineri, E., & Parkhurst, G. (2018). Understanding the public acceptability of road pricing and the roles of older age, social norms, pro-social values and trust for urban policy-making: The case of Bristol. *Cities*, *79*, 78-91.

Nikitas, A., Wang, J. Y. T., & Knamiller, C. (2019). Exploring parental perceptions about school travel and walking school buses: A thematic analysis approach. *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, *124*, 468–487.

Pezzella, A. (2018) 'Out' and about at work: Institutionalised heteronormativity on relationships and employment. In P. Dunk-West, & T. Hafford-Letchfield (Eds.) *Sexuality, sexual and gender identities and intimacy research in social work and social care: A lifecourse epistemology* (pp. 101–120). Routledge.

Pezzella, A., Pistella, J., Baiocco, R., Kouta, C., Rocamora-Perez, P., Nielsen, D., Nielsen, D., Kuckert-Wöstheinrich, A., Dudau, V., & Papadopoulos, I. (2022). IENE 9 project: Developing a culturally competent and compassionate LGBT+ curriculum in health and social care education. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2021.2012733

Pistella, J., Rosati, F., Ioverno, S., Girelli, L., Laghi, F., Lucidi, F., & Baiocco, R. (2020). Coming out in family and sports-related contexts among young Italian gay and lesbian athletes: The mediation effect of the 'don't ask, don't tell' attitude. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *29*(1), 208–216.

Riley, B. H. (2010). GLB adolescent's coming out. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Nursing*, *23*(1), 3–10.

Risman, B. J. (2018). *Where the millennials will take us: A new generation wrestles with the gender structure*. Oxford University Press.

Rosati, F., Pistella, J., Nappa, M. R., & Baiocco, R. (2020). The coming-out process in family, social, and religious contexts among young, middle, and older Italian LGBQ+ adults. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*, 1–13.

Salter, N. P., & Sasso, T. (2021). The positive experiences associated with coming out at work. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, *41*(2), 224–240.

Savin-Williams, R. C., & Ream, G. L. (2003). Sex variations in the disclosure to parents of same-sex attractions. *Journal of Family Psychology, 17*(3), 429–438.

Scandurra, C., Monaco, S., Dolce, P., & Nothdurfter, U. (2021) Heteronormativity in Italy: Psychometric characteristics of the Italian version of the heteronormative attitudes and beliefs scale. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, *18*, 637–652.

Scandurra, C., Picariello, S., Valerio, P., & Amodeo A. L. (2017). Sexism, homophobia and transphobia in a sample of Italian pre-service teachers: The role of sociodemographic features. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, *43*(2), 245–261.

Sharpe, S. (2002). 'It's just hard to come to terms with': Young people's views on homosexuality. *Sex Education*, *2*(3), 263–277.

Shen, J. (2011). Developing the concept of socially responsible international human resource management. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *22*(6), 1352–1363.

Sekoni, A. O., Gale, N. K., Manga-Atangana, B., Bhadhuri, A., & Jolly, K. (2017). The effects of educational curricula and training on LGBT-specific health issues for healthcare students and professionals: a mixed-method systematic review. *Journal of the International AIDS Society*, *20*(1), 21624.

Stevens, R. A. (2004). Understanding gay identity development within the college environment. *Journal of College Student Development*, *45*, 185–206.

Stonewall (2021). *Workplace equality index 2020*. Stonewall.

Tolman, D. L. (2006). In a different position: Conceptualizing female adolescent sexuality development within compulsory heterosexuality. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, *112*, 71–89.

Trahan, D. P., & Goodrich, K. M. (2015). 'You think you know me, but you have no idea': Dynamics in African American families following a son's or daughter's disclosure as LGBT. *The Family Journal*, *23*(2), 147–157.

Wang, P. H. (2017). Out of the country, out of the closet: Coming out stories in cross-cultural contexts. *Southern Journal of Linguistics*, *41*(2), 173–198.

Ward, J., & Winstanley, D. (2005). Coming out at work: Performativity and the recognition and renegotiation of identity. *The Sociological Review*, *53*(3), 447–475.

Wax, A., Coletti, K. K., & Ogaz, J. W. (2018). The benefit of full disclosure: A meta-analysis of the implications of coming out at work. *Organizational Psychology Review*, *8*(1), 3–30.

White Hughto, J. M., Reisner, S. R., & Pachankis, J. (2015). Transgender stigma and health: A critical review of stigma determinants, mechanisms, and interventions. *Social Science & Medicine*, *147*, 222–231.