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# Sexual orientation discrimination: Exploring the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual employees in Turkey

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## Abstract

This article explores workplace sexual orientation discrimination in the context of Turkey, a developing country displaying a unique set of gendered intersectionalities permeating the employment sphere. Using a multifarious theoretical backdrop steeped in a combinatorial analytical approach sustained by post-structural constructs, queer theory and relational perspectives, this study locates homophobic practices at work in terms of their variegated determinants, instantiations and possibilities for transformation. Open-ended, unstructured, probing interviews support the exploratory effort in gaining an authentic sense of meaning as evidenced by personal experience, and conditioned by contextual detail in the working lives of 20 lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals. This allows for the emergence of an account of how sexual orientation discrimination is diffused through a plethora of work environments in Turkey and at what particular ideational levels of signification emergent processes may combat such discriminatory practices.

## Keywords

critical management studies, human resource management, gender in organizations, identity, job/employee attitudes, masculinities, organizational, sexual orientation, work environment

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## Introduction

Early research in the area of sexual orientation discrimination at the workplace focused on the fundamental problem of virulent homophobia that manifested itself through bullying and physical violence perpetrated by colleagues, as well as summary termination decisions made by corporate and non-corporate employers in the event of identity disclosure by sexual minorities (Levine and Leonard, 1984; Palmer, 1993; Snape et al., 1994; Woods and Lucas, 1993). This initial research programme had several purposes. First, the academic as well as the practitioner publics would be informed that lesbian, gay and bisexual employees constituted a sizeable portion of the workforce, even though most of them, by necessity, had to remain in the closet. Second, the career disadvantages of non-heterosexual employees would be delineated with respect to the personal damages suffered in material and psychological terms. Finally, inequities experienced by lesbian, gay and bisexual staff would be shown to cause a negative work culture that stifled general organizational performance. Overall, this initial discursive formation was a critical response to an employment context lacking in clear and concrete equality standards capable of protecting sexual minorities.

However, most of Europe and North America have witnessed the emergence of relatively greater respect for sexual orientation diversity, both from the standpoints of the commercial and government organizational ethos and from the perspective of established legal safeguards. There are now anti-discriminatory rules supportive of lesbian, gay and bisexual workers; numerous corporations have developed their own diversity mission statements that acknowledge and protect sexual orientation difference as a basis of equality policy, and activist groupings within private and public organizations serve as watchdogs in the fight against exclusionary practices. Critically, a significant proportion of sexual minorities are now increasingly more likely to disclose their sexual orientation in the office, on the factory or shop floor (Trau and Hartel, 2007), creating a more transparent work environment where latent discriminatory actions can be identified more readily and unfair practices do not stand unchallenged. Therefore, with regard to sexual orientation diversity, the current debate in the advanced industrial economies now mostly pivots around the question of putting policy into practice and getting the best out of the legal-economic system in order to ensure the full equality of all sexual minorities in the workplace (Colgan et al., 2007).

Theoretically, as well as empirically, this recently crystallized central question forms a principal feature of a second-wave corpus of work whose research agenda is concerned with identifying effective strategies to meet the varied challenges faced by lesbian, gay and bisexual employees in an ostensibly more inclusive era (Button, 2001; Clair et al., 2005; Day and Greene, 2008; Monro, 2007; Skidmore, 2004). This literature prioritizes the needs for: 1) identifying current passive aggressive sources and types of unequal treatment as regards sexual minorities; 2) countervailing such inequalities through legal, institutional and group-level empowerment processes; and 3) developing practical frameworks of analysis in assessing the quality, extent and evolution of sexual orientation diversity within the workplace.

To be sure, the foregoing perspectives should not be taken to suggest that North American or Western European countries form a coherent object of study that exhibits uniform trends of improved rights for lesbian, gay and bisexual workers. The USA, for instance, has only recently repealed regulations that exclude sexual minorities from military employment through a codified practice known as the ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ (DADT) policy, and US laws still preclude federal recognition of partner benefits for sexual minorities on the basis of the Defence of Marriage Act. However, this situation is constantly challenged from within and outside the political and business spheres. Furthermore, although there is no national anti-discrimination legislation protecting the employment rights of sexual minorities, 20 states and the District of Columbia have passed laws securing equal protection at the workplace (Human Rights Campaign, 2009). In fact, by 2008 approximately 85 percent of the Fortune 500 companies and 94 of the Fortune 100 companies had formally incorporated the principle of sexual orientation equality into their company HR policies (Human Rights Campaign, 2009). This promising situation is even more pervasively apparent in the European Union context, where the majority of member states have anti-discriminatory legislation designed to safeguard gay, lesbian and bisexual employee rights.

To be sure, despite such improvements, people of different sexual orientations often receive unequal pay scales, face difficulties in securing career advancement and their performance is often subject to greater scrutiny and review, indicating that there may still remain hidden mechanisms of prejudice responsible for differential career growth trajectories experienced by lesbian/gay/bisexual versus heterosexual workers (Badgett and Frank, 2007; Berg and Lien, 2002; Meulders et al., 2004). Moreover, as Colgan and colleagues (2007) indicate, legal protections do not always fully eradicate encounters with surreptitious, if not full-blown, homophobia in the way gay, lesbian and bisexual workers are treated by their colleagues. For instance, instead of open homophobic attack through verbal or physical abuse, harassers make seemingly benign jokes or generalized, mildly disparaging statements about homosexual orientation that may have pernicious underlying intent.

Whether we consider the first-wave research programme (where blatant abuse of lesbian, gay and bisexual workers formed the central issue in question), or the second-wave research agenda (where lesbian, gay and bisexual employees have recognition in the public sphere and, as such, the research focuses on how well these rights are instantiated in practice), the literature on sexual orientation discrimination at work is demarcated around the conventional geographic borders of North America and Europe. Perhaps in line with their traditional portrayal as the ‘other’, regions such as Africa, Asia and the Middle East have so far received scant conceptual or empirical attention in regard to how lesbian, gay and bisexual workers fare in terms of the various challenges they face as they pursue their careers. This gives the literature on workplace sexual orientation discrimination an incompleteness that must be remedied, as both academics and practitioners have an essential interest in limning the full range of experiences sexual minorities encounter in the employment sphere. In addition, the regions that have received the least attention are currently undergoing critical junctures in their cultural narratives owing to the accelerated rate of economic modernization and the

concomitant large-scale fluid and, at times, uncertain societal change. As such, lesbian, gay and bisexual workers located in the ‘other’ regions face greater challenges in establishing physical and ontological security, which serve as preconditions for successful integration in social life as well as the workplace.

The aims of the present study are thus fourfold. First, the article attempts to fill the lacuna in the workplace sexual orientation discrimination literature, where the published academic work tends to be centred on advanced economies. Selecting Turkey as the specific reference of analysis secures a contribution to the emergence of a first-wave literature on sexual orientation discrimination in a developing country context. Second, the study utilizes post-structuralist concepts in conjunction with queer theory to trace the discursive dimensions of what it means to be gay, lesbian or bisexual in Turkey in terms of actual lived experience. The contribution of this standpoint is to tap into the conceptual toolkit of post-modern theory, in parsing out the impact of patriarchal institutions and narratives and their power, control and domination, which underpin the unequal gender relations in charting the ideational locality of lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals in the Turkish employment context. Third, through a series of interviews conducted with gay, lesbian and bisexual employees, the article aims to establish authenticity of subject-based knowledge of discriminatory practice and its various instantiations in different sub-contexts in the Turkish domain. Finally, the interview-centred empirical approach reliant on the *relational* perspective (Ozbilgin and Tatli, 2008) traces the intersection of stakeholders – the government and its institutions, the family, different types of employers, heterosexual co-workers and civil society organizations – specifically as conveyed through the lived experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual interviewees to establish the complex patterns of work-based discrimination in Turkey on a multiplicity of interconnected levels of meaning and practice.

The thematic focus of this article does not involve a study of the experiences of transgendered workers in Turkey. Conceptually, whilst the terms gay, lesbian and bisexual refer to sexual orientation, the term transgendered (or transsexual – a potentially more loaded term more commonly used in Turkey) denotes gender identity. Moreover, empirically, in Turkey, the hegemonic violence perpetrated against the transgendered minority operates at an entirely different (far higher) order of magnitude. As such, a separate study would be appropriate for the review of transgendered individuals’ employment experiences.

## Theoretical framework

This study stands in contradistinction to the viability of totalistic and law-like statements conferring sense and meaning on human behaviour through the deductive identification of deterministic patterns, such as, if-then logics steeped in cause-and-effect relationships. Axiomatically accepted perspectives by notable structuralists such as De Saussure (1959) and Lévi-Strauss (1966), which had a defining impact on much of the 20th century social science and business research, indicate that what appears complex is at bottom a simple code of relations that, over time, gain layers of complication, which once pared down would signify a system of social incentives, acts and constraints defined by rules and formulas applicable in all cultures. This type of analysis takes certain ‘truths’ as universal and finds their roots in purportedly stable binary oppositions.

As a response, in a series of landmark studies, Foucault (1980; 1990; 1995; 1997; 2001) challenges what may seem ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ in social life as inherently conditional upon the masculine power, domination and control that permeate human practices and institutions, and that create discipline and manage the evolution of subjectivities. According to Foucault, the idea (to which the present study fully subscribes) is not to deny all structure and suggest that, for instance, there is no system of patriarchy, but to put into question the assumptions of such a system and how it may be variable and contingent in its representations based on underlying power relations. Such a perspective brings forward a post-structuralist sensibility that is the primary mode of analysis directing this study’s focus on the uncovering of the contingent, peculiar, unique, non-heterogeneous sites of semiotics that secure the signification of socially shared, yet individually lived acts, processes and moments in the working lives of gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals in Turkey.

Foucault (1990) suggests that the system of prevailing ideas is capable of creating entire subjectivities, and the invention of the homosexual identity in the late 19th century is a case in point. If discourse is so potent as to have the capacity to produce and sustain socially intelligible and salient identities, it is equally powerful in regulating those identities and alternately legitimating or illegitimating them through various biological and social scientific systems of thought, or the restraining and chastising hand of the government. Importantly, according to Foucault, the invention of a subjectivity generating the homosexual (or later the bisexual) as a category did not flow from a random act or the teleological path of progressive scientific discovery. In fact, this was a discursive project put together to simultaneously define, privilege and secure the heterosexual order, the site of purported normalcy, in binary opposition to what came to be viewed as homosexuality, a punishable deviation from ‘normalcy’. Corollary to this, as Derrida (1978) suggests, in such a binary modality, the inferior status of one dynamic (in this context, the homosexual category) served as a means of sustaining the superior status of the other (the heterosexual category). Indeed, such a binary would occupy the social world with the condition that the very survivability and intelligibility of one construct – heterosexuality – would hinge on the control, by any means necessary, including various forms of violence and abuse of the ‘other’ construct, homosexuality.

The socially constructed artifice of this ostensibly primordial *othering* motivates Butler (1990) to consider how the non-natural categories heterosexual and homosexual come to bear such power, salience and resonance (which allow them to stand as ‘natural’) in constituting social actors who embody them. Theoretically redeploying speech act theory developed previously by Austin (1976), Butler (1990) conceptualizes gender and sexual orientation through the lens of performativity, where the iterative nature of performances undertaken by social actors within the framework of hegemonic binaries solidify gender realities with the effect that the binary divisions appear as if to be stable and organically occurring equilibriums. Because such stability is in fact a social ruse, rendering this concoction credible requires regulation (perhaps in the sense of Foucault’s (1995) panoptic social corpus forcing all actors, whether homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual, to discipline each other and themselves through discursive signifiers of social reward and punishment). Upsetting, or even questioning, such a schematic could potentially decimate patriarchy, which means that the full power and might of patriarchy is

unleashed in its defence. From the standpoint of the present study, various instances of sexual orientation discrimination at work (or elsewhere) stand as moments of assertion of a patriarchal order that is threatened by the deeper fluidity of sexual experience within one's self or as expressed socially.

Continual reification of *compulsory heterosexuality* requires semiotic violence perpetuated unto what puts it into existential suspense (Butler, 1990). Therefore, uncovering this semiotic violence in terms of its varied operants in the work courses of gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals in Turkey is an important goal of the analysis that follows. However, an issue of equally great importance could be that, once shown for what they are, such violent acts of signification are difficult to combat. The potent analytical prowess of Butler's gender performativity logic paradoxically often finds it challenging to grasp and offer ways out of the problem of *othering*. Parodying, drag and poking fun at the patriarchal order are Butler's generic solutions, and whilst constituting theoretically lucid and fertile ground for analytical extensions, these may not generate actionable strategic courses for oppressed individuals to pursue. This is an issue that Foucault also resigns from addressing in its entirety: having laid out the discursive frameworks of analysis deployed in grasping the deeply seated power relations that produce an unequal ordering of gendered relations, there is no specific instrument or practice for the subjects to bring into play in remaking the very disciplining worlds they inhabit.

Bourdieu (2000) approaches the crux of the problem by recognising that post-structuralists identify the socially constructed nature and functionality of gender, yet rely implicitly (and to an extent less than successfully) upon rhetoric to modify the preconditions of oppressed subjectivities manufactured by the dominant discourse (cited by Ozbilgin and Tatli, 2005: 857). In her later theorizing, Butler (2004) acknowledges the question: What are the conditions of transformation for the socially constructed oppressive order of heteronormativity? One departure offered by Butler (2004: 224) is the act of 'invoking rights for which there are no prior entitlements.' However, even such rearticulating of the acceptable limits of social signification is potentially ineffectual, in particular, when executed by the socially disadvantaged subject. This is further complicated by variations within particular subjects' reality of educational attainment, occupational affiliation, socio-economic status as well as the differential social histories, institutions, rules and regulations and national/sub-national narratives of a given locale where the subject is in action. Ozbilgin and Tatli (2008: 400) argue that Bourdieu, whose major works (1977, 1984, 1990, 1998) have culminated in the possible reconciliation of myriad structuralist and post-structuralist themes, offers an intriguing focus for change utilizing the materialist-symbolic base provisions of social existence and action that allows post-structuralist discursive analysis to translate itself into the improvement of the day-to-day reality of life conditions. This line of inquiry is especially accommodating in overcoming the various subcutaneous propellers of sexual orientation discrimination, the present study's centre of gravity.

In Turkey, a multitude of material and social mechanisms work together in organizing a sense of historicity, a prevailing social consciousness, past and current labour regulations as well as employment practices, political order and identity processes to continually renegotiate the representation and integration of sexual minorities in terms of the discrimination *problématique*. In order to fully take stock of this complexity, the

analytical approach must link a queer theory sensibility with a Bourdieu-inspired *relational* perspective; a veritable synthesis that finds its potency in the imbrications of structuralist and post-structuralist discernments, as outlined by Ozbilgin and Tatli (2008), and consider distinctive ideational levels of meaning and structural conditionalities that cut across a variety of stakeholders in a particular context. Instead of universalist analytical statements supporting non-localized prescriptive strategies to combat ostensibly uniform problems experienced by sexual minorities across time and space, the focus moves toward capturing particularities and re-orientating, sometimes fundamentally, the precepts of received wisdom in favour of a more subversive strategic equality nexus locating sexual orientation issues in Turkey in their authentic context.

Ozbilgin and Tatli (2008) intimate in conceptually wide-ranging detail that continually expanding, challenged, renegotiated and repositioned structurations must be integrated into the analysis in order to sufficiently delineate the *chiaroscuro* of instantiations the diversity question takes on in the plethora of unique localities around the globe. Specifically, they point out the self-intersecting polygon of the *national, discursive, sectoral, organizational* and *individual* dynamics as contributive of the significant modalities of diversity practice at the workplace (Ozbilgin and Tatli, 2008). This perspective provides a platform for the analysis of the empirical elements of the present study. In particular, post-structural concepts are used to discuss the data with the purpose of tracing the discursive foundations and points of departure for grasping the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual workers. However, the interviews also involve probes into structural conditions in order to contextualize the results within the unique Turkish institutional, political, legal, sectoral and national work topography.

## **Genealogical antecedents of the sexual orientation problématique in Turkey**

Turkey embodies a unique socio-cultural space of contradictions straddling the increasingly politicised ‘East-West canyon’ of competing identities, under the full brunt of variegated economic dislocations perpetrated by rapid modernization and unchecked globalization. In political terms, despite the staunchly secular Kemalist heritage (a political philosophy dating back to the early years of the republic), Turkey is currently governed by the Justice and Development Party known for its religiosity and close ties to political Islam. Economically, whilst Istanbul and Ankara, the largest areas of conurbation have traditionally been home to the manufacturing and sophisticated services industries, the rest of the country (especially Middle, East and Southeast Anatolia regions, where more than half the population reside) has faced stagnation and decline owing to rapid migration to the cities, low public or private investment in infrastructure and regional security and stability issues (resulting from the long-running civil strife associated with the disputed Kurdish region).

At the heart of the gendered barriers to any equality project in Turkey lies the challenge of a patriarchal family structure that is supported and perpetuated by the legal system with existing codes and regulations in favour of male hegemony or reformed provisions that do not receive full application in practice (Kogacioglu, 2004). One insidious method of sustaining patriarchy is through honour killings: the murder of a female

relative (usually one's daughter, sister or niece) to punish perceived sexual transgressions and 'clean' the 'stain' on the family's honour. Honour killings are at least partially coextensive with the governmental inaction and the tacit complicity of permissive laws, social practices and prevailing mores and norms (Ahmetbeyzade, 2008; Kogacioglu, 2004). Beyond serving as the ultimate mechanism of control regulating an individual's socio-sexual experience, honour killings contribute to the emergence of a discourse where all sexual minorities are objectified as a source of shame and revulsion, a threat to an idealized, 'pure' family order. The policing of the female sexual experience that deeply genders the interplay of relational dynamics in all sorts of other spheres in Turkey also involves family-sought virginity tests in state hospitals before marriage, as well as loss of child custody or alimony in the event of a divorce if the woman is perceived by the judge and law clerks, or portrayed by the husband, as less than honourable (Kogacioglu, 2004).

The gendered segregation of specific work environments is further emblematic of inequality, with various job roles in 'mines, cable laying, the sewage system, tunnel construction, and other underground and underwater operations, fire services, the metal and chemical industry, construction work, work involving night shifts and garbage collection' excluding women based on labour laws that allow employers to deem certain work unsuitable for women (Ozbilgin, 2002: 58). Conversely, male workers are strongly discouraged from such allegedly 'feminine' work roles as dancer, midwife, nurse, day care centre worker, child psychologist, primary or secondary school teacher. Workers who go against gender-stereotyped occupational choices often face jokes or comments that touch upon sexuality or sexual orientation within their circle of family, friends or colleagues.

In addition, despite recent improvements in the Turkish labour regulations inspired by the provisions of the International Labour Organisation, Sur (2009: 195–7) argues employees are afforded differential degrees of protection in general: whereas in larger organisations (with 30 or more workers and *possible* unionization), labour rights ensure that more strict job security rules apply, enterprises with fewer than 30 workers, smaller family-run companies and agricultural holdings with fewer than 50 workers are outside the scope of the full provisions of the labour code. In vast swathes of Anatolia, where women are disproportionately highly represented in agriculture, and in major cities, where many small or medium-sized businesses employ women in administrative or support positions, the resultant gender inequality implications of the existing legal code are especially troubling. The weaker legal protections imply that women may face greater threats of dismissal in any dispute at work. Beyond the matter of the male-female gender differences in possible labour protections, there is no law or regulation that currently safeguards workers in any type of organization (whether it be state or private, small, medium or large, located in the manufacturing, service or support sectors) against sexual orientation discrimination (Sural, 2009).

As part of the accession process into the European Union, major new rules and regulations are continually being incorporated into the Turkish legal, economic and political spheres. Of particular note, among these great changes has been the effort to coordinate and standardize the existing labour laws with those prevailing in Europe. Yenisey (2005) suggests that one such regulatory modification, Article 5 of Labour Act No. 4857, has introduced the principle of non-discrimination into employment law, and she argues that

although sexual orientation is not specified as a basis for protection, legal professionals could use a particular feature of Article 5 – non-discrimination on the basis of sex – as a way to extend equal treatment to individuals facing sexual orientation discrimination. Regrettably, however, according to a report by the Commission of the European Communities (2009), there is as yet no governmental agency responsible for equality in Turkey and, moreover, the lack of any specific legal provision that would discourage sexual orientation discrimination at work contributes to an environment where lesbian, gay and bisexual employees routinely lose their jobs without recourse to compensation or reinstatement.

In general terms, the sexual orientation diversity *tableau* in Turkey is an amalgam of positives and negatives. Citizens do not ordinarily face criminal charges on the basis of their sexual orientation, although the severity of social stigma attached to identity disclosure is so great that many lesbian, gay and bisexual Turks and Kurds see concealment of their identities as an obligatory social survival mode. Lesbian, gay and bisexual people are able to form and maintain civic institutions (albeit under frequent threats of closure by public prosecutors), and several coffee shops, bars and clubs catering to the needs and interests of sexual minorities are now lacing the inner city neighbourhoods of Istanbul (although the police regularly raid such venues often arresting individuals who do not happen to carry a national ID card at the time, a condition that destabilizes minority attempts to secure safe spaces and a shared sense of normalcy).

Sexual orientation is seen, represented and experienced in a range of forms and treated differentially both by various sections of the society and the sexual minorities as part of lived experience (Bereket and Adam, 2006; 2008; Tapinc, 1992). While in Istanbul, and to a lesser extent in Ankara, there are specific areas with at least limited options of visibility for lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals, elsewhere sexual minorities are often invisible and almost alien entities in the public consciousness. KAOS GL, Turkey's largest LGBT organization, has in recent years engaged in a wide range of queer-positive activities (including pride parades and seminars/workshops with invited academics and public intellectuals), and established links with international human rights organizations for increased support. However, these attempts are continually thwarted by the dominant system, especially given the repeated court indictments KAOS GL has faced under the religious conservative government.

In a large-scale ethnographic study completed by the Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2008), a plethora of evidence from various spheres of life exposed the degree to which discriminatory practices and policies pervade such socially important Turkish institutions as the military, the medical profession, the police, the court system and the media. Specifically, through wide-ranging interviews with scores of lesbian, gay and bisexual citizens, HRW (2008) gives detailed information on how the military disallows sexual minorities to carry out military service, and those who come out are issued discharge papers (indicating psychosexual disorder as the basis for exemption) that could potentially blight their subsequent careers as the military service is mandatory in Turkey for males, and all employers scrutinize discharge papers before signing employment contracts with young male employees; the police sometimes extort money from sexual minorities in addition to verbally and physically abusing them; homophobic violence (even opprobrious acts involving murder and mutilation) can be penalized relatively

more leniently based on homosexual-panic type defence strategies that still seem to have validity in courts; and the positive representations of homosexuality in the media are isolated, with even major newspapers and network channels regularly providing objectionable commentaries on sexual minorities. In short, there is an entrenched culture of institutionalized homophobia in most spheres of social life continually thwarting attempts by non-heterosexual citizens to enjoy the benefits of fully realized functional citizenship.

## **Methodology**

Owing to the largely explorative and interpretive nature of the present project, instead of standardization and generalizability, flexibility and specificity were built into the research approach in accordance with a qualitative orientation (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). Thus, the empirical dimension was empowered by an in-depth and fluid inquiry into the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual workers in a range of businesses. Based on snowball sampling, probing and free-ranging unstructured interviews were conducted with twenty individuals. This sampling method was chosen to meet the various challenges associated with identifying and recruiting interview subjects in a prohibitive social space where many potential participants needed to have the advantage of anonymity about their sexuality in order to avoid costly personal consequences. Owing to severe challenges associated with the recruitment of gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals who would be willing to discuss at length their employment experiences as sexual minorities, initially two LGB-facing social networking sites, Gabile and GayRomeo, were used to recruit interview subjects. Individual site members were randomly sent out a brief message explaining the aims and nature of the present study along with a polite request for participation in a narrative interview touching upon their experiences at work as well as in social life and family spheres as a sexual minority, with specific assurances of anonymity and confidentiality for the research participants. Whilst the response rate was very low (below 5 percent), and some of those who responded later revoked their decision to participate, it was possible to conduct interviews with several initial participants who then spoke to their friends and recommended wider participation in the study, assisting the project to locate more subjects. Where it would be unlikely to reach a sufficient number of interviewees through alternative sampling methods, and where internal authenticity rather than external validity is what the interviews are aiming to secure, snowball sampling is extremely effective (Berg, 2004).

During the interviews, special care was taken to motivate the participants to bring forward details and themes in a longer, unconstrained and unfettered answer pattern. Encompassing ethnographic elements steeped in aspects of the story-telling opportunities provided by the narrative interview format (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), the participants were allowed to share their own experiential understandings unmarred by reductive ideography. This was envisaged to give space and representation to a group of individuals whose existential employee *voice* (the capacity to articulate and posit their position in society and work environments, as conceptualized by Bell et al., 2011) has been eradicated or forestalled by the force of prevailing traditions, values, norms and mores. An interview technique that centred on relatability between the interviewer (also a sexual minority) and the participant ensured that the subjects could reveal, so far as possible, the deeply-seated knowledge of their lived experiences.

The unstructured interview strategy meant that there would be no standard interview schedule to follow with each participant, and based on specific events recounted and unique perspectives espoused by individuals, varying probing questions would be posed to delineate each person's unique experiences. In terms of the overarching approach taken, at the beginning of the interview process each participant was prompted to provide information on certain demographic characteristics such as sexual orientation, age, income, educational attainment, organizational affiliation (whether they worked for a small, medium or large organization in the public or private sector) and the specific position/type of job they held. Subsequent questions often delved into their experiences as closeted, semi-closeted or out gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals in the educational environment, friendship circles and the family unit. Later questions would cover whether they were out at work, if their workplace had any policies or known perspectives on gay, lesbian and bisexual employees, whether they or anyone they knew at their workplace or any other similar workplace encountered homophobia and in what forms and with what effect such abuses were perpetrated. Finally, questions probing into participant judgments as to whether social norms, laws and regulations, institutions, company own policies or personally varied factors could be generative of homophobic practices at work, and if potentially the transformation of such processes in Turkey could lead to the deconstruction, subversion and transcendence of workplace homophobia.

## Findings

As may be observed from Table 1, which indicates various characteristics of the participants in the study, seven lesbian, 11 gay and two male bisexual individuals participated in the study. The participant age range spanned from 19 to 37, and all interviewees lived in either Istanbul or Ankara, the two largest cities in Turkey. Whilst it was possible to locate participants from all income groups, in terms of education, the interviewee attainment levels ranged from the high school diploma to the Masters degree, with the majority falling somewhere in between. Many of the participants worked in the private sector; however, some suggested that previously they had been public sector employees as well.

Following Ozbilgin and Tatli (2008), the research findings are organized along five levels of signification with regards to the diversity ethos – the national, discursive, sectoral, organizational and individual planes. As regards the national plane, all participants agreed that the absence of a legal corpus penalizing sexual orientation discrimination contributed greatly to the culture of victimization. A gay middle-manager in a private bank remarked:

I just don't think me or anyone else could do anything about the discrimination against gays. Not for now. Homophobia is everywhere! Maybe the only way is if there is a change in laws – because of the EU process. Once there is a law protecting me, I would have some backing to defend my rights. Then they can't get rid of us just like that – laws would give us the safety net we need.

The emergence and continual electoral success of the Justice and Development Party was seen by a number of interviewees as a further source of increasing worry. A 37-year-old gay deputy general manager in the tourism industry recounted:

**Table I** Participant characteristics

Sexual orientation	Age	Income*	Educational attainment	Organizational affiliation	Job type
Lesbian	24	Lower	High school diploma	Private medium chain	Waitress
Lesbian	27	Middle	Some university education	Private large manufacturing	Administrative assistant
Lesbian	29	Lower	Some university education	Private small lawyer's office	Administrative assistant
Lesbian	32	Middle	High school diploma	Private large Retail	Assistant store manager
Lesbian	31	Middle	University degree	Private large manufacturing	Middle manager
Lesbian	27	Middle	University degree	Private small own business	Visual arts/graphic designer
Lesbian	30	Middle	Some university	Private medium retail	Manager
Gay	30	Lower	High school diploma	Private large retail	Sales associate
Gay	37	Middle	University degree	Private medium Tourism	Deputy general manager
Gay	25	Upper	University 4 <sup>th</sup> year student	Private medium manufacturing	Project assistant
Gay	19	Middle	High school diploma	Private (family) small retail	Store assistant
Gay	27	Middle	University degree	Private large financial	Financial affairs advisor
Gay	33	Upper	University degree	Private (family) medium textile	Merchandiser
Gay	23	Middle	University degree	Public large factory	Administrative assistant
Gay	29	Middle	University degree	Private large construction	Civil engineer
Gay	31	Middle	Masters student	Freelance	Translator
Gay	32	Middle	University degree	Public medium education	Geography teacher
Gay	34	Middle	University degree	Private large retail	Store manager
Bisexual (Male)	33	Upper	MBA	Private (family) medium construction	Managing director
Bisexual (Male)	33	Middle	Some university education	Private medium tourism	Travel agent

\* Note that the lower, middle and upper income strata correspond with the intervals 0–£2850; £2851–£9200; £9201 and above. The first interval reflects the lowest quintile, the second interval covers the middle three quintiles, and the third interval stands for the highest quintile in the distribution of annual urban household disposable income in Turkey (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2008).

One day I was sitting outside at a restaurant with my friend, and the police picked us up and took us to the police station. They thought we were gay. I don't think we are typically gay, but they must have guessed it somehow. Nowadays you have to hide it even more – at home, at work, outside [ . . . ].

The dominant discourse of heteronormativity was viewed by participants as a multi-dimensional mechanism that deployed the coextensive use of various core reference groups, such as the family and the work organization, to discipline in a continuous and

uninterrupted manner sexual subjectivity in terms of identity and practice. Most participants were not ‘out’ in the home environment or at the workplace owing to fear of verbal abuse or violence, whilst those who came out for one reason or another often faced severe discrimination. Importantly, for most participants the home and the workplace (the private and public domains of life) merged and the decision to come out at work seemed linked to experiences or expected consequences at home and vice versa. The interconnectivity of homophobic spheres is manifest in an account by a lesbian interviewee:

I’d never be out at work. Not because of what they might do at work, but because the news could somehow reach my family. They would disown me. They might even kill me, but I don’t think things would reach that point. But I’d be dead to them anyway.

Indeed, many participants seemed to think extreme physical violence (honour killings in the context of lesbian, gay and bisexual people) would be far more likely in rural settings, but a few interviewees were unable to completely rule them out as possible consequence of coming out. A gay participant from Ankara who worked in a retail environment commented:

My family wouldn’t understand what gay means. They would think I am no longer a man. Being out could result in my family disowning me, excluding me from their surname, acting like I am dead to them. But taking life – it wouldn’t come to that, unless transsexual-transvestite sexual change happened.

As for sectoral contexts, interviewees converged on the idea that retail, entertainment and tourism were probably the only industries where being a sexual minority would not invariably entail employment termination or constructive dismissal, although even such environments were frequently noted as less than supportive. One gay merchandizer suggested:

There are many gay people in the industry, but everybody keeps it a secret to the extent they can. In my previous job, I would get questions or jokes hinting at me being gay. Not nice, friendly jokes. It was unbearable for me.

Those in the manufacturing sector suggested bosses would look for, and be sure to find, a reason to get rid of any worker expressing a different sexual orientation, while highly-skilled service sector employees suggested that their employers would deem homosexuality too controversial, and if they were out they would not be put in any situation where they might be representing the company to any external clients, and in general, they would probably lose all possibility of promotion.

In regard to the organization plane, participants converged on the idea that, whilst in small or medium sized firms, out gay, lesbian and bisexual employees could easily face job termination. In larger firms, because of greater anonymity or an ostensibly more professionalised human resources outlook, the pattern of discrimination centred on unsettling/traumatizing jokes and abusive comments. Right or wrong, the general perspective of the interviewees was that gay men were the likeliest employees to be fired

once identity disclosure emerged. A lesbian middle manager gave her take on the male-dominant gender-dependent dynamics of sexual orientation discrimination at work in a medium-sized organization:

Turkey is a patriarchal society, so women are like objects. My hyper-heterosexual colleague told me that women are like a car – you don't want a used car, so you always try to get a virgin, and lesbians are like a new or used car which has a permanent factory defect. My colleagues don't panic about me being a lesbian. They just make bizarre jokes and call me names like 'dominant woman', which fits into their idea of lesbianism. I think if I were a gay man though, they might have fired me right away.

The participants suggested that international companies operating in Turkey were not all that different as the managers and co-workers were from Turkey in any case, and if there were any policies of non-discrimination these were not applied or followed. One gay employee who previously worked for an American company for eight years suggested:

When people made lowering comments and obviously made fun of me, I complained about it, but nobody took it seriously, supervisors would laugh and move on.

On the individual plane, discriminatory actions taken by specific managers/bosses, personal experiences or stories heard from friends who are themselves sexual minorities seemed to have a significant (and in some cases perspective-defining) impact on some interviewees. A gay civil engineer recalled:

I started dating, and in the heat of first love – this was my first proper gay relationship – I stupidly allowed him to hold my hand briefly on Istiklal Street as we were walking to a gay club. A work colleague and his wife walked past us. I was terrified, and I desperately hoped he didn't see me. From that moment, the night was ruined for me and I kept worrying. Nobody said a word about it when I got to work on Monday. Just as I relaxed, right before lunchtime, my boss took me in his office and told me they didn't need people like me there and asked me to leave the job. I couldn't believe my whole world went upside down just like that. I hated myself for being so indiscreet; I kept thinking I should've been more careful.

A number of participants also seemed to suggest that, whilst women often seemed more understanding than male colleagues, in general the reactions would be highly variable and hard to conceptualize as part of a pattern. A gay interviewee explained:

It's not about your gender or the gender of your manager or the type of company you are working for, but what kind of person your manager is. If they are more open-minded, they will support you. It's just very random – I think this is the main problem. You may be discriminated or not based on how understanding or narrow-minded your boss is.

## Discussion

In patriarchal cultures where heteronormativism and its conventional representations are almost fetishistically protected, the act of breaking away from the sacrosanct *order*

of things (Foucault, 2001) can result in concurrent majority disgust toward the breakaways and minority shame within the breakaway community itself (Nussbaum, 2004). This can perpetuate a heterosexist culture of hate toward the homosexual individual and a self-hating inferiority within the homosexual topography. In Turkey, despite the absence of legal persecution of sexual minorities, the substantial limits on the discursive space allotted to the homosexual identity inhibit individual *technologies of the self* (in the sense of Foucault, 1997) to establish an existential place and purpose within the public-private nexus. The dominant and prohibitive sexual *dispositif*, which according to Foucault (1980), signifies the mass of institutions, values, norms and ways of being and relating that continually reinforce traditional power hierarchies/disparities, leaves sexual minorities in Turkey open to a continually renegotiated but so far never disappearing instability.

In the context of the narrative interviews conducted with lesbian, gay and bisexual workers, the emergent themes centring on the traditional family and its various instantiations, the homophobic employment culture, and the absence of employment non-discrimination laws and regulations shed light on a confluence of factors in line with this *dispositif* that perpetuates a communally shared perception of insecurity, inadequacy, devaluation and self-doubt at work and beyond. In Turkey, family members often adopt potentially threatening, dismissive and mentally abusive attitudes when homosexuality is revealed, and this alone can push lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals to conceal their sexual orientation to the extent feasible in the work setting. In a culture where ‘honour’ killings still pervade certain segments of the social fabric as acceptable practice (Ahmetbeyzade, 2008), coming out entails a strong existential fear for the non-heterosexual worker.

Interviewee evidence also suggests that a perspective still critical in the workings of the dominant culture is one steeped in diminishing the personhood of the woman, meaning that, as the woman’s identity loses substantive presence, the male identity is glorified as the ultimate symbol of power and possibility (Helvacioglu, 2006). At an extreme, this unequal dyadic power relationship between man and woman – especially, with the binary structuration glorifying the male at the expense of female within the organized hierarchy at work (Knights and Kerfoot, 2004) – can lead to the eradication of woman’s self, which effectively turns the dyad into a monological discourse where all social process is structured and construed self-referentially by man (Irigaray, 1985). This socially imposed zero-sum game between the sexes is maintained at all cost, as the heterosexual man in the patriarchal culture defines who he is through this lens. In integrating and consolidating his heterosexual identity, the typical Turkish man plays out roles based on shared norms of conventional masculinity (Boratav, 2006), and thus seems compelled to perpetuate sexual orientation discrimination.

Several participants’ accounts of their lived experiences converge on the perception that the dominant culture (which in this case is heteronormative) has a panoptic eye (as in Foucault, 1995), an overarching omniscience that is forever observing and regulating the activities of the sexual subculture. For the sexual minorities, the twin fears of status loss (losing the respect of direct reports as well as line managers) and possible job termination create a constant anxiety that any wrong step may reveal their sexual orientation, what is often a deeply held secret, and therefore they should always be on the alert for

any person or process that may uncover it. In the instance of the gay civil engineer, a sense of anger at oneself for failing to be continually aware of the panoptic eye seems to be stronger than the sense of disappointment felt in the face of summary dismissal by one's employer without so much as being given a chance to engage in full communicative interaction. As an ultimate moment of *abjection* (objectification of the subject; Kristeva, 1980), the participant's experience signifies how the gay worker is devolved into a lower order of existence where the perspective of justice and fairness is always skewed in favour of the subject; heterosexual man. More troubling yet, the previous account represents how a social space defined self-referentially by heterosexual man is causing what Levinas (1999) would suggest is a point of alterity whereby the abject gay worker comes to accept and internalize the objectifying views of himself perpetuated by the norm-defining subject the heterosexual man. In a deeply heteronormative culture, being continually subjected to homophobic abuse may thus teach the gay employee that somehow he is morally in the wrong for showing his 'true colours' to the heterosexist colleagues.

While interviewees suggested differential levels of visibility might exist from sector to sector, even allegedly more permissive sectoral environments seemed to exert a great deal of trauma on the lesbian, gay and bisexual workers. Organizationally, the anonymity and disconnectedness of a large company seemed to be reassuring to some participants; however, this indicated no real improvement in terms of policies and practices observed in the work environment, and instead it showcased a platform where employees concealed themselves more easily to avoid discrimination. In general, the spectre of social rejection seems to ensure that the sexual minorities hide themselves from the public consciousness, and the lesbian, gay and bisexual employees remain virtually invisible at work (Woodward and Ozbilgin, 1999; Ozbilgin and Woodward, 2004).

While some interviewees suggested that legal reforms would be welcome relief for lesbian, gay and bisexual employees in Turkey, it is likely that such reformation would only serve as a starting point in what is a process of slow transformation. It would be an overstatement to see legal change alone as panacea where norms at the level of the family, friends and work colleagues defining what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour toward sexual minorities are unaltered. Nevertheless, the advent of sexual orientation discrimination regulations in Turkey could impose a legitimizing effect of their own, with such institutional and government recognition of basic equality causing people on the fence about this matter to move potentially to a more supportive point on the spectrum.

Several interviewees mentioned the European Union accession process as indicative of such promise, especially in regard to putting a reign on the religiosity of the governing party and the continually evolving implications of political Islam. However, transposing European Union laws into the Turkish context could be complex and challenging. As Kocherov (2007) suggests, owing to the opacity of the *acquis communautaire* directives on laws relating to sexual minorities, European Union's recent eastern enlargement programme has not been unequivocally successful in this respect, and the countries who have achieved candidature status or even full membership have not fully integrated non-discrimination provisions with reference to sexual orientation into their legal frameworks. Furthermore, Dalvi (2003–4) argues that international authorities are powerful in

effectuating change to the extent that the normative context in a given country accommodates it, giving the example of European Court of Human Rights whose rulings effectively ended sexual orientation discrimination in military service in one signatory country, United Kingdom, and had no impact on exclusionary practices in another signatory country, Turkey.

## Concluding remarks

This study contributes to the emergence of a first-wave literature on workplace sexual orientation discrimination in the context of Turkey, a developing country with a unique amalgam of social, economic and political ground realities. Through 20 in-depth interviews, the research approach probed into the complex employment experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual employees. The participant accounts indicated the pervasive presence of a significant level of blatant discriminatory activities ranging from sustained harassment through to repeated unwanted jokes and innuendos, to actual job termination, to threats of violence.

Patriarchal practices and institutions that together form an underlying condition of subjectivity within the artificially induced and savagely protected heterosexual-homosexual binary were investigated, in the context of Turkish historicity, from a post-structural perspective inflected with queer theory precepts. This thought nexus served to uncover the contingent semiotics of being a lesbian, gay or bisexual subject in Turkey, and how it translates into individual work lives. This was coupled with an additional layer of theoretical inquiry, where a *relational* framework of analysis (outlined by Ozbilgin and Tatli, 2008) traced the locality of remarks and narratives offered by the study's subjects and organized the data on a number of interconnecting levels, such as those pertaining to the national, discursive, sectoral, organizational and individual contexts. This allowed for a stronger basis of comparison across recounted experiences and laid out the departure points for a policy-oriented approach along concrete lines of inquiry for future studies.

One crucial indication of the present study is that the resolution of the sexual orientation diversity *problématique* in Turkey requires a wholesale change in norms, institutions, legal texts and policies. In the absence of strong safeguards for sexual minority rights in general public as well as employment domains, perpetrators of discrimination who form the majority both at work and within the family and the wider society, will not spontaneously desist from such activities of objectification and harassment. Equally, unless there is a normative shift that re-centres the gravitational focus on gender through a less patriarchal calibration of masculinity, the dominant system may co-opt any improved legal corpus and render it incapable of full applicability.

In this light, some practical policy implications ensue from the analysis. The European Union accession process, which many sexual minorities in Turkey rely on as a guarantor of a potentially more improved future life and work context, could beneficially use its political wherewithal to build the principle of sexual orientation non-discrimination into a more well-articulated, critical feature of membership negotiations. Foreign companies, a large number of which may have strong anti-discrimination policies in their home countries, may beneficially direct their attention into ensuring that the same protective

policies are followed diligently in their operations in Turkey, through diversity management training, LGB recruitment programmes at universities, foreign and local LGB mentors within the organizational frameworks, and information-sharing activities with civil society organizations. KAOS GL and related social organizations could attempt to establish public-private forums with companies, government authorities and foreign and domestic media organizations to the extent where it is possible to discuss and potentially 'normalise' a non-patriarchal discursive order where moments of improved understanding may be captured and nurtured. Subversive discursive practices coupled with concerted, self-examining institutional efforts may be sufficiently potent to deconstruct and render unbound otherwise resilient and seemingly intractable patriarchal domination.

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