The absent presence: Negative space within discourse and the construction of minority sexual identity in the workplace

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ABSTRACT

Sexuality and the experience of sexual minorities in the workplace are under-researched areas. The research reported here – a case study in one government department in the UK – utilizes a discursive research method to uncover a theme that is at the centre of this experience – silence. In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with individuals eliciting their stories on their experience as lesbians and gay men in the workplace, and these stories were then used to promote more general discussion within focus groups. Understanding silence in the research process with relation to both the researcher and the respondent was found to be vital for research in this area, and the article raises issues to do with uncovering previously silenced voices. Silence also emerged as a recurrent theme in the research and found that there were many ways in which this silence can play an integral role in organizational discourse and the creation of social identity. We have therefore suggested that silence could be referred to metaphorically as ‘negative space’, as this term helps to emphasize the multifaceted nature of silence. The research highlighted reactive silence and the absence of response, silence as a form of suppression, of censorship and of self-protection and resistance. It also concludes that silence, in all its changing forms, influences and contributes to the creation of social reality and gay identity for lesbians and gay men in the workplace.
Introduction

This research grew out of a perception that of all diversity categories, there remains one that struggles to be a recognized element of the diversity agenda within organizations. Sexuality, in general, and sexual minorities, in particular, constitute one of the most taboo topics in contemporary organizational theory (Hancock & Tyler, 2001; Klawitter, 1998; McQuarrie, 1998). Despite a large body of literature in lesbian, gay and queer studies, references to sexual orientation in the diversity literature in the past have been at best cursory, perhaps giving a definition of diversity to include sexual orientation before returning quickly to the discussion on race or gender (Cornelius, 2001; Kossek & Lobel, 1996). There is a growing literature on sexual orientation and organizations (e.g. Croteau, 1996; Day & Schoenrade, 2000; Driscoll et al., 1996; Hall, 1989; Hearn et al., 1989; McNaught, 1993; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001), but there are remarkably few case studies of sexual minorities in specific work organizations. One of the reasons for this is that sexual minorities at work have, in the past, been surrounded by silence; they have been perceived not to be present in organizations. Just as men work with men and come to believe that they work in a gender-neutral world rather than one where men dominate (Martin, 1992), heterosexuals also, by working with other heterosexuals, come to believe that they are working in a sexually neutral world, rather than one in which heterosexuals dominate. Because sexual minorities are not perceived to be present, sexual orientation is not perceived to be relevant, as if gay people have a sexual orientation, but straight people do not. And whilst this silencing of sexual minorities has been recognized in previous research about lesbians and gay men, (Brocklehurst & Ward, 2002; Burke, 1993; Butler, 1997; Day & Schoenrade, 1997; Driscoll et al., 1996; Escoffier, 1975; Hall, 1989; McNaught, 1993; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Schope, 2002; Schuyf, 2000; Shallenberger, 1994; Weeks, 1977, 1989; Woods & Lucas, 1993), what has been less researched is the multifaceted nature of the silence around sexual minorities and how these multiple silences play out in organizational processes around gay/lesbian issues.

The silencing of minority sexual identity in the workplace

Self-identity relates to the question ‘who am I’ and is drawn from one’s experience as a separate being, having a continuity over time and space, and
is reflexively understood and interpreted through one's own life scripts and with relation to participation in competing discourses, and various experiences and roles (drawn from Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Levitas, 1965). This is related to social identity, which focuses more on 'who am I in the eyes of others' and is a comparatively conscious set of self-images, traits or social attributes perceived and reflected back by others. The level of congruence of self and social identity is particularly pertinent to the study of sexual identity, as this is an area where considerable splitting and separation can take place, one medium for which is through silence.

The silence of non-disclosure is a major factor in the lives of lesbians and gay men, bisexuals and transsexuals. People who decide not to disclose their sexual orientation at work do so with good reason, as many believe that they will be discriminated against (Badgett & King, 1997). The fear of repercussions encourages sexual minorities to keep their minority sexual orientation hidden; according to one study, 36 percent of people are less likely to promote or recruit a gay man, and 31 percent of people are less likely to promote or recruit a lesbian (Snape et al., 1995). Language use in organizations can also potentially influence an individual's decision to remain silent. For example, in one case study by Wilson (2000), despite the organization being relatively accepting of gay men, straight men still felt able to make comments such as 'enough of them about', and 'nearly overrun' (Wilson, 2000). Often derogatory comments are linked to a person's ability to do the job. For example, one trader on Wall Street said of a colleague that it was bizarre that 'the guy's a fucking faggot and he's still trading' (Woods & Lucas, 1993). The way that sexual minorities maintain this silence can be through deliberate action on their part to 'pass' as heterosexual, sometimes inventing opposite sex partners (Croteau, 1996; Woods & Lucas, 1993), or 'covering' their sexual orientation by not disclosing that information to others (Croteau, 1996). The organization can also help to maintain the silence through social practice; for example, uniforms can help sexual minorities to hide sexual orientation (Holliday, 1999). These can be formal uniforms such as those that police, fire-fighters and nurses wear, or informal ones where employees conform to the organizational dress code; one respondent in the empirical study we report on in this article said in response to a question about how he dressed at work, 'well, you can't spot a fag in a suit, can you?' When sexual minorities leave the silence of non-disclosure behind, or in other words, when the individual discloses their minority sexual orientation to others in the workplace, the results can be unexpected. For example, one study highlighted the increased commitment to the organization that those who have come out at work feel (Day & Schoenrade, 1997, 2000) although clearly, this is dependent on a number of issues, not least having a
series of policies and procedures in place, which support the positive treat-
ment of minorities. With the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation)
Regulations Act coming into force in the UK at the end of 2003, providing
employment rights for sexual minorities in most organizations for the first
time, such policies and procedures will have to be in place in order to comply
with legislation. And ‘out’ gay people in the workforce are becoming more
empowered through self-organization (Colgan, 1999). Changes such as these
have enabled us to carry out a case study on the workplace experience of
sexual minorities in a relatively small government department in the UK (‘the
Department’).

What was particularly striking in our findings, reported here, was that
in this organization, which is forward-thinking and where progressive diver-
sity management practices have given a voice to previously silenced sexual
minorities, silence continues to be a significant theme, and discourse around
those sexual minorities continues to be silenced. This article, therefore,
tries to address the question of what part silence, in its multiple and
changing forms, plays in the construction of sexual identity in organizations,
and how focusing on the issue of silence adds to our overall understanding
of discourse.

The role of discourse in studying minority sexual identity

The focus of much discussion about the ontology of sexual identity is the
dialectic of the essentialist versus the constructivist debate. This very debate
has been described as epitomizing one of the most important differences
within the modern history of transgression (Dollimore, 1991), and particu-
larly in the area of sexuality. Despite this lively debate, however, the essen-
tialist view does not adequately deal with the power-knowledge regime of
compulsive heterosexuality (Butler, 1990; Seidman, 1997) nor does the essen-
tialist position explain how compulsive heterosexuality is created in organiz-
ations.

A significant development in this area was Foucault’s radical challenge
to our understanding of sexuality as an essential, biological feature of our
being by suggesting that sexuality was socially constructed, pointing to a
remarkable proliferation of discourses about sexuality in the nineteenth
century (Foucault, 1976). One of Foucault’s most provocative assertions and
one that certainly acted as a catalyst for the development of queer theory,
was that modern homosexuality is of comparatively recent origin, having
grown out of a particular context in the 1870s. Like sexuality in general,
homosexuality should be viewed as a category of knowledge rather than a
discovered identity constructed through discourse (Foucault, 1976; Spargo,
Discourse theory has, therefore, become an important part of studying sexuality and minority sexual identity in particular.

The influence of discourse theory has also become widespread in organizational analysis (du Gay, 1996), and discourse analysis is now recognized as one of the prime ways of studying organizational life and of analysing complex organizational phenomena (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; du Gay, 1996; Grant et al., 1998; Oswick et al., 2000). Its role in the construction of workplace identity has been acknowledged generally (du Gay, 1996), and specifically by queer theorists (Gamson, 2000), who have concentrated on the effect of linguistic practices on the construction of social reality for sexual minorities. Discourse creates not only social reality, but also ways of understanding the world, and the concepts, objects and subject positions that actors use to fashion a social world.

However, there is no agreed-upon definition and discourse analysis itself, has, confusingly, many uses (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000). One definition of organizational discourse might be described as the ‘language and symbolic media we employ to describe, represent, interpret and theorise what we take to be the facticity of organizational life’ (Grant et al., 1998: 116). This definition is useful because it gives us a sense of what discourse is and what it can be used for, addressing the immediate problem of the many uses of discourse analysis. Discourse, in this definition, therefore refers to a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a topic. The term refers both to the production of knowledge through language and the way that knowledge is institutionalized, shaping new social practices. What this definition does not address, however, is the role of silence, and whether or not it is viewed as sitting inside or outside discourse and what shape it takes. Neither does it concentrate on what the impact of silence might be in an organizational context.

That is not to say that silence and its role in discourse has not been recognized. Foucault suggested that silence is not only constitutive of overall discourse itself but is an agent of power in its own right (Foucault, 1976). For example, ‘hegemonic’ discourse includes implicit rules; a rule that precludes open discussion of the experiences of marginalized people means that knowledge of this taboo is present in the discourse (otherwise the experience may be alluded to), and thus is present in the ‘speech’ even if it is not talked about.

Foucault put forward the notion that discourse is best conceived as a series of discontinuous segments, of which the function is unclear and unstable. There are a multiplicity of structures and discursive elements, which go to make up the whole. One of the discursive elements is silence, which Foucault identifies as being also an agent of power. For example,
The make up of discourse has to be pieced together, with things both said and unsaid, with required and with forbidden speech. (Foucault, 1976: 133)

In this way, Foucault is recognizing that discourse may be made up of silence and of things that remain unsaid. Those things that do remain unsaid may be, in some way, forbidden. Silence, can therefore be illustrative of power being articulated, or as a means of resistance.

Discourse as a vehicle for power can mean the domination of one discourse by another, in an oppositional relationship (Fairclough, 1989), and the dominated discourse is under pressure to be silenced, suppressed and eliminated. Silence can then become a product of discourse as well as an element of discourse itself as Foucault suggests. Dominant discourses can also contain oppositional discourses, (Fairclough, 1989), which means that the dominant discourse credits the oppositional one with a certain limited legitimacy and protection. The minority is tolerated and accepted rather than put on an equal footing.

Following Foucault, then, this research sees discourse as a set of unstable, complex elements, with the spaces in between those elements, or silence, being an integral part of discourse. The absence of ‘language’ or ‘words’ or what some would call ‘discourse’ is here seen as part of overall discourse, or the discursive.

There are two distinct approaches to the study of discourse; the ‘interpretive’ and the ‘critical’ (Heracleous & Hendry, 2000). They are not mutually exclusive, and this article draws on both. The interpretive approach means that discourse expresses, but also creates, social relations and practices. As such, discourse is capable of transforming, indeed forming, our identities as social, and sexual, beings (Mumby & Clair, 1997; Reed, 1998). The relationship between discourse and identity is also not unilateral; discourse can impact identity, and identity can impact discourse. For example, in the research data presented later, one man’s experience in creating an identity as an out gay man at work is made more positive by taking his partner to the Christmas party; the positive discourse among his colleagues, or at least the absence of any negative talk, enabled him to become stronger and more confident not only in his sexuality, but also in his work. Another example was of a previously married man who came out at work; the talk and interaction of his colleagues changed around him, as they ceased to include him as much in their conversation, and did not enquire about his life outside work.

When considering the effect of discourse on the social reality of sexual minorities in organizations, it is impossible not to recognize the unequal power relationship between the homosexual minority and heterosexual
majority. The critical approach in discourse analysis aims to take the part of those who suffer from linguistic-discursive forms of domination and exploitation (Fairclough, 1995; Titscher et al., 2000). The critical approach to organizational discourse asserts that it is the discourse which determines and constitutes the subject’s identity, with the subject being trapped in discursive structures (Heracleous & Hendry, 2000), and is therefore a powerful way of exploring struggles within organizational life (Hardy et al., 2000).

The critical approach developed through major social theorists, such as Foucault and Gramsci. For example, Foucault stated that ‘Power and knowledge are quite clearly articulated in discourse’ (Foucault, 1976: 133). In the research presented here there are examples in which discursive silence is used as a mechanism of power and control in order to silence potentially opposing views; for example, a gay manager was removed from his post while managing the organization’s response to Section 28 because he was not seen as impartial. However, in this research we would also argue that although discourse can be used as a straitjacket to limit the ability of gay and lesbian people to construct their own identities in organizations, agency is not extinguished entirely, and the discourse can be used to build power as well as to curtail it. A crucial feature of Foucault’s analysis is the concept of resistance and ‘reverse discourse’ (Spargo, 1999), where minorities are not only created, but made stronger and empowered by hostile discourse, and then work against it in an act of resistance. In the example of one of our focus groups, there was a majority of lesbian and gay members; they themselves utilized their power to dominate and determine the discourse during the focus group’s discussion. This suggests, consistent with Foucault’s views on resistance and reverse discourse, that in the attempt to silence certain voices by the dominant discourse, that same discourse creates the site of opportunity for suppressed voices to demand their legitimacy to be heard.

Each perspective, both interpretive and critical, contributes an important aspect to the understanding of discourse analysis: the first is that discourse constructs our social reality, the second is that our reality is made up of power relationships expressed through discourse. Both perspectives are necessary to our understanding of how discourse shapes the identity of sexual minorities in the workplace, how discourse helps shape reality for them, but also how discourse reinforces the unequal power relationship of the homo–hetero binary. Both perspectives embrace linguistic and non-linguistic communications and the social practices in which they are embedded (Heracleous & Hendry, 2000).
Silence: The absent presence

We use the term ‘absent presence’ to encapsulate the dynamic of minority sexual identity and the importance of silencing; this comes from Derrida’s concept of deconstruction, which allows us to understand the ways in which truth is ordered in discourse and the ways in which certain terms are marginalized (Hancock & Tyler, 2001). The basis of this ordering is the concept of binary oppositions, in which oppositional linguistic dualisms (Hancock & Tyler, 2001), such as ‘man/woman’ or ‘good/bad’, are not equal partners as they would be in Saussure’s structuralism, but exist in a series of hierarchical relationships with the first term normally occupying a superior position (Hancock & Tyler, 2001). Derrida (1998) refers to the relationship between these two terms as ‘différance’, a neologism based on the French word ‘différer’ which brings into play both concepts of difference, a spatial concept, and also deferring, a temporal one. Derrida uses this term to explain not only that terms in binary opposition to one another create a hierarchical relationship, but also that the first, or superior term, is actually defined by the other. For example, in our article the concept heterosexual is defined by the absent presence of the concept ‘gay’ or homosexual, its oppositional other. Implicit in these two terms is the hierarchical superiority of the term heterosexual. Therefore, the presence of one term is dependent on the absence or ‘absent presence’ of the other. In this way, then, silence can be understood to be important in defining discourse because it represents the absence, or the absent present other, upon which the hierarchically superior term depends; in deconstructing the meaning of silence it may be helpful to consider what terms might be defined by this oppositional absent presence.

Silence: Negative space and the importance of silence in understanding discourse

The discourses of, and around, sexual minorities are often silenced. Some organizations actively censor all mention of sexuality, whereas in others informal social practices do not allow lesbians and gay men to have a voice. Following the interpretive approach, this raises a number of questions around whether identities can be formed by language when that very language is absent, and how gay employees frame their sense of who they are, when faced with silence. Likewise the critical approach poses questions around how power and knowledge can shape social practices and set new social practices into play through language, when that very language is absent.

One way of addressing these issues is through a deconstructionist
response by using Derrida’s concept of différance to explain the silence by considering absent words. But the silence itself, and the shape it takes, may be constructed by the discourse that exists around it; indeed, these gaps in discourse, contingent on the organization, can play as powerful a role as speech itself, perhaps even becoming part of the organization’s discursive practices. If, as we have suggested, silence is constructed by the discourse that surrounds it, then is it not possible that silence, existing as it does in binary opposition to discourse, constructs the discourse in return? In order to capture this concept, we have borrowed a term from the vocabulary of two-dimensional visual language in practical art: negative space. Positive space is the space occupied by the drawing object and negative space is the space behind the object or between two objects (Hoddinott, 2003). In practical art, it is often the practice not only to draw the composition, but also to draw the negative spaces which force an awareness of the composition as a whole (Rodwell, 2002). In the same way, we believe that the focus on, and deconstruction of, silence forces an awareness of discourse as a whole. In Gestalt psychology the ground is as important as the figure in defining and understanding the whole ‘gestalt’. A gestalt therapist will look for what is absent as well as what is present to develop understanding, for example, in the case of someone talking of the death of a parent without any emotion. Likewise, in photographic film, the negative is an important part in producing the picture. Another brief example may help to explain this concept: when drawing, for example, a leaf, concentration on the leaf alone would lead us to draw what we know to be a leaf, rather than what we see. We know what a leaf looks like, so why bother to check that we have drawn it correctly? However, because we have no preconceived notion about the shape of a space, by focusing on the negative space that surrounds the leaf, it becomes necessary to look very carefully at what we are drawing (Rodwell, 2002). In the same way, when deconstructing discourse we may be tempted to understand what we know to be the meaning rather than what we hear in spoken discourse or read in written discourse, or text. By focusing on silence, or the negative space that exists between talk, it forces us to have an awareness of the discourse as a whole.

**A research method for uncovering silence on sexuality in organizations**

The study took place over the period June 2001 to October 2001 in one of the smaller UK government departments. The ‘Department’ has a headquarters with various regional offices. It has made significant progress in
managing diversity in recent years; employees receive equal opportunities training, there are regular workshops on various different aspects of diversity, and diversity features in annual performance appraisal forms. Despite a previous focus on race and gender, the Department has nevertheless made progress in other areas such as sexuality. There is a lesbian and gay employee network, testimonials from gay employees have been used at equality conferences in the organization, and a banner carrying the Department’s name has been carried at London’s annual Lesbian and Gay Pride march.

One, if not the major, complication in carrying out research into sexual minorities in organizations is in how to gather data when silence surrounds them. Silence not only because it is an under-researched area, but silence because it is difficult to get people talking about the subject at all. A key challenge of this research was to create an approach and research method that could break and explore this silence.

The study was conducted by one of the authors, himself a gay man, and data were collected at two levels, the individual and the group. This approach aimed to resolve the tension between the individual and organizational level of analysis and to access what can be very private experiences of sexuality in organizations, and surface ‘discourse’ itself. First, 17 individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with lesbians and gay men in order to collect stories around sexual minorities in the organization and their experiences, focal events and incidents at work. Respondents were recruited by asking for volunteers from the organization’s lesbian and gay network, and the profile of the respondents can be seen in Table 1.

The data collection method for the individual interviews was storytelling. The interviewer raised issues such as whether the individual was out at work, how they managed their identity, what coming out was like and so on.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total no. of participants</th>
<th>40</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender Woman</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Men</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location London</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location Other</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade Team leader</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade Middle manager</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade Administrator</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal opportunities experience A</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal opportunities experience B</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal opportunities experience C</td>
<td>15</td>
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</table>
on. Beyond this loose structure, however, respondents were encouraged to tell their stories in their own way. Storytelling is a relatively recent addition to the area of discourse analysis, but one which is growing in importance as researchers explore their power to communicate the character of the organization in stories which are essentially part of the fabric and life of organizations (Gabriel, 2000).

However, individual stories were not enough. In order to explore the production of sexual identity with relation to discourse within the organization, the research needed to go beyond individuals to capturing group processes, and encourage discussion on the topic which is often left unspoken, and data would therefore take a long time to collect through observation or other methods. These stories were then taken to focus groups, in each of the Department's locations, to get people talking about issues relating to sexual minorities, and how they, as members of the organization reacted to these stories told by their colleagues. Did they recognize the stories? How did they feel about the issues raised? Did they recognize the issues as valid?

Six focus groups were carried out throughout the organization. Sexuality was not controlled for; the aim was to recruit a number of different people across the organization, and not to create a ‘straight’ or heterosexual focus group. Neither did we want a ‘gay’ focus group as we had already collected a large amount of data on sexual minorities from the individual interviews. Only one individual interviewee came to a focus group.

As can be seen from Table 1, more women than men took part in the groups, although there was an even split between London and the regions. Five senior managers also took part with the remainder being split between middle managers and administrators.

The participants were recruited by sending an email to heads of department, asking them to ask for volunteers in their department. A good cross-section of staff took part, as the focus groups were in different geographical locations (different functions are located in the different locations). In order to ensure that we had not just spoken to people who were engaged with the topic of sexuality, we arranged for one of the London groups to be recruited on a different basis. Here we targeted one department, and six people were selected at random and invited to take part by the head of department.

One example of the stories collected from the individual interviews and used in the focus groups is provided in Figure 1.
Findings: Themes of silence

Silence was not part of the original focus of the research but emerged as a significant factor and underlying theme in a number of different guises.

There can be no doubt that, compared with less positive organizations, the Department is a very good place for sexual minorities to work; there is little overt discrimination, efforts are made to limit covert discrimination, such as third-party reviewing of annual appraisals, the employee network for lesbian and gay employees is very high profile, and personal accounts abound with positive stories. The organization appeared to be a positive place for lesbians and gay men.

However, a pattern of ‘silence as absence’ started to build up, both in the research, and emerging from the data, as the following comment from one of the respondents demonstrates:

I wouldn’t say it’s a positive place to work – there’s an absence of negativity, but that’s not the same as being positive.

Looking elsewhere in the data, it seemed that identity was constructed by a pattern of absence – what was not said, rather than what was said.

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Private Lives

The reaction to my coming out was no reaction. I didn’t encounter any hostility. There was gossip about it but not to my face. The big difference I noticed in the way colleagues treat me is the degree of interest they show in my life outside work. When I was married, it was a two-way process; there was mutual interest in the mundane things in life, what we did at the weekend, kids, pets, even the trip to the supermarket. That way of communicating is now closed off to me to some extent. I’ve noticed that I can be asking people about what they do, but as soon as I start talking about what I’m doing they shut down, because they’re not prepared to hear, even though it’s tedious and boring. Some people will talk about their children ad nauseam and what they did at the weekend, but then if I say what my partner and I did at the weekend, it’s ‘oh well back to work, got lots of e-mails’! I regard the relationship I’m in now as equally valid to the one I had when I was married. This isn’t the case with the people I work closely with so much, but is especially obvious with people I don’t know particularly well.

Figure 1 ‘Private Lives’, one of the stories used in the research
Silence in the organization

**Coming out means leaving silence behind**

During the research process, some themes recurred and became prominent. One of these was coming out. When asked to describe what it was like coming out, most interviewees described it as significant. One respondent talked about his coming out in the following way:

> My defining moment was, I think, when I was able to come out completely. I brought my partner to the Christmas party which to me was completely unheard of, and there were no repercussions of any sort. It gave me enough confidence to really get into my work. To the point where I was one of the best workers in the office and it got me promotion in the end.

Earlier in this article we made reference to research which has shown that those people who are out at work are more committed and have greater loyalty to their organization than those who remain in the closet (Day & Schoenrade, 2000). This respondent would tend to support this and the fact that he reported that his level of confidence had improved is consistent with the view that the uncovering of silence is constitutive of a positive gay identity.

This interviewee was not alone in describing his ‘defining moment’ at work as his coming out. All interviewees were asked what their most important moment at work had been. All asked whether we meant as a gay man or lesbian, or as an employee in general; we left it up to them to choose. Most chose their coming out as the high point of their career. Nevertheless, there is an unavoidable paradox in the ‘speech act’ of coming out, where talk and action seem to blur into one (Butler, 1997). The paradox involves the concepts of silence and power; sexual minorities, by remaining silent and in the closet, are invisible and lack power. However, through the process of coming out, they become visible and are no longer silent, but they can still lack power because of the hegemonic relationship of the homo-hetero binary; as the causality of lack of power is transferred from silence to loss of control over discourse.

Foucault refers to this loss of control over language when he suggests that one's life is not reducible to the discourse that one speaks or to the sphere of discourse that animates one's life (Butler, 1997). However, another interpretation is that creating space for the subject in discourse does not mean that the discourse then belongs to the subject. Indeed, the subject may lose discursive control.
Reactive silence and the blank response

Coming out was often met with silence from others in the organization. People in the Department reacted with disinterest to the fact that their colleagues were gay. The account given in Figure 1 is from someone who was once married and then came out as a gay man, and where he compares the two experiences. The lack of talk and interest in his private life made him feel different, abnormal and excluded. The way that language achieves closeness and intimacy between people through informal communication was referred to as 'phatic communion' by the anthropologist Malinowski in 1923, which can be a means of defusing the potential hostility of silence in situations where speech is conventionally anticipated (Jaworski & Coupland, 1999). The scenario described in Figure 1 suggests that by 'shutting down' and avoiding this social communication, the respondent's colleagues, consciously or unconsciously, are using silence as a tool of hostility. Indeed, although injurious language depends on the use of names, it can take the form of silence (Butler, 1997). Work colleagues create social reality for gay people in the workplace, through the absence of what might be said, and what is left unsaid. It could also be said to be constitutive of social identity and the way in which they are seen by their colleagues (Hardy et al., 2000). It is important to recognize that, although we have interpreted this lack of reaction in a negative way, with possibilities ranging from disinterest to hostility, there are many more potential explanations. The reaction of the focus groups to this issue suggests that people may fear two things; one is the fear of offending, so it is easier to say nothing and maintain the silence. The second is the fear of finding out too much. The gay man or lesbian is seen as lascivious and sexually charged (Hall, 1989). Using Derrida's concept of 'différance', the absent, oppositional response may have been that of showing interest in their life outside work, but this would have meant involvement in a conversation the details of which might be unwelcome. We had an insight into what form this absent discourse might be when there was a reaction to this situation from one of the focus groups:

There is a limit (to what you want to know about a gay person), but you can’t control it – the only thing is to walk away.

Interestingly, the focus group compares the potential embarrassment of talking to a gay man about his weekend with the embarrassment felt by work colleagues when an employee comes back to work after a death in the family:
The reason they clam up is that they assume that he is going to tell them exactly what he got up to that weekend and they don’t want to know. That would be their ignorance – he does do boring things, but because they’ve never met a gay person before they think he puts his pink spandex trousers on. I would assume it’s something they’ve never encountered before and so don’t know how to treat it. It’s like when someone comes back to work after a death in the family – you don’t know what to say to people – you don’t know how to treat them . . . . And people in that office are thinking – if I ask him this he might think I’m prying.

Another respondent felt aggrieved because work social events are peppered with heterosexual couplings, which then go on to form the subjects of office gossip, but in his case, did not:

There’s a long tradition in the Civil Service of going off for a couple of days and staying in some hotel, and having these huge ‘getting-to-know-you’ sessions. . . . And one occasion, quite a long time ago, I got off with somebody basically, very publicly – oh yeah, it was very public. I don’t think it came as any great shock, maybe the incident came as a shock, but the basics of it didn’t. I mean it wasn’t anything I did deliberately. Since then nobody ever said a word to me about it. It was almost like it didn’t happen.

This particular event, by its unusual nature, being a homosexual and not a heterosexual coupling at an office party, was perhaps more likely to be talked about. Yet as far as the respondent was concerned, it was totally ignored by colleagues and other employees. Given that deconstruction represents an attempt to demonstrate the absent presence of the oppositional Other (Hancock & Tyler, 2001), what people say is not simply expressive of what is present, but also of what is absent. In that sense, in this example, what is present is a lack of acknowledgement of an alternative sexual relationship. And this social practice, which would inform discourse, paradoxically unless fed by discourse, will disappear from the collective memory. By not being talked about, events are starved of the oxygen which would breathe life into them and give them meaning. By ignoring alternative sexualities, by refusing them the currency of social discourse the organization makes it more difficult for sexual minorities to construct an ‘out’ social identity. But importantly, what is absent in this scenario is any sort of naming. ‘Naming’ is an important form of social acknowledgement. Lack of ‘naming’ can be a form of blindness or blankness or rubbing out. However, it is possible that this discourse is only absent in front of the lesbian and gay employee, it may still
persist behind their back. Judith Butler recognizes this, suggesting that one's social self can be constructed by others in one's absence:

Consider the situation in which one is named without knowing that one is named, . . . one may imagine oneself in ways that are quite to the contrary of how one is socially constituted.

(Butler, 1997: 30–1)

The reaction of the majority in the focus groups agreed with the respondent's suspicion that people generally wanted to suppress talk of sexual minorities. For example, in one focus group the complaint was that although 'They have a right to exist in the working environment,' one's sexuality is of no interest to other people. Again, Derrida's concept of différance helps to deconstruct the marginalization being enacted upon the expression of this gay man's sexuality when we consider that displays of heterosexual sexuality are constantly evident in the work environment, such as wedding rings, talk of husbands and wives, and pictures of children. This contradiction can lead some to feel that it is the homosexual's sexuality that is of no interest to other people, rather than sexuality in general. There is the acknowledgement that they have a right to exist, although this right comes with strings attached (Fairclough, 1989); as long as they suppress their own identity. But identity is constituted, in this instance, in another way; through performance. Heterosexual coupleings at work social events may be described as a performance; in certain circumstances it is almost ritualistic. Performativity, and in this case performativity of heteronormativity, is a repetition and a ritual which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body and culturally accepted norms (Butler, 1999).

Gay people may be discriminated against at work because they fail to appear in accordance with accepted gendered norms (Butler, 1999), in this case the respondent failed to appear in accordance with accepted heterosexual performance. Because heterosexual performance is itself constructed, this is, ironically not a copy of an original, as it were, but a copy of a copy (Butler, 1999).

Silence as a means of suppression

In the previous examples, silence was the manifestation of a refusal by the majority to engage in discussions of sexuality. But silence does not always mean the same in different contexts. Silence can also be a means of suppressing social reality; by not allowing certain things to be talked about.

One comment of complaint from the focus groups was why we should
be talking about lesbians and gay men at all. Heterosexuals were not singled out for special treatment so why should homosexuals be? For example, they have a right to exist in the working environment, but my sexuality is of no interest to anybody else. I don’t have a website, and I don’t have my picture in (the magazine). I just think they should be treated like everyone else in the Department. What are we doing for single mothers?

The issue of ‘special treatment’ is one which is contested across a number of diversity areas – race, gender, marital status as well, and as shown above, attempts to promote more visibility for one group can cause resentment by members of others. There is not always solidarity among members of the targeted group over such actions, or support from those of other disadvantaged groups. Suppression and silencing of discourse renders them invisible (Kirsch, 2000) and makes it harder for them to develop confidence and power through shared identity. Silencing discourse around sexual minorities is a very effective way of suppressing their identity. One incident in one of the focus groups demonstrates silencing as an act of suppression; one of the focus group participants, who was black, female and gay, was arguing in favour of positive action. One of the other participants, who was clearly respected by some of his colleagues, and who was male, white and middle-aged, raised his eyes towards the ceiling and sighed audibly. Immediately, the group’s attention was moved away from the first participant, whose argument was now lost.

Silence can be a symptom of censorship at work

One of the issues in using storytelling as a data-collection method was the loss of power over content. In telling their story, the interviewee has the power to surprise, disclose or even shock. They can also choose not to reveal important elements of the story. The first level of censorship is, therefore, in the gift of the individual storyteller. However, censorship does not remain at this level. Once told, the story can still struggle to be heard, as the organization attempts to censor and silence. The difference with suppression is that censorship is an expression of official power, rather than unofficial suppression. The researcher also becomes implacably involved, as censorship is an active process following the act of uncovering. The next story shows how, through legislation, the oppositional terms of heterosexual and homosexual have continued to be hierarchically constructed; the two terms are in a constant state of interdependence, as in order to be prioritized and shown to be superior, the ‘Other’ or homosexual has to be debased. The Section 28 in
the story refers to the common name for Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1986. This section prohibits local authorities in England and Wales from ‘promoting’ homosexuality. It also labels gay family relationships as ‘pretend’.

I was dealing with the whole area of HIV, drugs and health. There was a lot of very positive stuff that went on there. I was right in the midst of that. There were lots of strong personalities; lots of them with their own personal agendas and a propensity to go to the press and leak things. The first two or three years went very well. Lots of successes, lots of firsts. But of course in the midst of all of this we have the spectre of the repeal of Section 28. Things were getting increasingly difficult with the Minister and his then Political Advisers. There were lots of unhappy, edgy ministers. I’d taken a hell of a lot of that stuff, and it all went pear-shaped at the last minute. The churches got involved, who, of course, are not slow at turning things to their agenda; they thought it was totally inappropriate for a gay man to have such a strong say in the repeal of Section 28.

The respondent was then moved from his job and the story hit the newspapers. The respondent was left to face a barrage of reporters on his own, with little support from the Department. The assumption appeared to be that a gay man may not give impartial advice on an area dealing with homosexual issues. However, in some other areas of diversity, for example, gender issues, it is likely that a different argument would be used; instead of impartiality, advocacy would be preferred, including women to ensure valuable access to their experience on the issue. This would lead to a very different conclusion – that rather than being illegitimate, counting a woman as one of its members may be seen as a prerequisite. Again conflating diversity issues can create problems, but the comparison does demonstrate that different norms may be applied – where one working party on an issue seeks impartiality another seeks the representation, advocacy or experience of the disadvantaged group.

The first example of silencing encountered in this research in relation to this story came in the next few seconds after the telling, as the researcher was asked to switch off the tape recorder. The then Minister was, allegedly, notoriously homophobic. Recording examples of his homophobia was too frightening for the respondent, and repeating them here might be legally inadvisable (it is interesting to note that even in the act of discussing this area of censorship, the researchers felt it advisable to censor material for their own protection from litigation).
The second instance of this story being silenced came soon afterwards, when asked by the organization not to use the story during the focus groups. But the story would not go quietly - it surfaced in every single one of the focus groups carried out.

The third time that this story was silenced, and actually censored, was in the final report presented to the organization. Given that everyone had talked about it, it would have been misleading not to mention it in the final report; the researcher outlined the story and people's reactions to it in the briefest of ways. The organization asked for it to be deleted completely before the report was submitted.

Censorship also showed that the organization found it difficult to acknowledge certain unpleasant realities. One respondent said that he could not come out at work because he was afraid of being called a '****ing batty boy'. These words, for the sake of decorum, and at the request of the Department, had to be removed from the report, which raised the question of whether the leaders of the organization really know, when they hear complaints of verbal abuse, how serious this verbal abuse really can be.

The story told by the gay man who was removed from his job because of his sexuality demonstrates censorship in various different ways. What better way to eliminate a minority discourse, and assert the power of the dominant discourse (Fairclough, 1989) than to remove the person responsible for the minority discourse. This is consistent with Foucault's view of silence protecting the majority - 'Silence protects power' (Foucault, 1976). But, of course, the removal has its place in a meta-discourse; homosexuals have since the 18th century been seen as dishonest, lascivious people (Schuyf, 2000).

**Silence as self-protection and resistance**

A crucial feature of Foucault's analysis is the concept of 'reverse discourse' (Spargo, 1999), in which minorities are not only created, but also hostile discourse creates the opportunity for resistance. Silence can be used as a means of resistance in two principal ways. First, by remaining in the closet and remaining silent, sexual minorities can refuse to collaborate with the heteronormative discourses of the majority. They also control their own discourse; control is lost to an extent once silence is left behind. Identity may then become one of fragmentation and splitting into public façade and private view. This splitting can be notoriously difficult to research unless there is some leakage from the private into the public arena, for example, where the interview becomes seen as a private confessional enabling some of the public façade to slip.
Silence in this sense then becomes a form of passive resistance. It is much harder to do battle with something that is not tangibly present. Whereas silence in many contexts is associated with lack of power, the withholding of knowledge, which may otherwise provide others with words that can be used as ‘evidence’ or for ‘persecution’, can be empowering, and can also provide access into a world of talk that may otherwise be denied to someone. For example, the person silent on their sexual orientation may overhear opinions which disclosure would send underground.

Second, the minority is, occasionally in a majority position. One focus group in London had, if not a majority, certainly a large percentage of lesbians and gay men and the homophobic minority either did not exist, or had chosen to stay away or were silenced by the more vocal supporters of sexual minority. Foucault (1976: 133) identifies silence as ‘the obstacle, the starting point of resistance and opposition’. In this case, sexual minorities were using the very same tools of silencing to maintain power as the heterosexual majority; the difference was that their access to this tool was rare.

Silence in the research process

Voices that can be silenced: The researcher and the respondent

Silence was a theme which became apparent in the research process. There were two main issues, one was a question of voice, that is to say how much the researcher’s own voice would silence those that had previously been silenced. The second was a question of discomfort around uncovering silence that had previously protected the sexual minorities.

During these interviews and focus groups, the researcher was very conscious of his own voice, agenda and viewpoint. Being a gay man, with experience of working in a variety of corporate environments, was, from a reflexive point of view, important in gaining access to respondents and building up the necessary trust with them to carry out the interview. Also in using critical discourse analysis, having an agenda is essential, and therefore it is arguable whether the researcher’s voice could, or should, be silenced. Initially, it was decided not to allow this voice to come across in either the interviews or the focus groups, but the problem does not rest there. After analysis of the data, would it be possible for people to speak in their own voices (Czarniawska, 1999)? As a researcher, one can hope to be the spokesperson for others, but the goal of political representation jostles with the awareness that the researcher is ‘performing an act of ventriloquism’ (Czarniawska, 1999: 107).
There are a number of other metaphors that usefully illuminate the role of the researcher in articulating previously silenced voices. Another is the ‘parrot’ where one hopes to avoid a crude, loud parody of what can be an inexplicably complex array of experiences and emotions. Feminist researchers have discussed the problems of articulating silence, for example, Belenky et al. (1986) and Winstanley (2001) refer to a variety of ways of knowing - the power and lack of power in silence, the power to listen and to hear others’ stories, and the use of others to advocate or articulate one’s own narrative.

Potentially, most harm is done when interpretations are imposed on what the researcher claims to be authentic voices from the field. If rendering these voices to a wide audience were to be the goal, then it would be better to silence the researcher’s voice and to create speaking platforms for those not heard (Czarniawska, 1999). However, the desire was to analyse, using a critical perspective, the way in which multiple silences are articulated and to construct the identity of sexual minorities in organizations. In doing this, it would be difficult to avoid using one’s own voice, both in analysing and in presenting the data. Nevertheless, the reader may also take a different view (Czarniawska, 1999).

The discomfort of uncovering silence

Not all of the respondents were ‘out’ at work, which suggests the researcher being involved in the process that Derrida described as the ‘third level of violence’ (Derrida, 1998; Johnson, 1997). This is not the visible and palpable violence of an aggression perpetrated by one person on another, but empirical violence, the uncovering of what has been covered over. Giving a voice to those who were silent in the organization is not a comfortable process - maintaining respondent anonymity suddenly became problematic. It brought private issues from the realm of the individual to the public arena for public scrutiny, not just in terms of sexuality. One respondent told of the death of his partner, and how the organization had dealt with it. This issue had been covered over, and uncovering it resulted in an out-pouring of emotion. This could not be ignored, for the issue and the way in which the organization had responded was particularly relevant to the research. Nevertheless, this did not make the researcher’s actions any less intrusive, or make the researcher feel any less of an intruder.
Conclusion

This research had the aim of looking at the construction of minority sexual identity in organizations through discourse. The distinction between self and social identity has been shown to be an important conceptual division to make, as 'silence' in certain work contexts may mean that there is a lack of congruence between self sexual identity and social sexual identity, or between different social identities in different contexts. The silence that enables this splitting to take place can be evident in a number of ways.

Despite the organization in this case study being forward-looking, and one which took great care to give lesbians and gay men a voice, it was surprising to find there were many examples of where silence was a recurrent theme.

The literature on discourse has identified silence as a discursive practice (Foucault, 1976) which contributes to the identity construction of sexual minorities in organizations, as well as being a feature of the power relationship between the homosexual minority and the heterosexual majority (Butler, 1997). Previous research would suggest that silence, although still a powerful discursive element, takes only one form - the absence of language, the absence of noise, the absence of discursive practices themselves. The notion of the 'absent presence' in this article emphasizes the importance of absorbing all aspects of discourse in exploring sexual identity and discourse, because the absence of talk on minority sexual identity is as meaningful as the presence of talk on majority sexual identity. We have demonstrated the importance of viewing silence as being part of discourse, - the notion of 'negative space' highlights the interconnectedness of the positive 'talk' and negative 'space' which together constitute discursive meaning. In conceiving of silence, in a metaphorical sense, as negative space, we have suggested that our understanding of discourse can be potentially increased by focusing on the silence that exists in and around it. Although considering silence as a means of understanding discourse, we posit the notion that thinking of silence metaphorically as negative space helps us to understand that silence can take different forms itself. The exploration of silence has shown that it can take on multiple meanings and roles. First, there is the idea that undisclosed minority sexual identity is a silent identity, and that 'coming out' means leaving that silence behind, and enabling social identity to be more congruent with self-identity. Our findings also showed that silence can be reactive and that whilst there is an absence of a response, silence itself can be a very powerful presence. Silencing can be used by a group as an active means of suppressing the 'Other', in this case minority sexualities. We have also seen how silence can be an example of censorship in the organization,
demonstrating Foucault's view that silence can be an agent of power in its own right. In addition, silence can be used as a means of self-protection, either by not coming out, and thereby refusing the heteronormative agenda that exists in organizations, or paradoxically, when sexual minorities are in the majority, they can, themselves, use silence as a means of power. Finally, the research acknowledged the importance of silence in the research process and the dynamic of silencing which can face researchers themselves.

Given this diversity of forms of silence, the metaphor of negative space can help our understanding; silence can change its shape, form and nature depending on the discourse around it, and depending on the intention, either purposeful or inadvertent, behind it. Assuming that silence is at least as constitutive of social reality for, and the identity of, sexual minorities in organizations, as other elements of discourse, and building on the idea that silence is, as suggested, negative space which takes different forms, then these different forms may be constitutive of social reality and identity for sexual minorities in organizations in different ways. Our intention in this article has been to identify these multiple forms of silence, and we have discussed how they play out in an organizational context with regard to the construction of minority sexual identity in work organizations. We believe that the impact of the negative space of silence on the construction of other identities and its interplay with power relations, as it is not just silence, but also the construction of identity itself which may have power over others, whilst beyond the remit of this article, would potentially be a useful and interesting area for further work.

Notes

1 This is a later draft of a paper presented at the 18th EGOS Colloquium, 4–6 July 2002, Barcelona, Spain ('Silence is (not) Sexy: Organizing Sound and Silence').
2 Author's own translation.
3 Explained in full on page 18.
4 It should be noted that there has now been a change of administration.
5 'Pear-shaped' is a form of slang used in the UK to denote 'wrong' even 'disastrously wrong', 'fall apart' or 'not according to plan'.

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