

Coming out at work: Reasons and Strategies

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With the collaboration of Michael Bernier

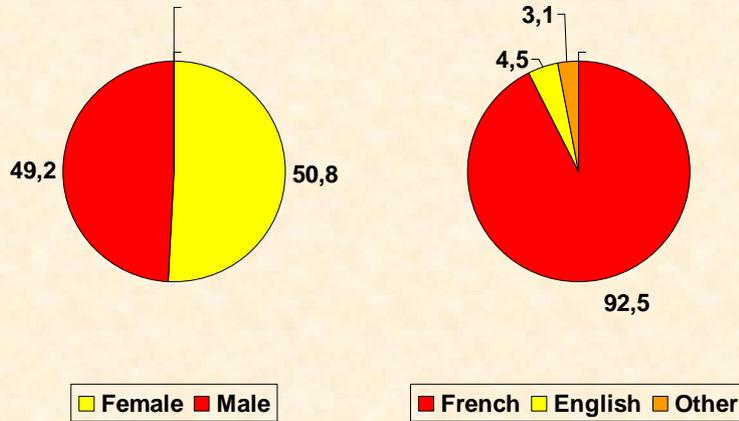
As early as 1977, the province of Quebec prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation in its Charter of Rights. It was the first province in Canada and one of the first governments in the world to do so. In the rest of Canada, it took about 20 years of demonstration, political lobbying and court appeals, before sexual orientation was finally taken into account in the Canadian constitution and in the Bill of Rights of all other provinces and territories¹. Still anti-discrimination measures were not enough to engender equal treatment of gays and lesbians in all spheres of life. More recently, many legal changes acknowledged their couples and family relationships². Recognition of cohabiting same-sex couples was obtained in 1999 in Quebec and in 2000 in federal laws. The judicial system in Quebec is different from those in the other provinces: civil status, intergenerational affiliation and family rights and obligations are defined by a Civil code, inherited from the times of French colonialism. In 2002, the Quebec parliament modified the Civil code by creating a new institution, called the civil union, opened to both homosexual and heterosexual couples and quite similar to a marriage without being called as such because the definition of marriage is a matter of federal jurisdiction. In the same bill, the Québec parliament recognized that a child, conceived by medical or non-medical insemination or adopted, could legally have two mothers or two fathers, whatever their civil status (cohabiting couple or civil union), both having the same parental status and responsibilities. Finally, in 2004, following court decisions, gays and lesbians could get married in Quebec and in a few other provinces, a reality that became an official Canadian law in 2005.

These legal changes both reflect and entail a positive evolution in public opinion and attitudes towards gays and lesbians³ in society at large. Even though their positive repercussions are not all immediate, through their symbolic strength they legitimise individual claims to respect and social acceptance, collective struggles against homophobia and the implementation of inclusive policies. Public debate around these issues gives gay men and lesbians more social visibility and, in Quebec for sure, more exposure and a better image in the mass media. In the workplace, the new laws give access to a variable set of concrete advantages, such as leaves

to get married or for a partner's sickness, parental leaves, insurances and pension plans, depending on the particular individual or collective labour contract. Gay and lesbian workers are incited to come out in order to profit from these newly acquired advantages. In many cases, if they are in a civil union, married or cohabiting with a same-sex partner, they have the obligation to declare their status at least to their employer for administrative reasons related to taxation and medication insurance plan. On the whole, the recent legal changes have transformed the context in which is taken the decision to come out or not to come out at the job.

During the last 3 years, I conducted a large empirical study in Quebec aiming to produce an up-to-date, well-grounded account and analysis of the situation of gays and lesbians in their work environment. The research had 3 objectives: 1) to gather information on discrimination against and marginalization of gays and lesbians in the workplace; 2) to analyze their decision to reveal or not their sexual orientation, the ways they choose to do so and the consequences incurred; 3) to assess their willingness to take advantage of their recently acquired legal rights and the difficulties they encountered. Using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, we collected 786 questionnaires and completed 204 interviews with gays and lesbians of all ages, working in different jobs and sectors of employment. We recruited participants defining themselves as gay and lesbian, using this or any other term such as homosexual or queer. Today's presentation is based mostly on the analysis of the self-administered questionnaires. Men and women are almost equally represented; 92.5% of the respondents declare French as their maternal language and the linguistic minorities, Anglophones and immigrants from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, are thus under-represented with respectively 4.5% and 3.1% of the participants.

Methodology : 786 self-administered questionnaires



Coming out at the job: a risky decision?

Concealing one's sexual identity was up until recently the most frequent adaptive strategy to face anticipated discrimination and homophobia in the workplace. Contrarily to other stigmatised identities, sexual orientation is not an "easily observable characteristic"⁴. Being identified as gay or lesbian is the result of a complex interactive process in which this particular feature is unveiled, claimed or assigned to a person, according to the interpretation given to a set of conducts and symbols, relating to clothes, manners and ways of speaking, which are codified as signs of belonging to the category "homosexual" in a specific cultural context. Hence gays and lesbians are involved in an ongoing decision-making process of coming out or not in different social situations and spheres of life. In the work place, the stakes at hand are particularly high because of the potentially negative consequences resulting from the loss or diminishing of all sorts of gratifications - economic, psychological and social - brought by employment. In most research, the decision to reveal or conceal sexual orientation is analysed as resulting mostly from the perceived degree of open-mindedness about sexual diversity in the work environment⁵.

Recent research approaches the dilemma of visibility at the workplace not as a dichotomous choice between being out or not but as a combination of various strategic ways of expressing or hiding not only sexual preferences and activities but many aspects of personal private life which can expose or make known information revealing homosexuality to others. Between direct affirmation of sexual orientation and, at the other extreme, covering up by adopting a

heterosexual façade, there is a host of intermediate strategies such as evasive answers to indiscrete questions and cultivating ambiguity about personal relationships. Gays and lesbians will use and mix different strategies in a selective manner depending on the personal characteristics and hierarchical position of the individual they are interacting with (is that person a colleague? A boss? A client?), depending also on the specific context, on the weight of anticipated advantages and disadvantages. These strategic choices fluctuate over time, opening up the possibility of a progressive unveiling of homosexuality in a particular environment - although the reverse is impossible – and these choice might change according to transformation of the cultural, economic and legislative context.

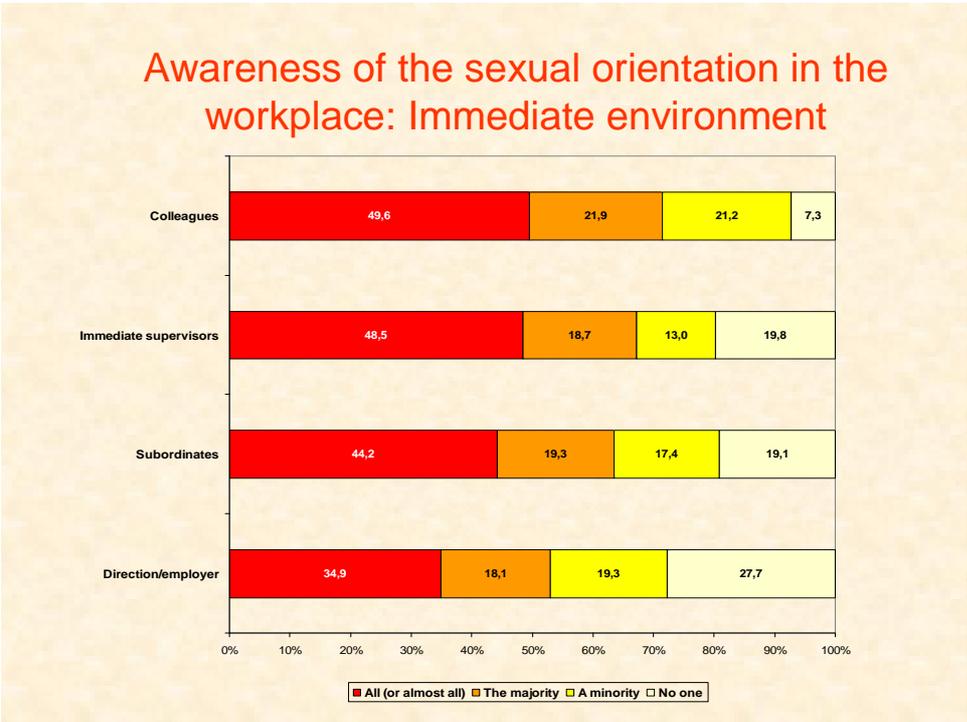
Who knows?

We asked the participants about awareness of their sexual orientation by the different categories of people with whom they interact in the workplace. As you can see, 71,5% of respondents say their homosexuality is known by the majority or by all or almost all their colleagues. The percentages decrease a little when we consider two other groups, with respectively 67,2% in the case of immediate supervisors and 63,5% for subordinates. On the whole, for a large majority of participants, information about sexual orientation is not a secret in the immediate work environment, which is not to say that they are constantly visible or out as gay and lesbian as we will see. On the other side, for more than a quarter of the participants, this information is still undisclosed to all surrounding people, at least to their knowledge, or known from only a minority. The proportion of respondents declaring complete concealment when dealing with one group or another indicates more cautiousness with people occupying a different level in the hierarchy than with colleagues.

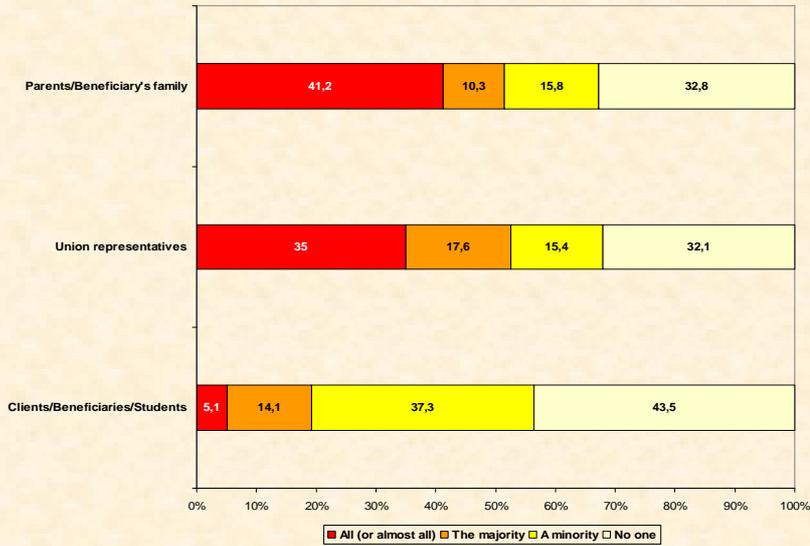
Awareness of sexual orientation is weaker when we consider what we could call the secondary environment, people with whom there is less daily interaction. Only a tiny majority of respondents say their sexual orientation is widely known by employers or by higher levels of direction, by union representatives or by parents (in the case of teachers). It is also noticeable that information about sexual orientation is more frequently completely hidden in these cases. Finally, awareness of sexual orientation decreases drastically with clients, students or patients. We can think of different explanations varying according to the type of clients and of services offered; interviews clearly suggest that working with clients such as children or adolescents, people with physical or mental disabilities is an important factor to consider because of persistent stereotypes linking homosexuality and sexual abuse. But what these data suggests on the whole is a pattern of selective visibility depending of the context and the position of the other interacting person in the work environment. It also means that

awareness of sexual orientation is not to be confused with projecting an image or showing visible symbols that could easily be decoded as signifying a homosexual identity by most people, including bosses and clients.

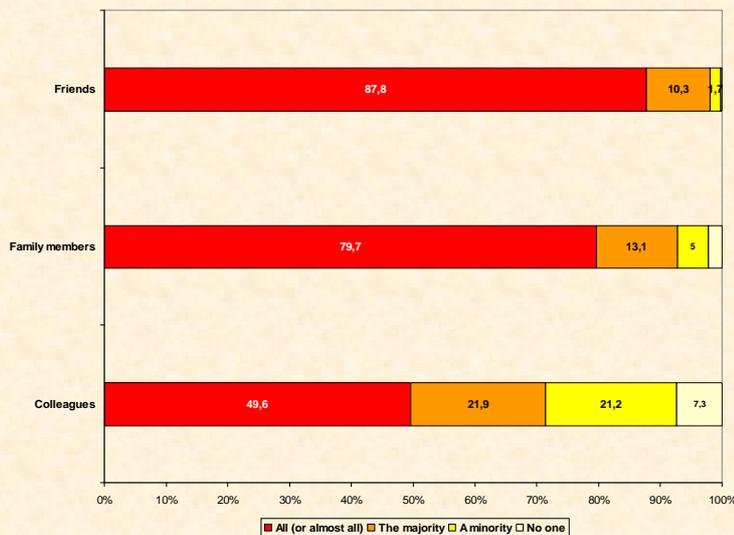
It is interesting to compare awareness of sexual orientation in different life areas. Evidently, our respondents are not in the closet in their personal lives. For 8 out of 10 individuals, sexual orientation is known by all or almost all family members. In another 13% of cases, it is known by the majority of relatives. The situation is similar with friends and acquaintances where keeping silence about homosexuality is exceptional. The gap between the private sphere and the work environment - considering only the category of the colleagues which is the most well-informed about sexual orientation - indicates that a significant number of respondents are discrete at the workplace and take precautions so that their sexual orientation doesn't become largely known, which again points to a pattern of selective visibility.



Awareness of the sexual orientation in the workplace: Secondary environment

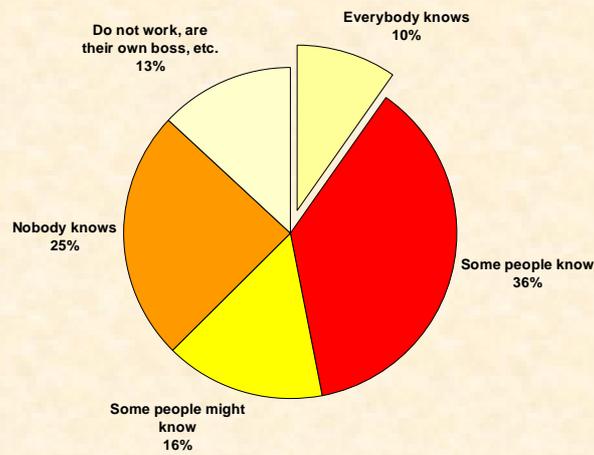


Awareness of the sexual orientation in the workplace: Colleagues vs family and friends



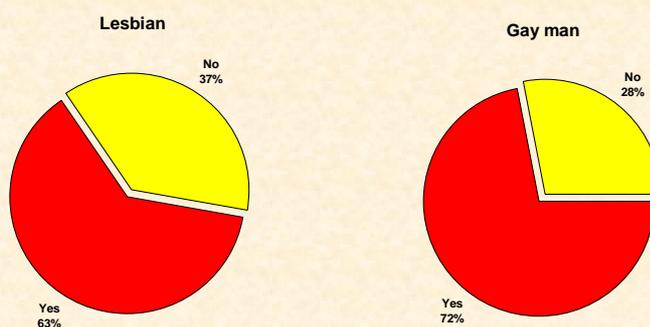
We don't have any corresponding data for the past but a study based on a sample of 1 000 lesbians published in 1984 gives us a comparative perspective⁶. In this study, only 10% declared that everybody knew of their sexual orientation at work while more than half said that only some people knew or might have known and a quarter said that nobody knew about their lesbianism.

Bertrand Report (1984): Awareness of the sexual orientation of 1000 lesbians in their workplace



When asked which category of people they were most likely to disclose their sexual orientation to, a majority of respondents checked other lesbians and gay men as their first or second choice among a series of possibilities. So not surprisingly, we observe that 72% know at least one gay man in their workplace and 63% know at least one lesbian.

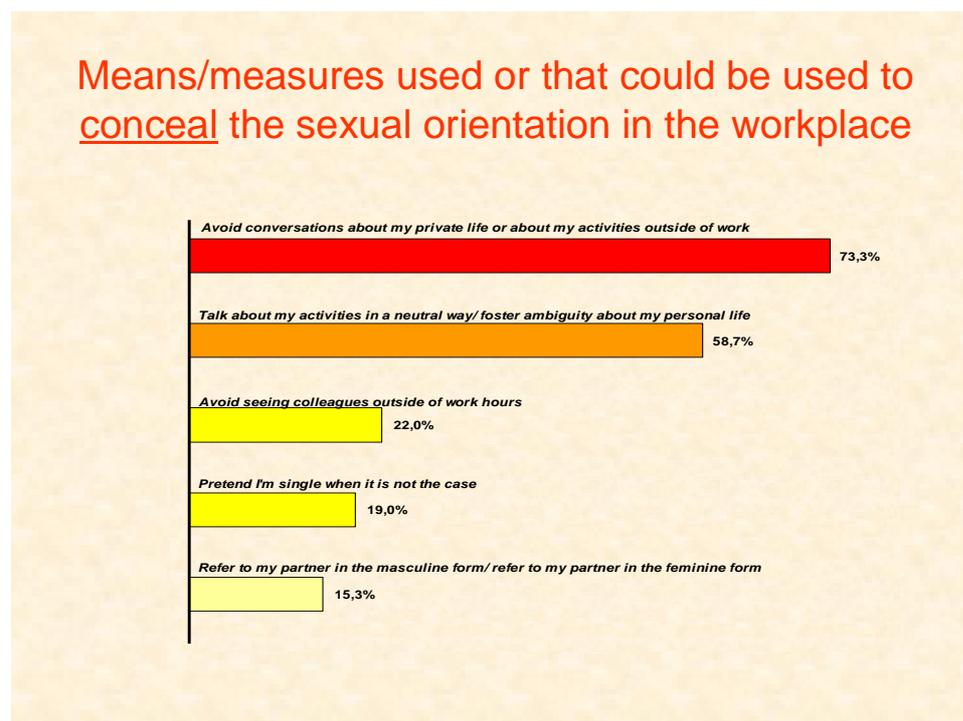
Proportion of respondents knowing another gay man or another lesbian in the workplace



In and out of the closet: Strategies and motives

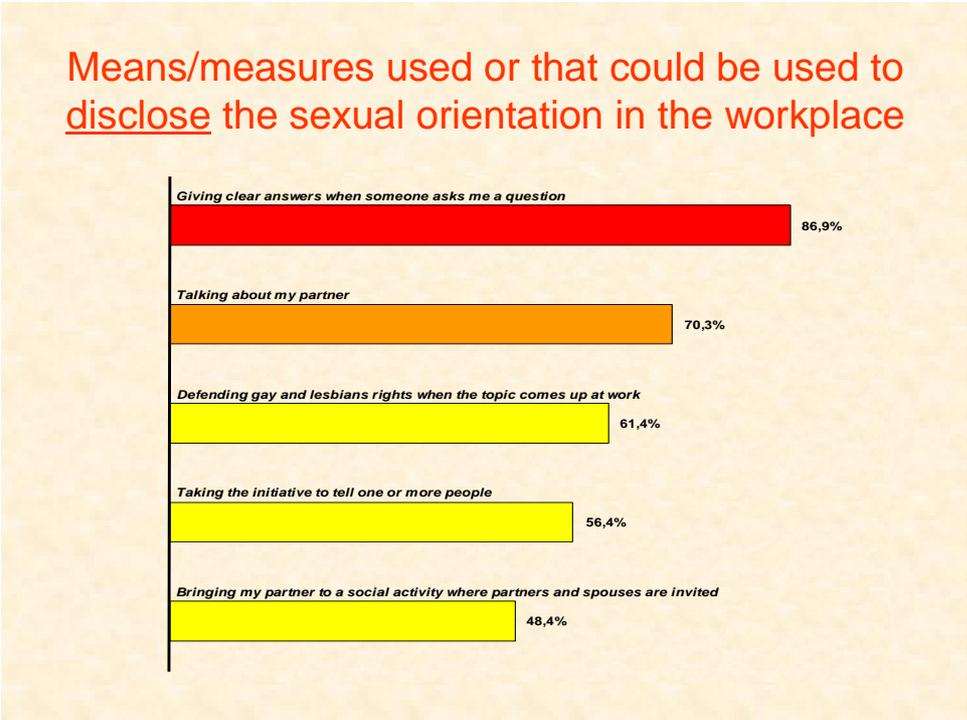
We now turn to the strategies used by gay and lesbian workers to conceal or to disclose their homosexuality at work. Drawing from the literature, we presented respondents with a list of

possible means to hide their sexual orientation and asked them if they had or would use them if necessary. These means are classically divided in active strategies, such as inventing a different-sex partner, and passive strategies, such as omission or ambiguity about one's own private life, or avoiding situations where one would have to open up about his sexuality or couple relationship⁷. Active strategies require more efforts in putting a mask, creating and sending false information in a credible way. Passive strategies more frequently reckon with the presumption of heterosexuality and the separation between public and private spheres. The majority of participants opted for passive strategies, the most popular one being avoiding conversations about private life or activities outside of work (73.3%). Many respondents also checked the options of talking in a neutral way and fostering ambiguity about personal life, especially if one is single and going out with friends for most of its social activities. Pretending to be single when it's not the case or changing the sex of one's partner are options selected by only a minority of respondents. Completely fictional strategies, such as inventing an opposite-sex partner, or making or approving homophobic jokes in order to turn away suspicion of homosexuality, received almost no support.



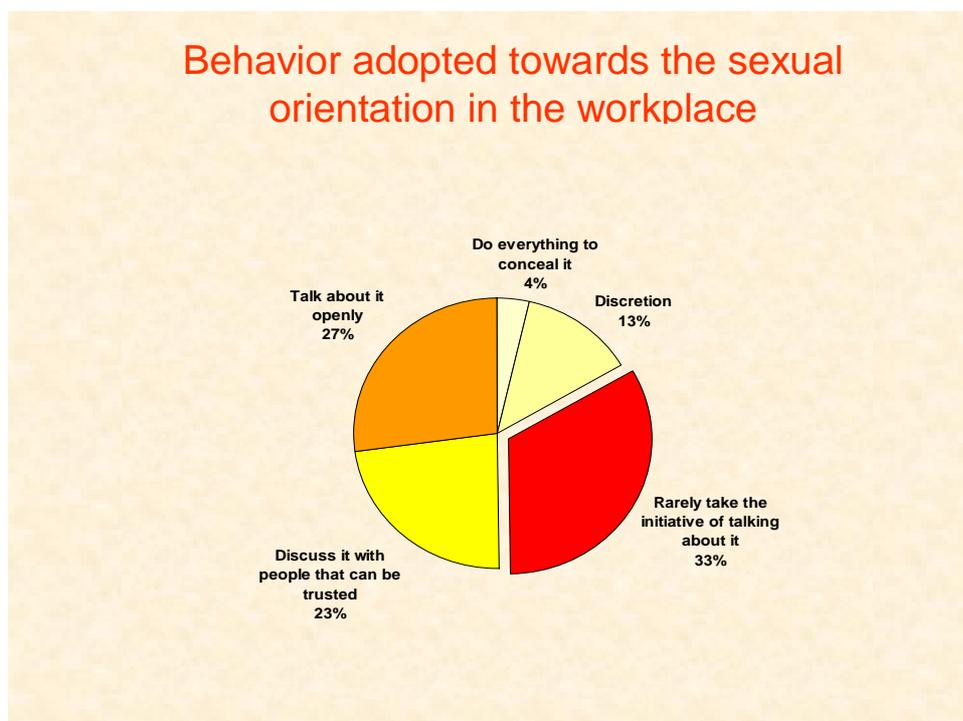
When asked what means they preferred when they wished to disclose their sexual orientation, respondents opted above all for direct and simple ways. Still, it is noticeable that the choice “Giving clear answers when someone asks a question” received support from 87% of respondents, a lot more than “Taking the initiative to tell one or more people” which was approved by 56% of them. In other terms, a vast majority of participants express a refusal of

lying, which is coherent with the rejection of inventing fictions about their lives. But only a slight majority opted for acting on one's own initiative. "Talking about my partner" is also a favourite answer (70.3%), probably because introducing this information in the daily conversation about couple and family activities is less dramatic than a sudden coming out and because it underlines the similarities between homosexuals and heterosexuals. Bringing the partner to a social activity where partners and spouses are invited is selected by almost half the respondents, which is certainly an indication of perceived open-mindedness in the work environment and of the positive impact of the new legal context. Still more respondents are willing to talk about their same-sex partner than to bring him or her to a social activity, which would imply a large exposure to all people of the work environment, whatever their position in the hierarchy and their attitude towards homosexuals.



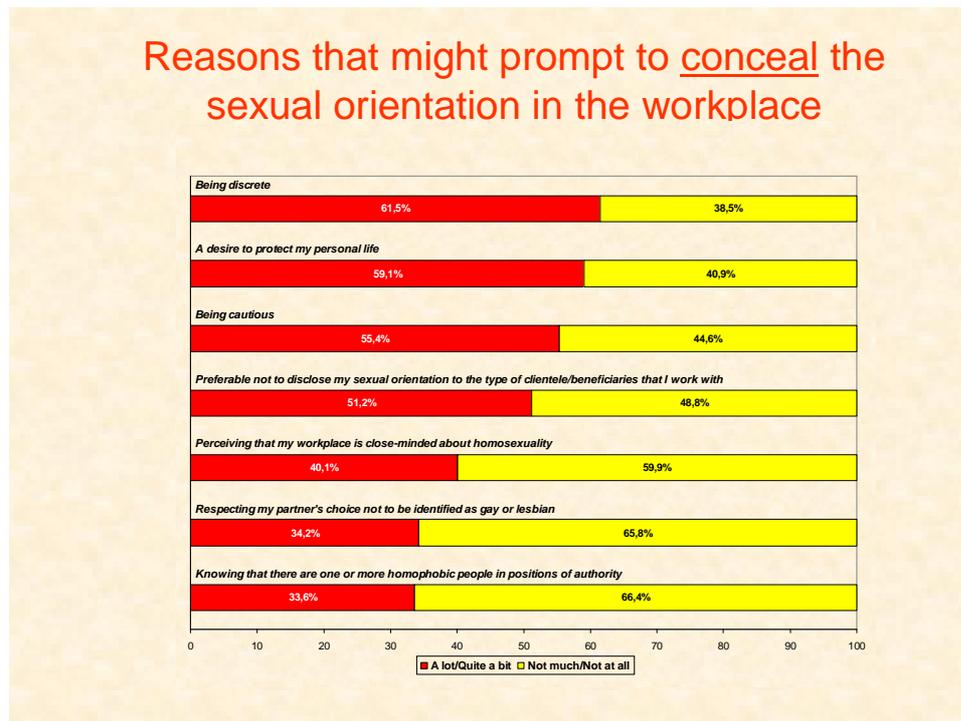
Awareness of sexual orientation by other people cannot be equated with the decision to come out and talk freely about one's sexual identity. For sure, it is influenced by the ways gay men and lesbians have decided to manage their sexual identity in their work environment. But people could have learned about it by other sources and at worst, the information about one's sexual orientation may have circulated against their will. In fact, almost a quarter of our respondents affirm that their sexual orientation has been disclosed so some or all their work colleagues against their will. So we asked our respondents to describe their general behaviour in the workplace by choosing between a series of affirmations. The results bring crucial nuances to the precedent data. While 27% say they talk about their sexual orientation openly,

regardless of who is present, 33% of respondents chose the statement “I rarely take the initiative of talking about my sexual orientation but I have no problem discussing it if someone brings up the topic” and 23% said they discussed the matter with certain people they can trust. While the vast majority of participants are not actively hiding their sexual orientation, more than half of them don’t bring it forward or select the people with whom they talk about it. We could interpret this as an indication that, for the majority of respondents, the environment is perceived as offering protection against blatant manifestations of homophobia and discrimination, so there is no need to actively and constantly hide information about their sexual orientation. Still they don’t feel comfortable or secure enough to display their sexual identity or talk about it without restraint in any circumstances.



We also asked the respondents which reasons might prompt them to conceal or disclose their sexual orientation to one or several people in the workplace and proposed a long list of possible motives in each case. It stands out from the data that explanations referring to the perceived open-mindedness or closeness of the work environment are among the most important. Five out of the seven reasons most frequently selected by respondents as rationale to justify concealment of sexual orientation refer to anticipation of negative consequences if sexual orientation becomes known, particularly by clients or by homophobic people in positions of authority. General reasons such as “being cautious” or “a desire to protect my personal life” imply a possible danger or, at least, harmful reactions from other people. Though the most popular answer, “being discrete”, refers to a personal characteristic, a matter

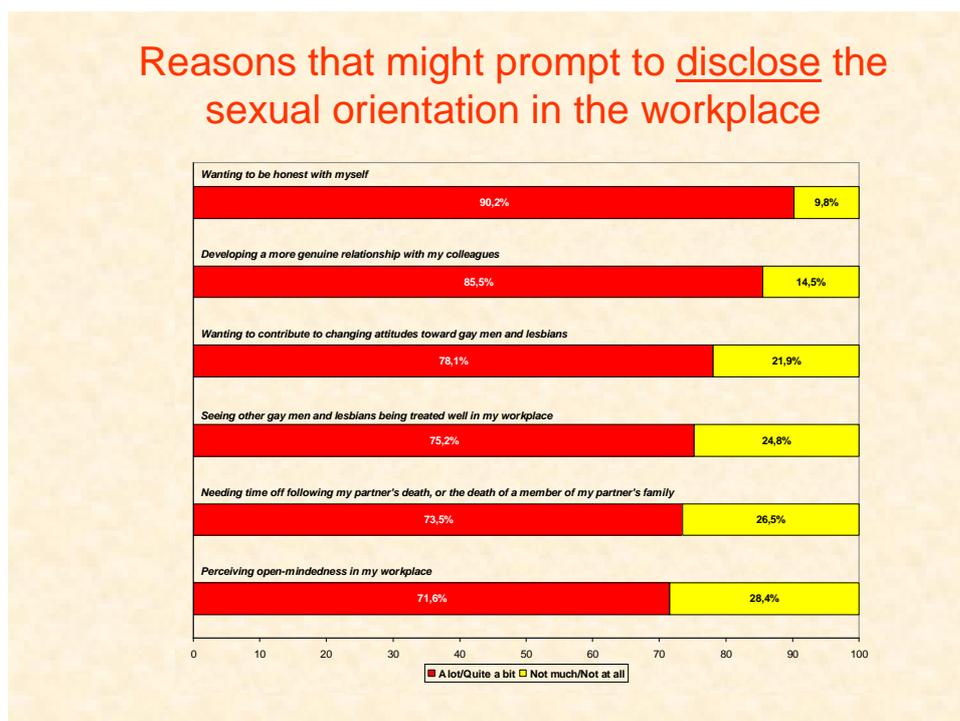
of temperament, it can also be interpreted as a learned behaviour, as an adaptive strategy which makes it easier not to drop any compromising information.



Among the most popular motives for being out at the job, we find the need to be honest with one’s self and, in second place, the will to develop a genuine relationship with the colleagues. This aspiration for authenticity is also strongly expressed in the interviews. As we have seen before, most participants reject strategies that would force them to have a double-life and constantly lie in order to build an image conform to heteronormative expectancies; the perceived risks do not necessitate such hard work. Sociologically speaking, these choices reflect a progressive dissolution of the frontier between the private and the public sphere in the work environment: colleagues become friends - at least some, discussion about personal, if not intimate, matters happens on a daily basis in the workplace and employers manage programs and policies where marital and parental status are taken into consideration. In such a context, it becomes harder to maintain a strict separation between private and public self-images.

Among the four other reasons most frequently invoked to justify coming out, the answers “Seeing other gay men and lesbians being treated well in my workplace” and “Perceiving open-mindedness in my workplace” indicate the importance of receiving positive messages from the work environment before feeling secure enough to come out. One might also deduce that gay/lesbian friendly environments do exist nowadays. The answer “Needing time off following my partner’s death or the death of a member of my partner’s family” convey a will

to take advantage of the new laws granting such possibilities to same-sex couples. These three answers reflect positive changes in the workplace. The fourth answer, “wanting to contribute to changing attitudes towards gay men and lesbians” may appear contradictory because it alludes to problematic attitudes. In spite of the positive changes, prejudice and stereotype are still persistent in many workplaces. To take a stand and argue against them might appear crucial to many both to insure self protection after coming out and in the context of public debate about same-sex couple recognition and marriage. Also some interviewees referred to the direct impact of being out in terms of changing attitudes among their colleagues: for example, some colleague will refrain from stereotypical judgements or homophobic jokes in front of an openly gay or lesbian person while another will discover the gap between flamboyant images of gayness and the ordinariness of actual gay lives. Whatever the real results of this will to contribute to social change, the intention behind this answer is the conviction that being out **has gained** some legitimacy and will produce positive changes instead of endangering one’s self.



The influence of personal characteristics and job-related factors

Finally, we have examined personal characteristics and job-related factors that could influence decisions, strategies and motives to declare or conceal sexual orientation in the workplace. Gender, work status and age appear to be influential variables, the first two on the degree of outness in the work place and the third, on the reasons invoked by respondents to justify their choice.

Although the questions concerning awareness of sexual orientation don't measure directly the decision to come out or not, they clearly show a systematic visibility gap related to gender. The sexual orientation of lesbians is less frequently revealed to all categories of people in the workplace except among other lesbians. This gap cannot be explained by a different level of "outing" in private life since there is no difference between gay and lesbian respondents if we consider sexual orientation's awareness among family members and friends. Lesbians can be discriminated against both as women and as lesbians, and this probably explains their greater cautiousness. The correlation between gender and sexual orientation's awareness is stronger when we consider categories of people occupying a different role or position in the work organization, which also seems to indicate that lesbians are more sensitive to possible discriminatory consequences on their job and in their career.

Correlations between the awareness of the sexual orientation in the workplace and the gender

	Women	Men	Strength of the link	Significative ?
Colleagues	66,2%	76,9%	0,119	Yes
Immediate supervisor(s)	60,7%	73,7%	0,138	Yes
Subordinates	54,1%	72,7%	0,193	Yes
Direction/employer	46,2%	60,1%	0,139	Yes
Union representatives	43,9%	62,3%	0,184	Yes
Clients/beneficiaries/students	14,7%	23,7%	0,114	Yes
Parents/beneficiary's family	45,9%	58,2%	0,122	Yes
Women in the workplace	58,2%	73,7%	0,164	Yes
Men in the workplace	49,3%	66,7%	0,176	Yes
Gay men in the workplace	66,4%	84,2%	0,207	Yes
Lesbians in the workplace	72,0%	77,9%	0,068	No
Family members	93,7%	91,9%	0,034	No
Friends	98,5%	97,7%	0,030	No

*The percentages correspond to the proportion of *All (or almost all)* and *The majority* mentions grouped together.

Being identified as homosexual in the workplace is also correlated with job status. Not surprisingly, sexual orientation's awareness is less frequent among workers considering their present position as somewhat or very precarious. The link between status and awareness is particularly strong for the immediate work environment, including supervisors and subordinates, which points to the importance of job security or protective measures against discrimination as an important factor in the coming out decision-making process.

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Finally, justifications of choices made in this process do not vary according to any of the considered variables except for a slight influence of age. In the proposed list, some reasons to conceal sexual orientation are more or less frequently chosen depending on the age group. For example, more respondents of the 20 to 34 years category selected the item “questioning or being uncertain about one’s sexual orientation”, which can be explained in terms of their developmental stage as young adults. Correlations observed with three other items relate more to generational than chronological age. Older respondents resort more often than the younger ones to motives such as the desire to protect their private life, the necessity of being cautious and negative stereotypes about AIDS – and they can bear witness to such stereotyping in their own past.

Correlations between the reasons that might prompt to conceal the sexual orientation and the age category

	20-34 years	35-49 years	50 years and +	Strength of the link	Significative?
A desire to protect my personal life	56,2%	57,2%	69,6%	0,099	Yes
Being cautious	48,1%	58,0%	60,3%	0,099	Yes
The presence of negative stereotypes about the transmission of HIV/AIDS	10,6%	15,3%	20,6%	0,095	Yes
Questioning or being uncertain about my sexual orientation	17,4%	9,0%	8,3%	0,125	Yes

*The percentages correspond to the proportion of *A lot* and *Quite a bit* mentions grouped together.

The influence of age is also evident in the motives invoked to justify coming out in the workplace. The desire for authenticity, with one's self and with the colleagues, seems stronger in the younger generation, for whom the idea of living a double-life or being covert as homosexual is becoming inconceivable. Younger participants are also more prompt to pick up reasons related to couple and family responsibilities, which also points to their desire to live openly not only as individuals but as partners and as parents, a possibility that has become more realistic with the new legal context.

Correlations between the reasons that might prompt to disclose the sexual orientation and the age category

	20-34 years	35-49 years	50 years and +	Strength of the link	Significative?
Developing a more genuine relationship with my colleagues	91,5%	83,9%	80,0%	0,119	Yes
No longer having to lie or invent a fictitious life	75,5%	67,3%	64,2%	0,093	Yes
Wanting to be honest with myself	93,6%	90,6%	83,1%	0,119	Yes
Becoming a parent in a gay- or lesbian-headed family	50,2%	35,1%	28,6%	0,165	Yes
Needing time off because of my partner's health problems	72,3%	70,4%	59,1%	0,100	Yes
Needing time off following my partner's death, or the death of a member of my partner's family	77,9%	74,9%	61,5%	0,126	Yes
Knowing of other visible gay or lesbian individuals in my workplace	71,6%	61,0%	64,4%	0,097	Yes

*The percentages correspond to the proportion of *A lot* and *Quite a bit* mentions grouped together.

An important limit of this study is the composition of the sample. Recruitment procedures favoured self-affirming (out) gays and lesbians who were easier to spot in the workplace or to reach in community groups. The public sector - education, health, social services and other public services – as well as the private service sector are over-represented in this sample, while primary and secondary sectors are under-represented. That also means that unionized sectors – which by and large offer more protection against discriminatory practices of all kinds – are over-represented. Living in an urban or a rural area also makes a difference. Finally, respondents were asked to answer the questionnaire referring to their actual job. A small but not insignificant proportion of them had quit a job or had been fired for reasons related to their homosexuality and might have looked for a more welcoming environment after such bad experiences. Others might have done so in the first place, even knowing they had a price to pay in terms of salary, advancement in the career or other possible losses. All these biases converge to give us a portrait that is certainly more optimistic than the opposite. On the whole, the workplace seems to be considered by the majority of our participants as a safe enough place in which they can be out selectively and guardedly, depending on the context and the category of people, safe enough to let down those protective walls that are needed to shield one's self against a very homophobic and discriminatory environment from which sexual orientation has to be completely hidden, but not safe enough to be openly out in all circumstances without caring about the consequences. They resort most often to intermediate strategies, being neither in the closet, nor blatantly out, which give them more control on the circulation of information about their sexual orientation. Benefiting from the newly acquired rights and legitimacy, they also use various means, such as trying to change attitudes towards gay men and lesbians, in order to negotiate the perception of homosexuality and transform their work environment in a more gay/lesbian-friendly one. Still we must not forget the significant minority who still resort to hiding for protecting themselves, at a great psychological cost and in spite of legal measures against discrimination.

Abstract

Coming out at work: Reasons and Strategies

While the Quebec Charter of Rights forbids discrimination based on sexual orientation since 1977, many legal changes also took place in recent years at the provincial and federal levels of government: recognition of cohabiting same-sex couples, creation of a quasi-marital status, called civil union, in Quebec, followed by access to marriage for same-sex couples in both Quebec and Canada. The adoption of these new laws both reflects and provokes positive change in public opinion and attitudes towards homosexuality, including in the workplace. During the last years, we collected 786 questionnaires and completed 204 interviews with gays and lesbians working in different jobs and sectors of employment in order to produce an up-to-date and well-grounded account and analysis of their situation. Among our respondents, only a minority report experiences of direct discrimination or working in a strongly homophobic climate but stereotypes, prejudice and indirect forms of discrimination are still present in many workplaces. The majority of respondents are out at work, but only a minority feel comfortable enough to talk freely about their sexual orientation. Analysis of strategies reveals that many are cautious about the potential negative consequences of being out. The reasons invoked to explain their decision to be out or not frequently refer to the perceived degree of open-mindedness in the work environment. Finally, we will examine personal characteristics, like sex and age, job-related and other environmental factors that influence their motives to declare or conceal their sexual orientation at the workplace.

¹ Warner, Lahey

² Patrice Corriveau, Sylvain Larocque, mon article dans Homoparentalités, référence en anglais ??

³ Ginette Pellan

⁴ M.V. Lee Badgett (2001), *Money, Myths, and Change. The Economic Lives of Lesbians and Gay Men*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 51. See in particular chapter three: The Costs of the Closet. Marieka M. Klawitter (2002), "Gays and Lesbians as Workers and Consumers in the Economy", in Diane Richardson and Steven Seidman (ed.), *Handbook of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, London, Sage Publications, 329-338.

⁵ Références à compléter. Définition de homophobie, hétérosexisme, discrimination. Voir Action concertée et Acfas avec Mathieu

⁶ Bertrand, 1984

⁷ Selon la demande de subvention, Hall 1992; Khayatt 1992; Kitzinger 1991; Woods et Lucas 1993. Vérifier et compléter.