
The Cognitive Effects of Hiding One's Homosexuality in the Workplace

JUAN M. MADERA
University of Houston

King and Cortina (2010) argue that the degree to which lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) individuals fear disclosing their sexual identities is related to negative consequences that include work-related attitudes and mental and physical health. I argue that the fear of disclosure as well as concealing one's sexuality might also impair the cognition of LGBT employees. Ample research has demonstrated the positive influence of cognitive ability on job performance (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998), and therefore, it is important to examine if cognitive resources are affected by the fear of disclosure and the effort to hide sexual orientation. This commentary builds on the research examining the effects of self-regulation or control over the self (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), and the effect of self-regulation on cognition, such as logic, reasoning, attention, and subsequent regulation (Richeson & Shelton, 2003; Schmeichel, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2003), and offers directions for future research.

Fear of Disclosing Sexual Orientation

During everyday interactions in the workplace, employees often strive to maintain a

positive self-image, whether it is during a conversation between two coworkers or an applicant in an interview (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008; Judge, Erez, & Bono, 1998). As a result, individuals tend to monitor their verbal and nonverbal behaviors, but for LGBT employees, this is particularly important if they do not want to disclose their sexual orientation (Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007), which is one of the most critical decisions faced by LGBT employees (Griffith & Hebl, 2002). A reason for this fear is the risk involved with disclosure—LGBT employees continue to be the recipients of hostility (Ragins et al., 2007).

Given this vulnerability to discrimination, many LGBT employees choose not to disclose their identities to anyone at work (Croteau, 1996), and instead opt to “pass” as heterosexual at work by not disclosing because heterosexuality is the expected norm (Clair, Beatty, & McLean, 2005). However, by not disclosing their sexual identities, LGBT employees might engage in regulating (i.e., controlling and monitoring) their verbal and nonverbal behaviors that they believe can reveal their sexual orientation during interactions in the workplace. For example, gay men might behave in more masculine ways and lesbian women in more feminine ways to create an image that is consistent with heterosexuality (i.e., counterfeiting; see Chrobot-Mason, Button, & DiClementi, 2002). Regulating one's thoughts and behaviors, however, comes with a cost. This challenge of controlling

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Juan M. Madera.
E-mail: jmmadera@uh.edu

Address: College of Hotel and Restaurant Management, University of Houston, 229 C. N. Hilton Hotel and College, Houston, TX 77204-3028

thoughts and behaviors to hide sexual orientation is reflected in the following by Powers (1996):

The energy it takes to “hide” is immense. Keeping things inside and responding to the simplest question takes great concentration. When I met the man I came to love, I was bursting to tell my co-workers about it. Yet, my fear kept me from even revealing that I was seeing someone. . . . Everything I said and did had to cover up my sexual orientation, which took tremendous energy (p. 84).

Self-Regulation and Its Consequences

Self-regulation “is the exertion of control over the self and occurs when a person attempts to change the way he or she would otherwise think, feel, or behave and involves overriding or inhibiting competing urges, behaviors, or desires” (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000, p. 248). Research shows that self-regulation is a limited resource that can be depleted; the use of self-regulation in one task also undermines subsequent tasks that require regulation. For example, in the self-regulation depletion paradigm, people are required to control a thought or behavior, such as resist eating chocolates while eating radishes, and then complete another activity, such as solving unsolvable puzzles. The result of using self-regulation is depletion—participants who engaged in self-regulation by not eating chocolates while eating radishes also quit more quickly on the unsolvable puzzles task than those who did not engage in self-regulation (for a review, see Muraven & Baumeister, 2000).

This self-regulatory depletion has also been shown to occur for tasks requiring high-level cognitive control, such as solving problems, reasoning, and drawing conclusions (Schmeichel et al., 2003). This level of cognitive activity often requires active self-regulation, such as concentration, attention, and control. Schmeichel et al. found that participants who engaged in self-regulation of behavior in one task performed worse

at logic and reasoning, cognitive extrapolation, and reading comprehension than participants who did not self-regulate their behavior. An implication of this research is that LGBT employees who control and monitor their behavior to avoid “outing” themselves might deplete their regulatory resources that are needed for their work. For example, the performance of LGBT employees giving a presentation, in an interview, or working in groups—all which require high-level cognition—might be undermined if the LGBT employee had previously engaged in regulating their behaviors to conceal their sexual identities with other coworkers.

In addition, the same cognitive resource is used for an array of self-regulatory tasks, such as regulating thoughts, controlling emotions, inhibiting impulses, and sustaining physical stamina (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), and because the same resource is used for other acts of executive functioning, its use in one task undermines the immediate performance of a concurrent task (Engle, 2002). For example, memory of the details of a movie is impaired if viewers attend to and suppress their emotional reactions while watching the movie (Richards & Gross, 2000). This occurs because of divided attention (Engle, 2002); memory is impaired when attention is divided by controlling or engaging resources between multiple tasks (e.g., watching a movie and attending to one’s emotions). In an interview or a meeting, for example, LGBT applicants who engage in self-regulation by inhibiting behaviors that they believe might reveal their sexual orientation might undermine the task of concentrating and recalling information during the interview or the meeting because of the energy expended on inhibiting and controlling behaviors.

The thought suppression literature also suggests similar mechanisms of control. Research on thought suppression suggests that people can successfully control or suppress their thoughts, mood, and behavior if they have all their cognitive resources to concentrate on control (Wegner, 1994). That is, the success of control is dependent on mental capacity—people

struggle to control or suppress when cognitive resources are engaged with other matters. For instance, in a study in which participants were instructed to hold a pendulum and not allow the pendulum to swing, participants were less likely to hold the pendulum without movement when they also had to count backward from 1,000 than when they did not have to count (Wegner, Ansfield, & Pilloff, 1998). The instruction to count backward distracted participants' concentration to hold the pendulum successfully. In the workplace, LGBT employees might not have the resources for successful control of their behaviors and thoughts because employees are often busy with projects, deadlines, e-mails, and/or meetings.

A potential implication of this line of reasoning is that LGBT employees only attempt to conceal their sexual identities or pass as heterosexual if they are willing to accept the potential cognitive side effect. However, this implication is particularly troubling because research shows discrimination against LGBT employees still occurs and therefore their fears of disclosure are legitimate. In addition, concealment/passing is a strategy many LGBT choose to cope with their fears (Griffith & Hebl, 2002). It is important for future research to consider how LGBT employees can manage their sexual orientation identities without suffering the negative cognitive consequences associated with self-regulatory control. This implication also underscores the importance for organizations to develop inclusive and supportive environments that are "safe" for LGBT employees to be comfortable with their sexual orientation.

It is important to note that King and Cortina highlighted the fact that there are no differences between LGBT and heterosexual workers on job performance. However, the performance of the LGBT employees might be impaired when their cognition is undermined by the cognitive energy expended on concealing or fear of disclosing their sexual orientation. Thus, the cognition of LGBT employees might not be affected

if the employees are not preoccupied in passing as heterosexual or if their levels of fear are low. Other potential moderators include past experience with sexual orientation discrimination, perceived organizational support, and the level of social support from friends and family (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Ragins et al., 2007).

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