



ITALY AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION IN THE WORKPLACE: GENDER AND REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN COMING OUT, PERCEPTION OF DISCRIMINATION AND SOCIAL SUPPORT IN 932 ITALIAN HOMOSEXUAL EMPLOYEES

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Introduction

According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Italy – divided into North, more progressive, open-minded and modern, and South, more conservative, narrow-minded and traditional when it comes to gender differences and sexual orientation questions – is the second most homophobic Country among EU Members: It has no law against homophobia and no equality body covering sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace.

In 1998, Gianfranco Fini, founder of *Alleanza Nazionale*, an Italian conservative political party, expressed the following opinion regarding a certain relation between homosexuality and work: “a primary school teacher who is openly gay cannot be a primary school teacher”. This statement was in line with the opinion expressed by a number varying from 25% and 50% of English respondents who stated it was *unacceptable* that gays and lesbians could be teachers, social workers or doctors (Snape, Thomson, & Chetwynd, 1995). It is interesting to notice that surveys by Greasley (1986), Taylor (1986) and Palmer (1993) point out that about 50% of respondents have a job in teaching, social assistance or health, even if, according to Palmer (1993), about 25% of homosexual people would avoid those kinds of jobs just because they know there is a stigma related to their sexual orientation. In 2004, Mirko Tremaglia, Minister for Italians in the World, commented the fact that the European Parliament voted against the nomination of Rocco Buttiglione as a European Commissioner (his ideas in matters of family, civil unions and homosexuals were considered too conservative) like this: “Poor Europe: fagots are the majority”.

In 2005, *Lega Nord*, another Italian conservative party, in order to protest against an homosexual manifestation, organized a *Via Crucis* in Verona whose participants wore t-shirts with such stripes as: “We Romeo and Juliet / You Sodom and Gomorra”. Between 2004 and 2005, still in Verona, *Forza Nuova*, an extremely conservative party, papers the whole city with such leaflets as: “Homosexuals in the Arena? Yes, with the lions!”.

In 2006, Alessandra Mussolini at the journalistic television program *Porta a porta* (Door to door) said to Vladimir Luxuria: “better fascist than fagot”. In 2007, mayor of Treviso (Veneto) Giancarlo Gentilini, on a Regional Radio said: “I’ll straight away give orders that an ethnic cleansing must be done of fagots. They cannot live here. They must go away and live in other cities”. In 2010, Silvio Berlusconi, Prime Minister, declared: “better to be fond of girls than be gay”. At the beginning of 2012, senator Carlo Giovanardi, who belongs to the same political party of Berlusconi, on a national radio declared that two women kissing in public is like a man peeing on the street. Finally, Dossier Homophobia Italia 2008 by Arcigay counts 45 aggressions and 9 murders. Dossier 2009, 52 aggressions and 8 murders.



Not only in Italy. Crandall University, a school located in Moncton, New Brunswick, is under fire because of its discriminatory hiring policies. The school, which is publicly funded, does not allow any gay staff members—and proudly announces so. The “no gays” policy is almost certainly in violation of Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms, so Crandall University seems to be begging for a lawsuit or tribunal case. There’s even Canadian legal precedent for exactly this situation from back in 1998, so I imagine the only reason the administrators aren’t reversing the policy themselves is for the attention.

From: <http://www.slapupsidethehead.com/2012/06/publicly-funded-university-forbids-gay-staff-members>

Research questions

Given that Italy is characterized by the lack of a law against homophobia and by political figures who externalize their hostile positions against gays and lesbians, how do Italian homosexual people perceive they are treated in the workplace? Do they feel they can come out of the closet or not? Do they feel they can count on some kind of social support coming from heterosexual colleagues? And, finally, given that in Italy children tend to be brought up differently according to their gender and regional belonging, are there any gender and regional differences between Italian gays and lesbians in their coming out and their perception of discrimination and social support in the workplace?

Participants and their characteristics

The survey has involved 932 Italian homosexual workers, 664 (71.2%) males and 268 (28.8%) females, 672 (500 males and 172 females) from the North, 260 (164 males and 96 females). Groups were also constructed on the basis of being out or not in the workplace, the title of study and the kind of job. 26 males (3.9%) out of 664 and 62 females (23.1%) out of 268 have children.

Instrument

Instrument is an ad hoc questionnaire divided into two parts. First part is composed of 13 personal data including ‘gender’ (male or female), ‘age’ (in years), places of birth and residence (in order to trace the ‘regional belonging’ either to the North or to the South), ‘education’, having ‘children’ (which can be seen at the same time as an indicator of ‘tradition’ and a deterrent for ‘coming out’; answers ‘No’ or ‘Yes’ to the question ‘Have you got any children?’), ‘coming out in the workplace’ (which makes the difference when investigating discrimination in the workplace on grounds of sexual orientation; answers to the question: ‘In my present job I have’: ‘Not come out’; ‘Come out just with a few’; ‘Come out with the majority’).

Second part is introduced by the following sentence: What is the frequency with which your colleagues have displayed the behaviors reported in the following list? And is composed of the 11 items listed below (rating scale: 0 = Never, 1 = Rarely, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Often, 4 = Always).

For more details see the window on the right

Instrument	
1. Express themselves negatively about homosexual people in general other than myself	
2. Express themselves negatively about myself as a lesbian/gay	
3. Call me using nicknames I don’t approve of, referring to my homosexuality	
4. Use vulgar words instead of ‘lesbian/gay person’ to offend someone other than myself	
5. Tell distasteful/unappreciated jokes about homosexual people	
6. Complain about the presence of homosexual people in general in the workplace	
7. Complain about my presence as a lesbian/gay in the workplace	
8. Organise a dinner without inviting me on account of my homosexuality	
9. Express something positive about homosexual people other than myself	
10. Express solidarity with the cause of homosexual people in general (e.g. on account of being victims of violence and/or discrimination)	
11. Express solidarity in my regard as a lesbian/gay person (because vulnerable to violence and/or discrimination)	

First 8 items refer to discriminatory behaviors (4 self-directed, 4 other-directed); last 3 items are examples of supportive behaviors (1 self-directed, 2 other-directed). Questionnaires were administered both via email and in presence by contacting different homosexual associations all over Italy. 2500 questionnaires were given out, 1250 in the North and 1250 in the South. The original research design aimed to reach 2000 people on the whole, 1000 in the North (500 males and 500 females) and 1000 in the South (500 males and 500 females), but given the difficulty to get answers especially from people in the South and women, regardless of the number of reminders, a decision was made to declare the survey closed when 932 people were reached (672 from the North, 260 from the South; 664 males, 268 females) and consider this difficulty as a piece of evidence. Thus, considering 1000 (500 males and 500 females) the final result to achieve, attrition rates are 32.8% for the North (0% males, 65.6% females), 74.0% for the South (67.2% males, 80.8% females)

	Total sample		North sample		South sample		Components								
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	C1	C2	C3						
Item 7	.21	.51	.08	.35	.26	.59	.07	.33	.11	.32	.09	.41	.85		
Item 3	.29	.69	.27	.61	.35	.77	.27	.60	.19	.49	.27	.65	.81		
Item 2	.40	.78	.25	.64	.41	.85	.25	.63	.40	.62	.26	.67	.79		
Item 8	.19	.54	.09	.35	.21	.61	.11	.39	.15	.36	.02	.16	.78		
Item 1	1.36	.93	1.58	1.17	1.29	.86	1.30	.99	1.38	.96	2.07	1.31	.88		
Item 4	1.28	1.00	1.40	1.16	1.16	.83	1.16	.94	1.32	1.05	1.83	1.39	.88		
Item 5	1.16	.93	1.40	1.19	.96	.88	1.20	.96	1.22	.94	1.76	1.45	.83		
Item 6	.31	.67	.62	.87	.10	.35	.62	.88	.37	.73	.61	.85	.61		
Item 10	1.70	1.21	1.54	1.15	2.07	1.21	1.67	1.03	1.57	1.19	1.47	1.21	.89		
Item 9	1.57	1.09	1.26	1.13	2.04	1.05	1.30	1.16	1.42	1.05	1.23	1.12	.84		
Item 11	1.13	1.24	1.12	1.18	1.48	1.32	1.32	1.29	1.02	1.19	1.01	1.10	.81		
Variance explained													25.7%	24.9%	19.8%
Cronbach’s Alpha													.83	.85	.81

Tabella 1 – Principal Component Matrix extracted from the 11 items (Varimax rotation, cut-off = .50), with the proportion of variance explained and Cronbach’s Alpha indices

Results

First component (C1 in Table 1) gathers items referring to discriminatory self-directed behaviors (Express themselves negatively about myself as a lesbian/gay, Call me using nicknames I don’t approve of, referring to my homosexuality, Complain about my presence as a lesbian/gay in the workplace, Organize a dinner without inviting me on account of my homosexuality).

On this component males and homosexuals who are out in the workplace have higher means than females and homosexuals who are not out in the workplace (p < .05). No statistical differences between North and South (p > .05).

Second component (C2 in Table 1) gathers items referring to *discriminatory other-directed behaviors* (Express themselves negatively about homosexual people in general other than myself, Use vulgar words instead of “lesbian/gay person” to offend someone other than myself, Tell distasteful/unappreciated jokes about homosexual people, Complain about the presence of homosexual people in general on the workplace).

On this component females and homosexuals who are not out in the workplace have higher means than males and homosexuals who are out in the workplace (p < .05). Moreover, homosexuals from the South have higher means than homosexuals from the North (p < .0001).

Third component (C3 in Table 1) gathers items referring to *supportive behaviors* (Express something positive about homosexual people other than myself, Express solidarity with the cause of homosexual people in general, Express solidarity in my regard as a lesbian/gay person).

On this component homosexuals who are out in the workplace have higher means than homosexuals who are not out in the workplace (p < .0001). Moreover, homosexuals from the North have higher means than homosexuals from the South (p = .002).

Crossing ‘gender’ and ‘regional belonging’ shows statistically significant differences for second and third components: females from the South, more than other groups, declare they witness discriminatory other-directed behaviors (p < .0001), while males from the North feel they can count on some kind of social support in the workplace more than other groups (p = .009).

Source	Component	Df	F	p-value
Coming out in the workplace	C1. Discriminatory self-directed behaviors	1	4.546	.033
	C2. Discriminatory other-directed behaviors	1	4.307	.038
	C3. Supportive behaviors	1	244.931	.0001
Gender	C1. Discriminatory self-directed behaviors	1	5.464	.020
	C2. Discriminatory other-directed behaviors	1	24.171	.0001
	C3. Supportive behaviors	1	19.032	.0001
Regional belonging	C1. Discriminatory self-directed behaviors	1	2.604	.081
	C2. Discriminatory other-directed behaviors	1	16.623	.0001
	C3. Supportive behaviors	1	10.063	.002
Gender × Regional belonging	C1. Discriminatory self-directed behaviors	1	2.557	.077
	C2. Discriminatory other-directed behaviors	1	41.514	.0001
	C3. Supportive behaviors	1	6.834	.009

Table 2: Analysis of Variance of the 3 components extracted according to fixed factors ‘gender’ and ‘regional belonging’ and covariate ‘coming out in the workplace’

Coming out

36.8% of the total sample (34.9% of the males, 41.4% of the females; 34.4% of the homosexuals from the North, 43.1% of the homosexuals from the South) is not out in the workplace. Homosexuals with children, especially females from the South, who have children with the highest frequency, are the less inclined to come out in the workplace, presumably to protect both themselves and their children. These data are probably the most convincing evidence that even today, in Italy, homosexual people feel it is better not to come out in the workplace, presumably to avoid such negative consequences as discrimination. And this seems particularly true for homosexuals (especially females) living in the South.

Perception of discrimination

Participants obtain rather low statistical means in the 8 items referring to discriminatory behaviors in the workplace, even if they tend to evaluate as more frequent other-directed than self-directed discriminatory behaviors. Basically, they seem to perceive discriminatory behaviors in the workplace, however few, but they tend to declare that they are against the others rather than themselves. A first explanation for these data can be found in the fact that a percentage of respondents varying from 33.8% to 51% are not out in the workplace. This reduces the probability to suffer from self-directed discrimination, while not preventing homosexual people from witnessing discriminatory behaviors against others. Of course, homosexuals who are out in the workplace declare self-directed discriminatory behaviors with statistically higher frequencies than homosexuals who are not out in the workplace, while there are no statistical differences in self-directed behaviors between North and South. On the contrary, homosexuals from the South, who are also the less disclosed, say they witness other-directed discriminatory behaviors with statistically higher frequencies than homosexuals from the North, which can be read also as a justification for their not coming out in the workplace.

Social support

Supportive behaviors are evaluated as more frequent than discriminatory behaviors, which is particularly true for homosexuals who are out in the workplace. This is comforting because, if it is true that homosexuals who are out in the workplace expose themselves to possible discriminatory behaviors, they also appear to be able to enjoy support coming from colleagues.