Heteroprofessionalism: The Power of the Gender/Sex Binary in the Workplace

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Abstract

LGBTQ+ people continue to face bias and discrimination in the workplace. In this article, we focus on one subtle yet insidious manifestation of such bias: heteroprofessionalism. In workplace contexts, professionalism is generally encouraged. However, what is considered professional is subjective and often shaped by those with high status identities such as cis-heterosexuality. LGBTQ+ identities are thus labelled unprofessional and inappropriate for the workplace context. We discuss (1) how heteroprofessionalism can be viewed as a manifestation of assimilation ideology that is employed to reinforce the gender/sex binary and (2) the negative consequences heteroprofessionalism has for members of the LGBTQ+ community. We discuss future research directions and end with recommendations for combatting heteroprofessionalism and its harmful consequences.

Keywords: Heteroprofessionalism; Heteronormativity; LGBTQ+; Assimilation; Gender/sex binary; Diversity ideology; Professionalism.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, + otherwise non cis-heterosexual) inclusion has become an increasingly polarized issue globally [1]. On the one hand, recent decades have brought a range of positive changes in many countries, such as increased visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals [2], legal advances such as same-sex marriage [3], adoption rights [4], and acknowledgement of intersex and nonbinary people on legal documents [5]. Similarly, organizations increasingly implement LGBTQ+-inclusive policies and celebrate LGBTQ+ identities during pride month [6]. On the other hand, there has been strong backlash against these changes, exemplified in the record number of anti-LGBTQ+ bills in the United States proposed in 2023 [7], banning LGBTQ+ content from school curricula as well as gender-affirming care for minors, and allowing individuals and organizations to discriminate against LGBTQ+ people.

The source of this backlash may – at least partially – lie in the regulatory power of the gender/sex binary [8]. The gender/sex binary is the ideological belief system alleging that there are two biological, natural, and immutable sexes (female and male) that determine gender, both in the sense of gender identity (categorization into the social categories of "women" and "men"; i.e., people are assumed to be cisgender) and gender roles (the cultural rules of what it means to be a woman or man; i.e., men are supposed to conform to masculine norms and women to feminine norms). These gender roles are constructed as complimentary and oppositional, and heterosexuality is considered the default (or sometimes the only morally permissible) option (see [9]). This assumption and prescription of heterosexuality is also referred to as heteronormativity. LGBTQ+ people challenge the cis-heteronormative assumptions of the gender/sex binary and

therefore often experience negative reactions, including open hostility and even violence (e.g., [10]).

In the workplace, this backlash often takes on more subtle forms. Here, we focus on one subtle yet insidious manifestation of this backlash in the workplace, namely heteroprofessionalism, that is, the pressure to behave in ways that are consistent with the gender/sex binary (i.e., with being cisgender and heterosexual). In workplace contexts, professionalism is largely encouraged. However, the concept of professionalism is shaped by those in high status positions and thus represents norms associated with high status groups, including heterosexuality [11, 12]. Anything deviating from these norms is labelled unprofessional and inappropriate for the workplace context. For example, while it may not seem noteworthy if a male coworker mentions his wife, a female coworker mentioning her wife may be perceived as a disclosure of something too private to be shared in a workplace context. In other words, what is deemed professional reflects the prescriptions and proscriptions of the gender/sex binary. Below, we discuss how heteroprofessionalism can be viewed as a manifestation of assimilation ideology, employed to defend and maintain the gender/sex binary (albeit not necessarily consciously), and the negative consequences it has for members of the LGBTQ+ community. We end with recommendations for future research and for combatting heteroprofessionalism and its harmful consequences.

2. Heteroprofessionalism as a Manifestation of Assimilation Ideology

2.1. What is Assimilation Ideology?

Assimilationism is a specific form of identity-blindness, which is a broad ideology that downplays group identities and difference, instead encouraging a focus on homogeneity (e.g., [13, 14]; also see [15]). Assimilationism takes the focus on homogeneity further by compelling

people from minoritized groups to adapt to dominant group norms [16]—thereby also implying negative evaluations of attributes associated with minoritized groups. Assimilationism has most often been discussed in the context of downplaying race and ethnic identity and generally has negative consequences for people of color [17]. For example, Black Americans report less engagement and that the environment is more biased in companies where employees endorse more of an assimilation ideology. Thus, scholars typically view assimilationism as a particularly pernicious form of identity-blindness. Assimilationism can be expressed explicitly through organizational mission statements but can permeate environments in more subtle ways as well.

2.2. Assimilation Ideology Applied to LGBTQ+ People

To our knowledge, assimilationism has not been frequently discussed or studied in the context of the LGBTQ+ community. However, research on diversity ideologies more broadly shows that when organizations adopt a broader identity-blind ideology focused on homogeneity, it hurts sexual minority identity disclosure [18] and organizational retention [19]. An assimilation ideology is likely to have even more negative consequences because it would additionally prescribe that LGBTQ+ people change themselves to better fit within cisgender and heterosexual-dominated environments.

More concretely, applying assimilation pressure to LGBTQ+ employees could mean withholding information about one's sexual and gender identity, due to the perception that these identities are unprofessional to disclose. What it means to be professional in the context of work is rarely explicitly defined, allowing biases to set in (see [12]). For example, White-dominated professional contexts often implicitly expect Black women to change their natural hair to look more "professional" (i.e., similar to White women's typical hair textures and styles; [20, 21]). For LGBTQ+ employees, biases are based on the gender/sex binary and its assumptions that

people are and should be straight and cisgender (see [22, 23]), rendering LGBTQ+ identities invisible. Requiring employees to have a "professional" identity, engage in "professional" behavior, and operate on the basis of "professional" values, creates the potential for marginalization (also see [12]) because "professional" is defined by the dominant group. This "heteroprofessionalism" is a specific form of assimilationism for LGBTQ+ people focused on norms for being professional. In other words, if sex and sexuality are unprofessional topics, LGBTQ+ workers—whose social identities are defined through sexuality (at least by others)—are pushed to the margins [11, 24, 25].

Overall, we argue that heteroprofessionalism is a manifestation of assimilationism that devalues LGBTQ+ employees' identities and their deviations from the default—thus reinforcing the gender/sex binary. As illustrated in Figure 1, the gender/sex binary dictates that people should be cisgender and heterosexual (prescriptive heteronormativity), which we argue is a form of assimilation ideology applied to gender/sex and sexuality. When applied in a workplace context, this assimilation ideology takes the form of heteroprofessionalism. Adherence to heteroprofessionalism in turn reinforces the gender/sex binary by marginalizing trans and sexual minority identities and rendering them invisible.
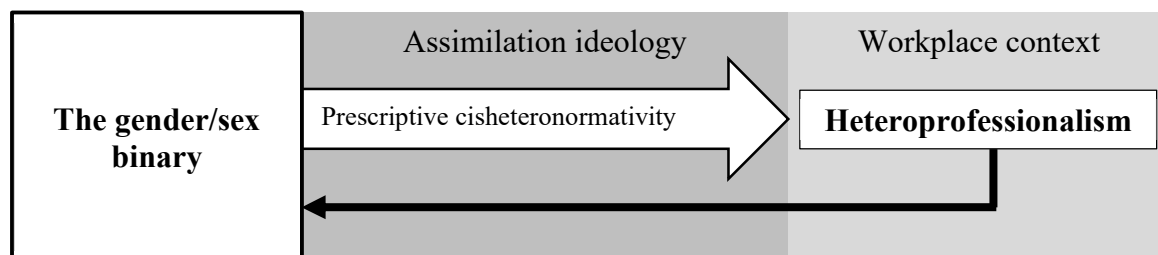

Figure 1. Heteroprofessionalism as a Result of Using Assimilation Ideology to Reinforce the Gender/Sex Binary in the Workplace

3. The Negative Consequences of Heteroprofessionalism

While heteroprofessionalism impacts all members of the LGBTQ+ community, it is important to recognize that this community is not monolithic with different subgroups facing unique challenges. Consequently, we expect heteroprofessionalism to affect different LGBTQ+ subgroups in distinct ways and that intersections with other marginalized identities (e.g., based on race or ethnicity) to also affect these patterns, but research has yet to examine such questions.

In the sections below, we describe the negative consequences of heteroprofessionalism and discuss the ways in which it affects all LGBTQ+ groups but also how particular groups are affected in specific ways. Broadly, we argue that LGBTQ+ employees find themselves in a double-bind: On the one hand, heteroprofessionalism pressures them to conceal their identities, but on the other hand, identity concealment leads to other negative conseuences.

3.1. Heteroprofessionalism and the Pressure to Conceal

As described above, heteroprofessionalism labels all deviations from cisheteronormativity as unprofessional – and LGBTQ+ employees are very much aware of such norms. LGBTQ+ people share a general sense that disclosing LGBTQ+ identity is inappropriate in professional contexts and often opt not to disclose their LGBTQ+ identities across a range of professional settings [24, 26, 27]. Some of our own work indicates that compared to their cisgender heterosexual counterparts, LGB+ employees experience greater conflict between their sexual and their professional identity and are more avoidant of disclosing sexual orientation to colleagues which is in turn associated with worse workplace well-being.[1]

Our recent work further suggests that LGB+ employees' concerns about disclosing their identities are well-founded: When learning about a gay co-worker, cisgender heterosexual people perceived them as less professional when they were open about their sexual identity than when

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[1] This work is part of ongoing dissertation research by Chenhao Zhou at Utrecht University under the supervision of the third author.

they were not, resulting in reduced willingness to collaborate with them.[2] Consistent with our argument that heteroprofessionalism is a tool to maintain the gender/sex binary, these effects are stronger among people who endorse heteronormativity (a key assumption of the gender/sex binary).

Importantly, some groups under the LGBTQ+ umbrella may be particularly affected by heteroprofessionalism. Bi+ people[3] experience discrimination and microaggressions like gay and lesbian people [28] (see also [29]). However, additionally, by violating the monosexual norm — the belief and expectation that sexual orientations are directed towards one gender—bi+ individuals face stereotypes that emphasize (hyper)sexuality and sex-focused imagery [30]. These stereotypes inherently conflict with heteroprofessionalism and exacerbate the negative workplace experiences of bi+ people, making them even more negative than the experiences of gay and lesbian employees [28]. For example, bi+ individuals have been shown to be less open about their sexual orientation at work compared to heterosexual, gay and lesbian employees [31] and to experience more unwanted behavior from colleagues such as intimidation, bullying, and unwanted sexual attention [32]. Therefore, it is imperative to facilitate the workplace inclusion of bi+ people, as general LGBTQ+ and diversity management approaches often do not adequately promote bi+ inclusion [28, 33].

We argue that gender minorities (e.g., transgender and nonbinary employees) are also particularly vulnerable to the effects of heteroprofesisonalism. Gender is one of the most important categorizing variables in modern Western cultures and impacts societal structures and practices such as physical spaces (e.g., gendered restrooms) and language (e.g., pronoun use) [8].

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[2] Zhou, C-H, Van der Toorn, J., & Jaspers, E. (2024). The double-edged sword of heteroprofessionalism: The impact of gay identity disclosure on perceived professionalism and cooperation intentions. Manuscript in preparation.
[3] Bi+ is the umbrella term for all people with a sexual orientation focused on more than one gender. Some identify as bisexual, pansexual and/ or queer. Others do not name their sexual orientation.

As such, navigating the workplace without revealing one's minoritized gender identity can be difficult. For example, misgendering (i.e., being referred to using the incorrect name or pronoun) is a common occurrence for nonbinary and transgender individuals [34, 35]. In such instances, individuals are forced to make a choice between disclosure of their identities or enduring continued and frequent instances of identity denial.

One common and unintrusive way to communicate one's identity is listing one's pronouns, for example on one's company profile or email signature. However, even such unintrusive identity displays can have negative consequences in professional contexts, especially for nonbinary individuals. For example, McCarty [36] showed that male authors of psychological research articles were significantly less likely to respond to an email from a student using they/them pronouns compared to he/him, she/her, or no pronouns. While this experiment cannot speak to the motivations of these authors, it nevertheless shows the negative consequences nonbinary people can face when disclosing their identity in professional settings.

3.2. The Negative Consequences of Identity Concealment

Above, we have described how heteroprofessionalism pressures LGBTQ+ employees to conceal their identities. At the same time, however, LGBTQ+ individuals who choose to adhere to heteroprofessional norms and *not* reveal their identity at work are perceived as less moral, presumably because concealment is seen as dishonest [37], putting LGBTQ+ employees in a double bind.

Additionally, concealment can lead to identity denial, that is, a lack of recognition as a member of a group that forms the basis of an important social identity. Identity denial can have a range of negative consequences, including adverse effects on mental health [35, 38]. All LGBTQ+ identities are likely to face identity denial (i.e., by assumptions of cisheterosexuality),

but some groups might be particularly vulnerable. Bi+ people often face bi+ erasure, a form of identity denial by which bi+ people are believed to be actually straight or actually gay; (see [39. 40]) and nonbinary people are typically perceived and addressed as their sex assigned at birth unless they explicitly reveal their identities [41]. The same is true for transgender women and men who do not "pass" as the gender that matches their identity or who do not conform to gender norms associated with their gender identity [42].

These findings underscore the harmful effects of heteroprofessionalism on LGBT+ employees' work lives and demonstrate that disclosure in the workplace is a double-edged sword. LGBTQ+ employees have the choice between revealing their identities and facing the negative consequences of acting "unprofessional" or concealing their identity, perpetuating a "spiral of silence" (see [43], p. 401).

4. Future Research

Research on heteroprofessionalism is still in its infancy. As such, many questions remain open. To develop a nuanced understanding of this construct, we need a validated measure of heteroprofessionalism but also research that goes beyond qualitative and survey methodologies.

Future research on the topic should further examine questions such as: How does heteroprofessionalism affect different groups under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, including those who also hold other marginalized identities? What are strategies that LGBTQ+ employees can use to navigate heteroprofessionalism? What are the policies, structures, and practices through which heteroprofessionalism is communicated and enforced? And, perhaps most importantly, how can heteroprofessionalism be challenged on a personal and organizational level?

5. Implications and Conclusion

What can organizations do to combat heteroprofessionalism and its harmful consequences? We argue that shifting from identity-blind messages that promote assimilation toward identity-conscious strategies that celebrate diversity will be more beneficial. Such strategies can be implemented in a variety of different ways. For example, explicit messages (e.g., on company websites or recruitment materials) conveying that an organization trains its workforce to embrace differences can increase sense of belonging and identity disclosure among LGBTQ+ employees [18]; the inclusion of gender pronouns in employees' profiles can make organizations appear more fair and signal identity safety to LGBTQ+ employees [44]; and equal opportunity statements that focus on genders beyond the binary can decrease identity threat among transgender and nonbinary people [45]. Importantly, such identity-conscious strategies often also benefit other disadvantaged groups. For example, Chaney and Sanchez [46] showed that gender-inclusive bathrooms also signaled identity safety to (cisgender) women and minoritized racial groups.

Open acknowledgements of LGBTQ+ identities can also disrupt cis-heteronormative notions of "professionalism" [24]. Questioning what is deemed professional is useful not only to LGBTQ+ workers but may also benefit other groups who do not adhere to White, masculine, cisheterosexual workplace norms. In line with suggestions from Mizzi [11], we encourage organizations to develop explicit definitions of professionalism that include the acknowledgement of and respect for diverse identities.

Organizations have much to gain from embracing identity-conscious strategies and rethinking their implicit definitions of professionalism. Additionally, disrupting cis-heteronormative definitions of what is deemed professional is not only necessary to support an increasingly diverse workforce, but can also contribute to the disruption of the gender/sex binary

and, in turn, benefit anyone whose gender identity, gender expression, or sexual identity does not

fit into this restrictive and oppressive framework.

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