Being 'That Token Gay Guy': Experiencing Minority Stress in Swedish Workplaces[1]

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ABSTRACT

Employers in Sweden are mandated to take active measures to prevent discrimination against sexual minorities. While it is important that relevant measures are taken, knowledge is lacking about cisgender lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people's minority stress experiences at Swedish workplaces. The present work is based on a thematic analysis of interviews with 53 cisgender LGB participants, focusing on how they experienced and dealt with minority stress experiences at work. Results are drawing on the minority stress model and illustrate experiences of distal minority stress due to a heteronormative work climate. This distal stress led to proximal stressors, such as constantly being on guard. Participants took considerable responsibility for others' feelings, felt a responsibility to educate on LGBTQ issues, and sometimes engaged in formal policy work to improve workplace conditions. The study points at the importance of shifting the burden of workplace minority stress from individual LGB people to employers.

KEYWORDS

LGB / minority stress / microaggressions / sexual minorities / workplace

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Introduction

Being employed and taking an active part of working life is health-promoting for most people (Aldén et al. 2020). It contributes to a social and meaningful context and helps individuals build a professional identity (Hultberg et al. 2018; Lysova 2019; Saunders & Nedelec 2014). Work can thus have a major impact on people's lives and well-being and positively affect their health (Hultberg et al. 2018). However, some groups experience worse working life conditions than others, leading the Nordic Council of Ministers to recently present evidence-based guidance toward a more inclusive labor market (Nordic Council of Ministers 2024). While international studies show that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people often are exposed to negative treatment at work (European Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020; Maji et al. 2024; Moya & Moya-Garófano 2020), the specific circumstances of LGB people were not mentioned in the Council's report. However, having specific guidelines addressing the needs of LGB people are particularly important in a Swedish context, as discrimination based on sexual orientation is prohibited by law and the Swedish Discrimination Act (2008:567) demands Swedish employers to take 'active measures' to prevent discrimination and to promote equal rights and opportunities for all people. However, far from being a safe haven, research continues to report that LGB people in Sweden are exposed to minority stress (Bränström 2017; Di Luigi et al. 2023; Malmquist et al. 2023).

In order to create an evidence base from which employers can develop the required active measures to prevent discrimination on the grounds of sexual identity, we need to know more about the 'risks' and 'barriers' (2§ in the Swedish Discrimination Act 2008:567) that LGB people face in their day-to-day life at work. To date, such experiences have not been studied in-depth in a Swedish context, which means that more exploratory studies on cisgender LGB-people's work-related experiences are needed. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to qualitatively explore cisgender LGB people's diverse minority stress experiences at their workplaces in Sweden. Our research question is: 'How do cisgender LGB people experience and deal with minority stress in Swedish workplace contexts?'.

Minority stress and LGB people's working life experiences

International studies show that LGB people are disproportionately exposed to negative experiences at work (European Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020; Gates & Mitchell 2013; Lloren & Parini 2017). To understand these disparities, the minority stress model (Frost & Meyer 2023; Meyer 2003) offers an important theoretical framework.

Minority stress can be understood to be the consequence of heteronormativity, which is the social norm that frames heterosexuality as the default and most acceptable way of being. When social institutions, such as workplaces, are organized around heteronormative assumptions, LGB people tend to be rendered invisible or treated negatively. A heteronormative climate further means that LGB people must calculate the risks and advantages of disclosure (e.g., Holman et al. 2022; Malterud & Bjorkman 2016; Wessel 2017). The minority stress model explains how these prerequisites create increased stress in for the individual LGB person (Meyer 2003).

According to the minority stress model, the mental health of LGB individuals is negatively affected by both distal (i.e., external) and proximal (i.e., internal) stressors (Meyer 2003). Distal stressors refer to experiences of discrimination, exclusion, and unfair treatment (Velez et al. 2013), which have been shown to disproportionately affect LGB people in a work context (e.g., DeSouza et al. 2017; Gates & Mitchell 2013). For example, Gates and Mitchell (2013) reported that 78% of cisgender LGB people in a US sample experienced workplace stigmatization, and 55% reported violations, harassment, or discriminatory incidents. Distal stressors also include more subtle negative treatment in interpersonal interactions between colleagues (Smith & Griffiths 2022), including microaggressions (Guiffre et al. 2008; Nadal et al. 2016; Resnick & Galupo 2019) and incivility (Cortina et al. 2013; Zurbrügg & Miner 2016). Microaggressions at work include experiences of being reduced to one's sexuality or being required to represent the entire LGBTQ community (Beagan et al. 2021). Even covert distal stressors, such as subtle microaggressions and incivility, can negatively affect LGB-people's well-being (e.g., Nadal et al. 2016; Lloren & Parini 2017; SAWEE 2022). An environment where incivility occurs is also at risk for more explicitly hostile interactions in the future (Andersson & Pearson 1999).

While Sweden has among the lowest levels of hostile and discriminatory attitudes toward cisgender LGB people in the EU (European Commission Directorate-General for Communication 2019), experiences of stereotyping, discrimination, and microaggressions have nonetheless been described as common experiences among LGBTQ people at work (SAWEE 2022). This highlights the importance of addressing distal minority stress in this context. In a survey-based report from one Swedish municipality, 35% of the LGBTQ participants reported having been exposed to offensive or discriminatory treatment at work, and about half reported having colleagues who talked negatively about LGBTQ people (Björk & Wahlström 2018).

The minority stress model further suggests that distal stressors can give rise to proximal stressors, which may also affect health negatively (Frost & Meyer 2023; Meyer 2003). The proximal stressors addressed in the model include internalized LGB-phobia, concealment of identity, and expected rejection (Meyer 2003), with the latter two having been extensively studied in work contexts (e.g., Holman et al. 2022; Wessel 2017). A Swedish survey-based report showed that about one-third of LGBTQ respondents hid their identity to half or more of their colleagues (Björk & Wahlström 2018). In contact with a third party, such as customers, clients, pupils, or patients, two-thirds of participants hid their identity. Being out was significantly more common among gay and lesbian respondents compared to bisexual respondents. Reasons for not coming out included not wanting to be asked curious or private questions, fear of discrimination or negative reactions, and fear of being excluded from the social community. Expectations of rejection, such as the risk of being exposed to abuse, discrimination, or social ostracism, have been documented in other research studies as well (e.g., Malterud & Bjorkman 2016).

The minority stress model also acknowledges the role of various coping strategies, where adaptive coping and social support are theorized to moderate the relationship between stressors and health outcomes (Frost & Meyer 2023; Meyer 2003). Research suggests that quality of support is more important than quantity, meaning that it is more impactful for LGB people to have one openly supportive colleague at work than having several generally supportive colleagues (Wessel 2017).

How can a positive working environment be promoted?

International research has suggested several important measures that can prevent minority stress experiences at work, or support LGB employees that have been exposed. On an organizational level, LGBTQ-inclusive policies have been shown to have a positive impact on LGBTQ people's work environment, leading to reduced discrimination, increased well-being, and an increased perceived ability to come out (Lloren & Parini 2017; SAWEE 2022). Such policies set the conditions for the work climate. This, in turn, has been shown to increase the likelihood of LGB employees being out (Holman et al. 2022; Thuillier 2022), which can have positive health consequences. The presence of other LGBTQ people at the workplace, as well as formal or informal LGBTQ networks, reduces feelings of vulnerability and social isolation (SAWEE 2022; Wessel 2017).

When LGB people are exposed to negative treatment at work, the presence of LGBTQ-inclusive policies has also been shown to be important for colleagues' willingness to speak up (SAWEE 2022). This, in turn, is an important part of creating and sustaining a positive work environment (Melton & Cunningham 2014; Ueno et al. 2020). In a Swedish context, reports have shown that the willingness to speak up against LGB hostility is very low among employees generally (Björk & Wahlström 2018; LO 2011).

To conclude, with legislation in place stating that no person should be discriminated against because of their sexual identity in Sweden (the Swedish Discrimination Act 2008:567), we need to know more about cisgender LGB people's minority stress experiences at their workplaces. This is important for employers who, according to the discrimination act, are required to develop appropriate active measures that tackle the barriers and risks for their employees.

Methods

Participants

Interview data from 53 participants were analyzed for the present study. The participants were 38 cisgender women and 15 cisgender men who were between 21 and 74 years old with a mean age of 37 years. Of these, 33 identified as lesbian or gay, 18 as bi- or pansexual, and 2 identified as LGB with no further specification.

The participants worked in a wide range of professions. Many worked as teachers, doctors, counselors, and assistant nurses. Others worked in law, culture, or technology. The vast majority had a university degree. Some participants also worked with gender or LGBTQ issues, either as volunteers or professionally.

Procedure

The data used in this article were collected in two phases. The first phase was part of an unfunded interview study focusing broadly on LGBTQ people's minority stress experiences. This project was approved by the Local Ethical Review Board in Stockholm (2018/330) and data were collected from 2018 to 2020. In the second phase,

a mixed-methods research project on LGBTQI people's working life experiences in Sweden was launched in 2022. This project was funded by AFA insurance (no. 200413). It was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2022-05639-01) and data collection was conducted from 2022 to 2023.

In the first phase of data generation, participants were asked to share any experiences they had of minority stress. The project did not have a specific focus on working life. Rather, minority stress experiences from a variety of life areas were described. The data corpus consisted of 87 interviews with self-identified LGBTQ people. Since minority stress experiences differ between cisgender LGB and transgender and gender-diverse individuals (TGD) (Björk & Wahlström 2018), we decided to analyze TGD participants' experiences in separate studies (Lundberg et al. 2022; Mejías Nihlén et al. 2025). For the present study, interviews with cisgender LGB individuals ($N = 55$) were selected for the analysis. Furthermore, to meet the aim of this study, only the parts of the interviews where participants described working life experiences were selected for analysis. This excluded nine interviews where work was not mentioned. In total, working life experiences from 46 interviews were therefore included from this broad dataset. In some of the interviews, working life was mentioned briefly; thus, only shorter sections of the transcripts were of relevance for this study and included in the analysis. Others provided substantial and detailed narratives of minority stress in working life, resulting in longer sections that were included in the analysis.

When reviewing the data from the first data collection, our assessment was that an additional data generation, focusing specifically on minority stress at work, would be beneficial for the purpose of the present study. In the second data collection, seven interviews with cisgender LGB individuals were conducted, which specifically focused on minority stress experiences at the workplace. Due to their specific focus, the entire transcripts were relevant for the study and included in the present analysis.

In both data generation processes, participants were recruited through advertising in online forums for LGBTQ people. The ad included short information about the aim and procedure, as well as contact details for the researchers. Those who showed interest were sent an email including more extensive information about the project and the participation. All individuals showing interest were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Individual interviews were scheduled and conducted over the telephone, over Zoom, or in personal meetings. The interviews were conducted by psychology students in the later parts of their education, under supervision of the researchers, and by the researchers themselves. An interview guide was used including questions about when, where, and how the participants had experienced minority stress, how they felt this had affected their mental health, and how they had dealt with the situation and the resulting stress. For the second phase of data generation, the interview guide was modified to focus only on working life experiences of minority stress. The data were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized.

Analytical points of departure and data analysis

A critical realist reflexive thematic analysis was employed for this study, following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) recommendations. Critical realism assumes

that an external reality exists independently of human perception, yet our knowledge of it is always situated and partial, framed by context, language, and subjective meaning. By drawing on a critical realist framework, we not only try to capture subjective interpretations but also seek to identify patterns and structures that shape these interpretations, moving beyond individual accounts to theorize about broader social forces.

The research team leading this project comprises psychologists affiliated with Queer Psychology in Sweden (QueerPsy), a research group committed to investigating LGBTQ health and well-being with an emphasis on structural determinants and systemic challenges as well as how these are experienced by individuals in their everyday lives. In this work, we engage in ongoing dialogue with LGBTQ organizations and communities, which has informed our research questions and the analytical perspectives we use. Our own lived experiences, representing diverse sexual and gender identities as well as professional perspectives, contributed to a broad range of viewpoints in the analysis. A collaboration with psychology students who actively contributed to data analysis and co-authored this article additionally broadened the perspectives.

Reflexive thematic analysis can range from more inductive to more deductive approaches (Braun & Clarke 2021). The research project is theoretically informed by the minority stress model (Meyer 2003), making the project deductive in data generation and analysis. However, we have simultaneously used an inductive approach in relation to coding and thematization, approaching the material bottom-up.

In line with the first step of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2021), all 55 transcribed interviews with cisgender LGB participants from the initial data collection were read through, marking all parts of the data that regarded working life experiences. Relevant data chunks were found in 46 interviews and stored in a separate document for further analysis. In the next step, this new document was read again before coding started. Initial ideas and thoughts that arose were stored in a separate document. Subsequently, a detailed coding of the selected data was conducted. Data chunks from two interviews were coded by two of the researchers separately, after which the codes were compared and discussed to enrich the analysis and increase reflexivity (Braun & Clarke 2021). In the following steps, initial themes and sub-themes were suggested based on the codes and discussed between the researchers. Each theme was given a preliminary name, and relevant extracts were collected for each theme. When forming preliminary themes, the researchers paid attention to intersectional variations in the data, such as differences related to age, gender, and sexual identity. While experiences of bisexual participants were sometimes different from those of lesbian and gay participants, the three groups also shared many experiences. Therefore, we decided to let the texture of the experiences form the thematic structure but aimed to mention any diverse patterns throughout the presentation of the results. As a next step, the in-depth interviews about working life experiences were read through and coded by one of the researchers, and codes were incorporated into the preliminary thematic structure. This modified the structure to some extent before settling on a final thematic structure, where the constructed main themes were closely related to the minority stress model (Meyer 2003).

Results

The present thematic analysis resulted in three main themes, and a total of nine subthemes, which are summarized in Table 1. The first theme 'The heterosexist workplace' engages with the participants' experiences of hostility and microaggressions at the workplace, which are distal stressors according to the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003). In contrast, the second theme, 'Constantly ruminating' focuses on proximal stressors, as it highlights the feelings of being on your guard and calculating risks and advantages of being open or not. The third and final theme, 'Being forced to act', focuses on how participants deal with minority stressors.

Table 1. Summary of themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
The heterosexist workplace	Experiencing a hostile climate
	Being othered and reduced to one's sexual identity
	Feeling invisible and left out
Constantly ruminating	Being on your guard
	Can I come out in a natural way?
	Do I even have a choice?
Being forced to act	Taking responsibility for others' feelings
	Feeling responsible to educate
	Engaging in formal LGBTQ policy work

The heterosexist workplace

The first main theme highlights experiences of heterosexist hostility at work, and feelings of being exposed. In short, this theme reflects distal minority stress experiences. While many participants report subtle experiences of distal stress in the workplace, some have been exposed to serious humiliations. The theme consists of three subthemes*: Experiencing a hostile climate, Feeling invisible and left out,* and *Being othered and reduced to one's sexual identity*.

Experiencing a hostile climate

Several participants reported experiences of heterosexist hostility at work. They referred to individual colleagues or managers who had expressed overt heterosexist attitudes. Beatrice recounted a conversation where her manager spoke negatively about Pride and made the following comment when Beatrice said she planned to march in the parade:

> Then she asked me, "Oh, and why are you going to that parade, my dear?" or something like that, and I said, "Well, because I'm bisexual, so it's important for me to go." And then she said, "Oh, well, in my days we used to say 'earwig' ['two-tailed' in Swedish], but I suppose you don't say that anymore," and she was very negative about it. (Beatrice, 32)

The manager reacted condescending and was questioning Beatrice's participation in the Pride parade. She kept expressing condescending attitudes even after Beatrice had disclosed her sexuality. In contrast, other participants explained that most prejudicial attitudes were expressed when others were unaware of the participant's LGB identity, but once they had come out, such talk often decreased. For Beatrice, the humiliation led to severe stress, and in the end, she decided to quit her job.

Like Beatrice, some participants shared experiences of having been disrespectfully treated by a superior, but a more common experience was that a colleague expressed negative attitudes toward LGBTQ people. Lisa (31), a preschool teacher, had a colleague who spoke derogatory about families with same-sex parents, claiming 'no, yuck […] there are norms for a reason [...] it should be mum and dad'. Lisa, who was in the process of having children together with her wife, described being shocked by facing such attitudes. She had turned to the preschool principal for support but was disappointed when the principal started speculating about other colleagues who may also hold similar values. Lisa had felt urged to turn to the principal's manager in the municipality before receiving the support she asked for. The experiences of Beatrice and Lisa are clear examples of overt distal minority stress experiences being played out at contemporary Swedish workplaces.

Being othered and reduced to one's sexual identity

Moving toward the more covert experiences of distal stress, this subtheme focuses on experiences where colleagues or other people at the workplace depicted LGB people or relationships as strange or deviant. Several participants described how their same-sex relationships were othered or exotified by their colleagues. Mia talked about her colleagues' ideas of what it is like to live with another woman:

> They assumed what it's like to live with a woman, like that it's just like a close friendship in another way. I mean, it's very gender-stereotypical assumptions, like "Oh, it must be so nice to live with a woman, who is more understanding and all." (Mia, 38)

Mia experienced being othered by the assumption of female same-sex relationships being more friendship-like. In contrast, other participants described how they themselves or their same-sex relationships were oversexualized. For example, one participant said that one of her pupils had called her bisexuality 'sassy'. LGB people, identities, and relationships seem to be both under- and oversexualized. Either way, they are depicted as deviant from the norm, and the experience can be understood as forms of distal minority stress.

Many participants explained how they, on occasion, had been exotified at work, for example, when colleagues asked many curious, sometimes intimate, questions. Vega (28) said that when she recently came to a new workplace, she had been asked a series of questions by a curious colleague, such as for how long she had 'known' that she was lesbian, how she could be sure that she was, and whether this really could be true, as she was 'so pretty'. Another participant, Sofia (28), had been met with a long range of intimate questions about her sexual preferences, for example, what she would do to give her girlfriend an orgasm, in a conversation where the colleague clearly transgressed her integrity.

Many participants described experiences of being reduced to their sexual identity and explained how such experiences made them sad and/or left them with a feeling of not being seen as a complex human being with many interests and features. For example, Olle (26) claimed that he was seen as 'that token gay guy', who was called in to serve as 'an alibi' ensuring a positive LGBTQ perspective in the organization. Olle appeared to be reduced to his sexual identity, and, in addition, was appointed as a representative for the entire LGBTQ community and expected to act as an expert on LGBTQ issues.

Some participants described how they tried to present themselves as ordinarily as possible, to avoid being exotified and othered, for example, choosing to talk about how they had been grocery shopping with their partner. Others chose to conceal being LGB—as a general strategy or at specific occasions.

Feeling invisible and left out

The most mentioned form of covert distal stressor was situations where LGB identities were not mentioned at all. Many participants explained how they, and everyone else at the workplace, constantly were presumed to be heterosexual. Thus, their experiences as LGB individuals became invisible. Heteronormative assumptions often meant that gendered words, such as 'boyfriend' and 'girlfriend', were used in a heteronormative way. For example, Elias (21) explained that 'people just [...] ask "do you have a girlfriend?", it is always that question'.

Gendered presumptions were common in a way that ignored and excluded non-heterosexual identities and relationships. However, gender-neutral words were sometimes also used in a way that made LGB identities invisible. One lesbian participant said that a colleague consequently was using the gender-neutral word 'cohabitant' when referring to the participant's wife, thereby concealing the same-sex relationship. For some bisexual participants, a double invisibility was experienced as they could face assumptions of being heterosexual *or* homosexual. They were presumed to be heterosexual when in a different-sex relationship and mistaken for being gay or lesbian when being in a same-sex relationship.

LGB individuals were sometimes made invisible even when LGBTQ issues were the topic of a conversation. LGBTQ issues were discussed among colleagues as if such people or experiences were not present among them, presuming everyone around the table to be straight and cis.

Several participants described how their minority identity affected their willingness or opportunity to take part in social conversations at the workplace, such as in the lunchroom. As a polyamorous bisexual person, Ellen deviated from both hetero- and mononormativity and felt unable to share everyday experiences with her colleagues. She described this:

> People talk like this, "Yeah, we're trying to agree on where to go for vacation," or like, "Yeah, he's so impossible with this happadapp." And I just feel like, "No, I'm not going to casually vent about my kind of relationship problems over coffee here, because you just won't get it." It's really a different world. (Ellen, 29)

Ellen's expectation that others would not be able to relate to her experiences led her to keep quiet about her relationships during the coffee breaks.

Because of heteronormative structures, several participants said that they felt alone at the workplace. Not having any other known LGBTQ people among their colleagues increased this feeling, not the least when no one else reacted to heteronormativity and/or hostility at work. However, some reported that they had found other LGBTQ identified colleagues and emphasized the importance of this. Having someone else who could understand the frustration and strain of working in a heteronormative climate made a big difference, and LGBTQ colleagues were important sources of support.

Constantly ruminating

Because of hostility, or fear of being exposed to hostility, all participants made decisions on whether and/or when to disclose their sexual identity at work. Concealment is known as a proximal stressor in the minority stress model, as this often leads to stress. Many of the participants described a constant inner rumination about pros and cons of coming out or not, where they measured risks in relation to advantages. The theme consists of three subthemes: *Being on your guard, Can I come out naturally?,* and *Do I even have a choice?*

Being on your guard

Many participants described how they were constantly on their guard at work. They thought a lot about what they said and how they behaved, as well as how this was perceived by others and what consequences it may have, showing the level of proximal stress they experienced. For those who were not out at work, or only were out selectively toward some colleagues, being on their guard often meant being careful to not self-disclose. Lena (69) explained her fears of being outed when she worked at an elderly care center, claiming that she feared that her patients 'would think it was gross' with 'a dyke lady' caring for them. However, she described in the interview that there had been no problems once she eventually came out, which lead to decreased stress. Lena's and others' experiences show that even if you are not directly exposed to hostility in the workplace, the very fear of being exposed and the precautions taken often lead to strain and stress.

Another participant, Noa (25), was working as a counselor at a clinic where they had pride flags at the reception. Occasionally, patients had expressed their dislike about this, which led Noa to be on his guard throughout the contact. He explained, 'Then I notice that I become a bit more tense, in the therapy room [...] it contributes to an inner stress'.

Participants who were out often described another aspect of vigilance, as their fears concerned being negatively treated because of their LGB identity. For example, Martin explained how he constantly reflected on his colleagues' behaviors:

> This colleague is a bit intrusive while also being pretty rude and standoffish, and sometimes I find myself thinking, 'Is it because I'm gay?' At the same time, [...] I'm a gay cis

> man, and it doesn't really feel like that's a big issue for people in general these days. So it would be pretty extreme if that was the case, but I just can't completely rule out the possibility in my head. (Martin, 25)

If anyone was experienced as unfriendly, or behaved in a strange way, Martin always wondered if this was an expression of a negative attitude toward him as a gay man. The experience pinpoints how proximal stress may arise when (potential) distal stressors are so subtle that the exposed person is not sure of how to interpret them.

Can I come out in a natural way?

Several participants claimed that talking about their sexual identity at work was perceived as too private and would be thought of as unprofessional. They could, for example, refer to their partner as 'someone I know', to avoid revealing a same-sex relationship. While their colleagues seemed to be chatting unbothered about their everyday lives, these participants felt a need to adapt what they shared. Many thought a lot about what is appropriate to be open about in which situations and with whom. A participant who concealed their sexual identity due to fear of negative reactions was David:

> Of course, you want people to like you, you don't want them to hate you. And then, at work too, I feel like I'd be discriminated against, even though I know that's not the case. That's what I mean—I know it's okay, and there's nothing wrong with me, but there's still this nagging feeling, like, 'Oh, how is this person going to react now?' (David, 27)

David described an uncertainty about how others would react if he were to come out at work. While some, like David, thought it would be inappropriate or unsafe to be open as LGB at all at work, most were out to their colleagues. However, toward third parties, such as patients, pupils, or customers, a majority had chosen concealment. For example, Martin (25) explained that, to him, being out would not be compatible with being professional, since being gay was 'an intimate detail that doesn't belong [at work]'. He described how he tried to steer around this topic to avoid disclosing that he is gay. Another participant, who was working as a preschool teacher, had decided not to be open toward the children, as she feared negative reactions from their parents. While her female colleagues could mention their husbands in everyday interactions with the children and parents, this participant had decided to never mention her wife. Her experience pinpoints a difference between same-sex and different-sex relationships, where mentioning a same-sex partner is thought to unprofessionally disclose something intimate and private, while mentioning a different-sex partner would be seen as ordinary everyday chatting.

Among those who wanted to be out at work, some described difficulties in finding a way to come out that felt natural. Nadia (29) was new at her job and thought a lot about how she would come out, claiming that 'presenting oneself becomes so incredibly loaded'. She explained that she did not know how to disclose her sexual identity without it feeling strange or dramatic. Although she wanted to be open, she kept concealing her identity because she waited for the 'right opportunity' that never seemed to come.

Participants who were in a same-sex relationship often mentioned their partner, using gendered labels such as husband or wife, to come out at work in a way that gave a 'natural' impression. Some described that this still felt uncomfortable, and therefore, they waited for someone to ask them directly before disclosing their sexual identity. Yet others explained how they made an effort to come out as quickly as possible to any new colleague, in an attempt to prevent heteronormative assumptions.

Do I even have a choice?

While many participants found it to be a relief that they could decide themselves when to conceal and when to disclose their sexual identity, others stated that they felt that they did not have a choice. A few participants described how there had been rumors at work about their sexual identity, and some participants explained that they had been outed before they themselves wanted to, as someone at their workplace had not respected or understood their wish to keep their sexual identity private. An opposite situation was also described by a few participants. They had decided to keep their sexual identity concealed until they felt ready to come out, but once they did, colleagues were offended by them not coming out earlier. This indicates that some people consider themselves entitled to be informed of others' LGB identities, and that this would take precedence over the person's right to choose when to come out.

A few participants had been requested by their managers not to disclose their sexual identity in contact with third parties. This request was only expected of them as sexual minority people, that is, their heterosexual colleagues were allowed to talk about their partners and family situations. Amanda had been requested to conceal her sexual identity toward her clients:

> I thought it was totally crazy, so I thought, well, then everyone should take off their wedding rings and keep quiet about their private lives – or should some people be allowed to talk about it but not [me]? I got really angry, but then, then I still didn't dare to question it, and yeah, I think I internalized that in the end anyway. Oh, and I was really, really anxious myself. I was really anxious that if I went to the Pride festival one summer, some client would see me. It felt like I was committing a crime. (Amanda, 35)

Amanda expressed her criticism of the fact that the same policy of concealment did not apply to her heterosexual colleagues. While she got angry at this heterosexist policy, she dared not question it out loud. Instead, she described how the unfriendly attitude eventually had come to affect her own image of her sexual identity. Her feeling that participating in the pride festival would be 'a crime' pinpoints how a heterosexist policy at work may affect the employee in many areas of life. This feeling can be understood as internalized homophobia, which is also a proximal minority stressor.

Being forced to act

Being out as an LGB person came with a number of different coping strategies, as participants navigated reactions to their identities and acted proactively to minimize distal

stressors. Many took responsibility for any kind of feelings or reactions their identities evoked among colleagues. Some felt required to respond to personal questions and to educate others about LGBTQ issues. In addition, some had chosen to lead projects on LGBTQ issues or policy work as a response to external or internal expectations of responsibility. The theme consists of three subthemes: *Taking responsibility for others' feelings, Feeling responsibility to educate,* and *Engaging in formal LGBTQ policy work*.

Taking responsibility for others' feelings

Several participants described making huge efforts to not make their colleagues and others at their workplace uncomfortable. They did not want them to feel embarrassed, confronted, or criticized for acting heteronormatively, or even hostile. Lena (69) explained that she avoided addressing heteronormativity, because she did not want her colleagues to feel embarrassed. She said that 'People are just unaware, you can't judge people for unawareness' and stressed that 'people are ashamed of their prejudice'. Therefore, Lena tried to help her colleagues relax. Through similar efforts, participants generally put others' feelings before their own, indicating that being confronted with your own prejudice would be worse than being exposed to prejudice.

Several participants said that they usually tried to come out directly to new people at the workplace, in an attempt to avoid heteronormative assumptions. One participant, Hedda (32), thought that others would be embarrassed if she would correct them (i.e., if she would say that she had a wife, when asked if she had a husband). Coming out in advance by mentioning her wife early on with all new contacts was thought to save others from embarrassment. She claimed:

> I find it so hard for others, you know [laughs]. Which, actually, is a bit crazy when I think about it objectively, but it's just the feeling I have in that moment, that I kind of don't want it to be hard for others, which actually is totally dumb. (Hedda, 32)

Hedda's and others' experiences show that the responsibility for maintaining a good atmosphere in the workplace often falls on those who are exposed to prejudice and heteronormative assumptions, rather than on those who expose them. The participants' narratives highlight the energy and extra effort it takes to protect others from bad feelings. As a sexual minority, they felt forced to take responsibility for others' prejudice, in order to avoid being accused of creating a bad atmosphere or being socially excluded.

Feeling responsibility to educate

Many participants said that they felt expected to answer all sorts of LGBTQ-related private questions at work, sometimes including intimate questions about their relationships, sex life, parenthood, and fertility. Many felt a need to be open and educate others, even when they did not feel comfortable in doing so, as this was thought to combat prejudice. Relatedly, several participants described how they were seen as LGBTQ experts at work. Some described a feeling of being used as a dictionary or encyclopedia on LGBTQ issues, which created frustration for some of them. However, others explained that they

thought of themselves as representatives of the wider LGBTQ community, rather than as just representing themselves. Those who worked with children or youth generally expressed a responsibility to educate coming generations, and being open was part of this education. Patricia was openly lesbian in her role as a teacher:

> I also have to be fine with those kinds of questions coming more often because I know what they can mean, it can be empowering for someone to hear about, and to get to ask the questions. [...] It doesn't irritate me but it's super boring to answer. But if they have a standard set of questions they ask, then I have a standard set of answers I give, and then it's over, you know. (Patricia, 41)

Patricia had chosen to respond to her pupils' questions, because it felt important to be a role model for them. While she found the questions tiresome, rather than annoying, others described similar questions as exhausting and stressful. Some participants also felt the need to draw boundaries and stop responding to certain questions. Karin (28) explained, 'it must somehow be on my terms, [otherwise] it becomes too much, and then I don't have the energy. [...] it's not my responsibility to educate the world'. With this stance, she could cope with curious questions without violating her integrity.

Engaging in formal LGBTQ policy work

Some participants said that they had engaged in different forms of policy work focusing on LGBTQ issues at work. While such engagements mostly were described to be in line with their personal interests and were often experienced as meaningful and positive aspects of work, some rather felt expected to take on such responsibility simply because they were open with their LGB identities at work. In addition, one participant, Sara, reflected on how her work with the LGBTQ policy of the municipality where she was employed led to an extended exposure to heterosexism. She explained:

> How much should I have to put up with in my professional role just because I work with these issues? [...] When I did this survey, we had an open-ended question with 'write whatever you want,' and it provided a huge amount of information for the survey itself. But I realized afterwards that I need someone to talk to about it because there was so much homophobic content. (Sara, 28)

While distributing a survey about their LGBTQ policy to all employees at the municipality had been an important and meaningful assignment for Sara, she had not been prepared to cope with the homophobia expressed by the anonymous responders.

In contrast to Sara, who led a LGBTQ policy development, another participant, Lisa (31), said that she refrained from engaging in such work tasks at her job, as she feared this would lead to negative reactions. She claimed: 'I don't want to be labelled like, "Oh, it's because she's gay, that's why she wants to include all of this"'. While being LGB was seen by several participants as a reason for engaging in policy work, Lisa thought of her sexual identity as a reason to refrain from such engagement, as she feared this would lead to negative reactions and social consequences for her. From these narratives, it is clear that attempts to deal with distal stressors on a structural level sometimes cause

additional minority stress or that such attempts are avoided due to the fear of such additional stress.

Discussion

With the minority stress model (Meyer 2003) as a theoretical framework, this study explored how cisgender LGB people experience and deal with minority stress in Swedish workplace contexts. The results highlight that LGB employees in Sweden experience several challenges and barriers to equal rights in the workplace, despite good intentions outlined in Swedish legislation (the Swedish Discrimination Act 2008:567). In the following sections, we discuss the empirical and theoretical contributions of the study, specifically focusing on how these results can inform employers.

The importance of addressing distal stressors at the workplace

Despite Sweden having one of the most accepting populations toward LGB people (Takács et al. 2016), the results show that many LGB people experienced what are considered distal stressors according to the minority stress model (Meyer 2003). This is in line with other studies (Björk & Wahlström 2018; Gates & Mitchell 2013; Lloren & Parini 2017).

While some participants mentioned overt humiliation, most experiences aligned with what the research literature refers to as subtle slights or everyday discrimination (Smith & Griffiths 2022), including microaggressions (Frost & Meyer 2023; Nadal et al. 2016) and incivility (Cortina et al. 2013; Zurbrügg & Miner 2016). An experience described by most participants was that people they met at work constantly made heteronormative and incorrect assumptions about their sexual identity. Employers need to address and intervene on these distal stressors, as even covert stressors have a negative health impact (Lloren & Parini 2017; Nadal et al. 2016; SAWEE 2022) and increase the risk of more explicit hostility in the future (Andersson & Pearson 1999). The participants in the present study expressed feelings of frustration, stress, and exclusion because of these negative experiences. This is problematic considering employers' responsibility to provide a good psychosocial work environment for all employees. In other words, microaggressions and incivility pose risks and create barriers that need to be addressed with active measures according to the Swedish Discrimination Act (2008:567).

The burden of dealing with negative experiences

The results show that distal stressors put participants in positions where they had to be constantly aware of their surroundings to navigate, and deal with potential negative situations—in other words, distal stressors led to proximal stress. The heteronormative climate that prevails at most workplaces led the participants to calculate the risks and advantages of self-disclosure, confirming previous research (e.g., Holman et al. 2022; Malterud & Bjorkman 2016; Wessel 2017). Negotiations about when, where, and how to come out were prominent in the participants' narratives and were described as an energy-consuming, ongoing inner discussion.

While coping is described as a separate factor from proximal stress in the minority stress model (Meyer 2003), participants' descriptions clearly illustrate how proximal stressors, such as expectations of rejection and constant overthinking, serve as strategies to deal with a negative environment. However, these strategies are also shown to contribute to mental health issues (Hatzenbuehler 2009; Meyer 2003). Therefore, these strategies are akin to maladaptive coping (e.g., Holton et al. 2015), which may help individuals manage a specific problem in the short term but leave the problem itself unaddressed and can contribute to long-term difficulties.

In addition to rumination and concealment, participants also reflected on other ways of managing their environment. Several participants talked about how they felt great responsibility for the workplace climate. This meant that they often did not speak up against heteronormativity to avoid making others uncomfortable. This behavior highlights several psychological dilemmas and make microaggressions go unnoticed or unaddressed (Nadal et al. 2016). Again, this way of coping is maladaptive, as it requires ongoing emotional labor from the individual, which can negatively impact mental health over time. The potential psychological burden that LGB people must bear provides another strong incentive to prevent these negative experiences from happening in the first place.

The importance of social support

Social support is a key factor in buffering against the negative effects of minority stress (Frost & Meyer 2023; Meyer 2003). The results highlight both positive experiences of support and instances where support was lacking. Regarding a lack of support, the results confirm a previous report showing that few employees would speak up if they witnessed homophobia or biphobia at work (Björk & Wahlström 2018). While some participants hoped that others would ease their burden by helping them address negative interactions, our results show that it was uncommon for anyone else to intervene when negative attitudes toward LGB people were expressed.

As a positive experience of support, participants mentioned the importance of having another LGBTQ person at work who they could turn to. Knowing other LGBTQ people at work has previously been shown to promote health, reduce feelings of vulnerability and isolation, and increase the likelihood of coming out (SAWEE 2022; Wessel 2017). Many participants described how they chose to be open because they wanted to serve as good role models and contribute to a safer climate for other LGBTQ people, which confirms previous research (Mattheis et al. 2020; SAWEE 2022). Participants in the present study explained how the presence of other LGBTQ people reduced their minority stress and enabled them to recharge emotionally. In line with these findings, it has been highlighted that employers need to work with workplace diversity as well as offer spaces for formal or informal LGB networks (SAWEE 2022; Wessel 2017).

The need for a shift from an individual to a structural focus

While adaptive coping strategies and social support can buffer the negative effects of distal and proximal stressors, the results also illustrate that focusing on individuals'

negative experiences and coping strategies does not address the root causes. Several participants in the study mentioned how they tried to shift from their individual struggle to focus more on the structural and systemic issues underpinning them. This involved both trying to educate others and engaging in formal work on diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace. However, this could, in turn, lead to a form of 'tokenism', in line with research by Beagan et al. (2021), who showed that LGBTQI employees are often used as evidence of workplace diversity and tolerance.

The results thus show that it is important to shift the burden of workplace inclusivity from individual LGB people, or a few supportive colleagues, to employers—since this is where the formal responsibility lies (the Swedish Discrimination Act 2008:567). To achieve this, researchers have questioned whether utilizing the minority stress model, as we have done in this study, is useful or if it contributes to individualizing the problems of structural inequity (e.g., McDermott & Roen 2016; Riggs & Treharne 2017). Such critical perspectives ask whether focusing on individual experiences and coping mechanisms truly helps challenge the heteronormativity that produces these issues. Instead, we need alternative theoretical frameworks that offer better guidance for intervention. Cortina (2008) suggests focusing on leadership, workplace culture, and organizational statements, such as policies, as key strategies. Some research on LGB employees' work experiences suggests that policies can effectively address attitudes and create a better work environment (e.g., Lloren & Parini 2017; SAWEE 2022). However, further theoretical elaboration and research are necessary to determine which interventions can effectively ensure equal rights and opportunities (the Swedish Discrimination Act 2008:567) for all people in Swedish workplaces.

Strengths and limitations

During the data analysis, the strengths and limitations of the two different data sets became apparent. While the first dataset had the richness of including a large number of participants with a wide variation of lived experiences, working life was not the main focus of these interviews. Therefore, the interviewer did not always ask detailed follow-up questions about the specific working life context when participants mentioned a stressful situation that had been experienced at work. In contrast, the second dataset has the richness of such details, but on the other hand, this data is limited to few participants.

As details of the specific working life contexts were often missing in the first data set, it was not possible for us to use branch or position as an intersectional focus in the analysis, which is an important limitation of the study. Despite this limitation, the experiences of everyday discrimination and the specific ways of dealing with such stressors were common across interviews and can serve as a ground for future studies focusing on different work contexts and positions.

In accordance with the exploratory aim, the present study has a wide focus, including both distal and proximal minority stress experiences at work, as well as how the participants deal with the stress. While focusing only on one of these aspects could have provided a more in-depth analysis, the strength of the present approach is that a wider picture is presented, where the interplay between different stressors, and how participants deal with them, becomes apparent.

Conclusion

This is the first exploratory qualitative study on cisgender LGB people's minority stress experiences at work in a Swedish context. Despite national legislation outlining that all people employed in Sweden should have equal rights and opportunities in the workplace (the Swedish Discrimination Act 2008:567), the results of this study show that LGB people still experience minority stress in their day-to-day working life. Participants navigated heteronormative environments and took great personal responsibility for others' feelings and their own safety. Based on the data, more needs to be done to change work environments that are heteronormative and sometimes even LGB-hostile. It is important to shift the burden of workplace minority stress from individual LGB people to employers. Further research should explore how effective policy, management, and collegial support can be developed to create Swedish workplaces that promote equal rights and opportunities to all employees, irrespective of their sexual orientation.

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