Middle Managers as Silence Breakers and Voice Givers?

A Critical Analysis of Middle Managers' Role in Supporting non-heterosexual Employees

by

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Abstract

Even though many companies are actively trying to improve the working conditions for non-heterosexual employees one can still recognize a lack of awareness for the importance of including them into the workforce. This frequently results in non-heterosexual employees feeling the need to be silent about their sexual identity and not making their voices heard in an organizational context. It is of interest to us to investigate ways to give voice to these employees and study in particular which role middle managers have since they are often referred to as champions for diversity. Our aim lies on deepening the understanding of what possibly inhibits middle managers' voice giving abilities by exploring the following research question: *"What are complexities middle managers face in giving voice to non-heterosexual employees?"* Following a qualitative methodology, we conducted and analyzed 13 semi-structured interviews in which we questioned middle managers, non-heterosexual employees and members of diversity departments. In line with existing literature, we argue that middle managers' intermediary position between top management and the operating core would enable them to create awareness for the importance of giving voice to non-heterosexual employees. Based on our findings we, however, argue that literature's view on middle managers as diversity champions is too simplistic since various complexities are overlooked. Often middle managers themselves lack awareness for the need of supporting non-heterosexuals and are moreover limited in their sphere of action which restricts their voice giving abilities. Based on this, we question whether middle managers are the 'right' group to support non-heterosexual employees. Lastly, we conclude that middle managers voice giving abilities are impeded since some non-heterosexual employees, due to individual personal reasons, remain silent about their sexual identity and thus do not want to have a voice in the first place.

Keywords

middle managers; voice; silence; non-heterosexual employees; LGBTI

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We wish you happy reading!

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1   Introduction

1.1 Background

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI)[1] people are faced with various difficulties working in a society where heterosexuality is often seen as the only acceptable sexual orientation (Subhrajit, 2014). Nowadays, many studies and articles show that the promotion of non-heterosexual rights has increased over the last two decades (Lloren & Parini, 2017), which is also reflected in the increasing engagement of big companies in LGBTI supportive initiatives. Overall, a lot of companies are already active in trying to improve working conditions for non-heterosexual employees. However, there is still more to be done, as workplace discrimination against non-heterosexual employees is still a present topic (Di Marco et al., 2018; Lloren & Parini, 2017). They experience workplace discrimination in forms of being confronted by prejudices, bullying, and harassment from a variety of people including their supervisors, coworkers, and business partners (Ruggs et al., 2015). As a result, many non-heterosexual employees suffer psychological and physical harm like low self-esteem, the feeling of loneliness and anxiety (Pizer et al., 2011).

In the worst case, employees feel silenced and the need to hide their sexual identity (Priola et al., 2014). When non-heterosexual employees are silenced, they are unable to proactively voice their opinions regarding work-related topics and they withhold their relevant opinions (Bell et al., 2011). This can, in turn, lead to a weak organizational commitment, dissatisfaction with their own career and at the end to increased employee turnover (Lloren & Parini, 2017). Non-heterosexual employees leaving the organization is an issue since it is known that a diverse workforce brings about benefits for organizations by encouraging the employees' job commitment or improving their job satisfaction which overall leads to positive business outcomes (Lloren & Parini, 2017). Thus, it is critical to emphasize how important it is to create an environment in which non-heterosexual employees feel that they can express their sexual identity at work without feeling the need to be silent.

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[1] We would like to remark that existing literature mainly focuses on LG and LGB people. Further, research determines to talk about LGBTI or LGBTQ, whereby the letter Q stands for the people "who identify as queer and/or are questioning their sexual identity" (Subhrajit, 2014, p. 318). However, to ensure consistency, in this thesis we will continue to talk about non-heterosexual people.

In order to create an inclusive environment, literature indicates that managers, in particular, middle managers, should take on the role of supporting non-heterosexual employees (Cox & Blake, 1991). Due to their special intermediary position between the operating core and top-level management, middle managers can have an especially great impact on the sense-making process of their subordinates by demonstrating to them why a certain change process is meaningful (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Therefore, especially during cultural change processes, such as the implementation of diversity management, middle managers play a crucial role (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2007). Thus, if middle managers were to take on this important role of promoting diversity, they could effectively contribute to an organizational environment in which it is "safe for others to speak up" (Milliken & Morrison, 2003, p. 1566) and in which particularly non-heterosexual employees feel that they can be open about their sexual identity.

1.2 Research Purpose and Question

When beginning to formulate our research question, we were inspired by change management literature which suggests, as aforementioned, that in particular middle managers hold a strategic position within companies which entails significant influence on their part during change processes (Balogun, 2003; Harding, Lee & Ford, 2014). Further research showed us that there are indications that middle managers' influential position gives them a pivotal role in the context of diversity management, with authors even referring to them as diversity champions (Tatli & Özbilgin, 2007; Cox & Blake, 1991; Maxwell, Blair & McDougall, 2001). We thus became interested in further investigating the importance of middle managers in the field of diversity management.

With this in mind, we approached our organizations of interest where the practical relevance of the topic became apparent to us. There, we asked the diversity officer about diversity fields they currently experience difficulties in. She explained to us that especially regarding initiatives aimed to support non-heterosexual employees, the company is still at a very early stage of implementation. Furthermore, the members of the diversity department, were wondering how to increase the participation in initiatives as a way to create an organizational environment where non-heterosexual employees' voices are heard. Our contact person emphasized that:

> *"(...) you simply cannot exclude this topic. Especially not if you know, that there are numerous members of the LGBTI community at the company who are not open about*

their sexual identity. That surely shows that something needs to be done here."
(Respondent 1)

She further referred to a certain barrier that exists regarding sexual identity, as many people perceive the topic to be very intimate and thus feel uncomfortable to talk about it. These conversations sparked our interest in the diversity dimension of sexual identity.

Therefore, in this qualitative study, we want to examine the topic of giving voice to non-heterosexual employees in detail. Our aim is, however, not to investigate the entire research field of voice and how it connects to non-heterosexuals in general, but rather which role managers, in particular, middle managers, play in this context. Therefore, connecting our two fields of interest, the influence of middle managers in regard to diversity management and how to enable non-heterosexual employees to make their voices heard in organizations, led us to the formulation of the following research question:

> *What are complexities middle managers face in giving voice to non-heterosexual employees?*

In order to explore and answer our research question with our qualitative study, we give voice to non-heterosexual employees by listening to their stories. We consider this aspect to be especially relevant since the topic of sexual identity is, as mentioned above, often considered to be uncomfortable to talk about, which leads us to believe that there is a need for a research approach focused on giving voice to our respondents.

In our thesis, we strive to contribute to the existing literature by increasing the understanding of the complexities middle managers face by giving voice to non-heterosexual employees. We argue that existing literature, when referring to middle managers as 'diversity champions', overlooks to acknowledge various complexities that come with this role and thus we specifically aim to challenge this view by deepening the understanding of what possibly inhibits middle managers' voice giving abilities.

1.3 Relevance

With our thesis, we want to waken the interest of middle managers and people that want to implement and engage in diversity activities or want to support and encourage their employees

to actively participate in initiatives. We want to deepen their understanding of the difficulties and possibilities that come with engaging in the topic. Additionally, we consider our thesis topic as being relevant for researchers that are interested in further investigating the role of middle managers and specifically their role in supporting diversity initiatives. Overall, we hope to create awareness for the importance of diversity management as well as the special need for supporting non-heterosexual employees.

1.4 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into 6 chapters: In this *first chapter* we provided the reader with a short introduction into the relevance of our topic by demonstrating the importance of the inclusion of non-heterosexual employees into organizations by giving them a voice. We furthermore presented our research question and which fields of literature we aim to contribute to with our qualitative study.

The *second chapter* gives an in-depth review of the three main literature fields we consider relevant for investigating our research question: Diversity Management, Voice and Silence and Middle Managers. After introducing the social justice and business case for diversity management, we will provide the reader with a detailed overview of the Voice and Silence literature, where we will show different factors that can influence non-heterosexual employees' decision when deciding whether to speak up or remain silent and the negative outcomes of feeling the need to stay in the closet. Moreover, we will consider different mechanisms that can give voice such as diversity initiatives or supportive individuals. Thereafter, we will look at the middle managers and their strategic position within an organization. Our literature review ends with a section that connects all three fields by reflection upon the current literature on middle manager's role as diversity champions, which we aim to challenge in our discussion chapter.

Subsequently, we introduce the methodology used to answer our research question in *chapter three*. Here we give the reader insights into our data collection method including a description of the preparation and execution of the interviews and the characteristics of our 13 respondents. Further, we elaborate on our process to analyze our empirical data by sorting and reducing it.

In *chapter four* the reader is provided with a detailed overview of our empirical findings. Overall, we found that middle managers face three main complexities in giving voice to non-heterosexual employees. First, middle managers are affected by the organizational environment

they operate in since it reflects how diversity management and the LGBTI topic are lived within the company. Secondly, our findings suggest that the non-heterosexual employees, middle managers get in touch with, differ in their expectations of voice since some employees decide to remain silent because of personal reasons whereas others clearly wish for voice and support. Third, the middle managers themselves have varying personal characteristics and attitudes towards non-heterosexual employees which influence their likeliness to provide employees with resources and verbal support.

In *chapter five* we discuss whether middle managers can take on the role of diversity champions as it is suggested by existing literature. Here we point out that middle managers' intermediary position between top management and the operating core would enable them to create awareness for the need of giving voice to non-heterosexual employees, which is in line with current literature. We however argue that literature has a too simplistic view on middle managers being able to act as champions for diversity since it misses to acknowledge various complexities. We claim that middle managers frequently lack awareness for the need of supporting non-heterosexuals and are moreover limited in their sphere of action which restricts their voice giving abilities. Based on this, we question whether middle managers are the 'right' and only group able to support non-heterosexual employees. Lastly, we conclude that middle managers' voice giving abilities are impeded since some non-heterosexual employees, due to individual personal reasons, remain silent about their sexual identity and thus do not want to have voice in the first place.

Finally, in our concluding *chapter six* we present a summary of our main findings from our discussion as a response to both our research question and aim and give suggestions for future research.

2   Literature Review

In order to be able to explore our research question, it was necessary for us to gain an overview about the existing literature related to middle managers' ability to give voice to the frequently underrepresented group of non-heterosexual employees. Before investigating the status quo of the existing literature about voice and silence and middle managers' role in organizations, we consider it important to give the reader insights into researchers' views on the reasons why companies engage in diversity management in the first place and how the LGBTI community is often overlooked in initiatives. Subsequently, we will examine researchers' debate on the concepts of voice and silence and problems related to the negative effects of non-heterosexual employees feeling the need to be silent about their sexual identity. This is where we want to make the connection to current literature on middle managers which suggests that middle managers in their strategic position play a crucial role in the sense-making process of their subordinates by explaining to them why a certain change process is meaningful. Lastly, we will introduce literature's view on middle managers acting as diversity champions.

2.1 Diversity Management

The interest and need for the engagement of organizations in diversity management can be traced back to the changes in the composition of the working population (Foster & Harris, 2005). The current workforce is characterized by a greater diversity than 20 years ago which also leads to the growing demand of society for a working environment in which it is respected and acknowledged that "individuals are unique and different from each other (Jose Chiappetta Jabbour et al., 2011, p. 59). Thus, diversity management has become "a buzzword for organizations of all types and sizes" (Von Bergen, Soper & Foster, 2002, p. 239).

2.1.1 Why do companies implement diversity management?

When examining the existing literature on why companies engage in diversity management, we identified two main reasons companies state as motivators for its implementation. Some organizations view the inclusion of employees from varying backgrounds to be a responsibility they have in order to ensure social justice. In this case, differences are seen as something that should be eliminated to create a 'level playing field' for all employees. Diversity initiatives at

other organizations originate from the wish to harness even these differences among the workforce, to reach an economic advantage compared to competitors and to open up new business opportunities.

The social justice case for diversity

Originally, the implementation of diversity management stemmed from the wish to create equal opportunities for all employees. Wilson and Iles (1999) define the concept of equal opportunities to be externally driven and that, when it is pursued in organizations, "rests on moral and legal arguments" (p. 31). Furthermore, differences among employees are viewed as problematic and thus measures have to be taken to treat every employee the same (Wilson & Iles, 1999). As McDougall (1996) points out equal opportunities practices have been defined "in terms of the search for equality, i.e. the creation of conditions where women and men are treated the same" (p. 64). Here legal frameworks to ensure individual employees' rights are a key element (McDougall, 1996). The responsibility for implementing the change in order to create a more diverse organization when following an equal opportunities approach lies mostly with human resources departments while diversity management rather includes all employees and specifically managers in this responsibility (McDougall, 1996).

The business case for diversity

Pitts et al. (2010) claim that diversity management acts as a response to challenges and opportunities in the internal as well as the external environment. In their research, Pitts et al. (2010) identify three environmental drivers that encourage the implementation of diversity initiatives: "environmental uncertainty, environmental favorability, and institutional isomorphism" (p. 867). Firstly, the authors point out that organizations feel the need to implement diversity management as a way to minimize ambiguity and promote stability. Secondly, a favorable environment such as the availability of resources like time and money for the initiatives can promote their implementation (Pitts et al., 2010). The third driver for diversity management, defined by Pitts et al. (2010), is institutional morphism which they understand as a phenomenon "where organizations in the same field gradually adapt to the same norms" (p. 873). Therefore, the authors conclude that some companies adopt diversity management, not as a reaction to a challenge they experience internally but rather because they observe peers in their external environment doing it.

Wilson and Iles (1999), however, find diversity initiatives in organizations to be grounded not so much in the reaction to internal or external challenges but rather in the so-called business case which revolves around the argumentation that a more diverse workforce creates a more profitable organization through a multitude of factors. They argue that diversity management is caused by perceiving differences as an asset as well as "a sense of commitment by the organization and its key players" (p. 32). Tatli et al. (2015) however critique the sole focus on the business case when organizations implement diversity management. The authors stress that seeing workforce diversity merely as an asset is "based on an implicit assumption that achieving equality and social justice are not legitimate 'business' of organizations" (p. 1246). Also, Knights and Omanović (2016) emphasize that when only focusing on financial gains when implementing diversity management companies may, when the expected profits do not come into effect, let go of the diversity issue "like a 'lead balloon'" (p. 14).

Robinson and Dechant (1997) however argue that there are three main economic reasons why companies engage in diversity management: Cost savings, winning the war for talent and an opportunity for business growth. As a way to save costs during everyday operation, the authors refer to, for example, the reduction of fines brought about by discrimination lawsuits against the company or reducing employee turnover which is caused by employees belonging to a minority or female employees feeling disadvantaged in the progression of their careers. Furthermore, companies can attract more talent when positioning themselves as an attractive and fair employer compared to their competitors (Robinson & Dechant, 1997). As the most recent benefit of diversity management, Robinson and Dechant (1997) consider an improved understanding of the marketplace and consumer wishes and subsequent business growth brought about by a more diverse workforce which better represents the environment companies operate in. In what they define as the "value in diversity hypothesis" (p. 46), Cox and Blake (1991) describe four arguments why and how diversity management can create this business growth by creating a net-added value for the organization. The four arguments the authors refer to are the marketing, the creativity, the flexibility and the problem-solving argument (Cox & Blake, 1991). While the authors' marketing argument refers to the aforementioned more favorable public relations and reaching a wider customer base, in their creativity argument Cox and Blake (1991) point out increased team heterogeneity as a way to further innovation at a company. Here the authors, however, make clear that this benefit can only be realized when awareness about each team members' individual needs and characteristics is created among employees. Heterogeneity is also the main contributor to greater flexibility and problem-solving

capabilities of diverse teams (Cox & Blake, 1991). This stems from a broader range of experiences being represented by diverse team members than would be the case in a rather homogeneous working group (Cox & Blake, 1991).

If the aforementioned awareness of other team members' needs is however not the case, it is possible that more diverse teams can also experience initial problems during collaboration. Warren, Kamalesh and Larry (1993) found in their research that newly formed heterogeneous groups often struggle to agree on what the most relevant tasks are and reported more cases of team members resisting contribution than homogeneous groups. Diverse teams thus require a longer time to get accustomed to each other as team members and overcome initial hurdles (Warren, Kamalesh & Larry, 1993). As a possible way to increase awareness for the value of diversity management and thus make team collaboration run smoothly Cox and Blake (1991) stress the importance of awareness trainings offered at organizations. Here leadership commitment for diversity management is crucial as Robinson and Dechant (1997) point out. The authors state that there is a larger probability for necessary resources such as time and money to be provided when managers perceive the business case for diversity as significant. This availability of resources would furthermore, promote offering awareness trainings and thus make a more successful implementation more likely and act as an additional driver for diversity management (Pitts et al., 2010).

When considering the business case for diversity as a driver for creating a more diverse workforce Sabharwal (2014) considers it crucial that companies go one step further and focus on promoting inclusion of employees which she argues will have even greater success in increasing workplace performance than just considering the business case. An inclusive work environment is described as one where employees' individual voices are heard and they are encouraged to speak up to contribute to organizational decision making (Sabharwal, 2014). Sabharwal (2014) refers here, just like Cox and Blake (1991) and Robinson and Dechant (1997), to the crucial role of committed leaders who acknowledge the additional value a diverse workforce can bring. The author views inclusion as a concept related to diversity management, but which goes beyond that by not merely creating initiatives targeting certain minorities or disadvantaged groups within organizations but rather by putting responsibility on committed leaders to enable a workplace environment which empowers all employees. Therefore, "inclusive management appears to hold greater potential for workplace harmony and improved productivity than diversity management alone" (Sabharwal, 2014, p. 211).

2.1.2 Representation of non-heterosexual employees in diversity initiatives

As mentioned above when motivated by a sense of commitment or a potential business case, organizations implement diversity initiatives to create a more diverse workforce. Brook and Colgan (2012) however point out that "the initial impetus for sexual orientation equality work in many organizations has been the activism of LGBTI people and their allies" (p. 360). Compared to initiatives regarding other diversity dimensions such as gender, age or ethnicity, programs supporting non-heterosexual employees are still underrepresented in an organizational context (Köllen, 2016). According to Clair, Beatty and MacLean (2005), this originates from the fact that sexual orientation belongs to the invisible social identities which are often overlooked due to their inconspicuousness but can still significantly complicate workplace interactions for employees. Brook and Colgan (2012) thus point out that diversity initiatives such as the formation of LGBTI networks are crucial ways to enable non-heterosexual employees and give them a voice within the organization. This can however only be effective if non-heterosexual employees are not just seen as members of the LGBTI community in general but as individuals with different needs of support (Köllen, 2013). Köllen (2013) describes that most companies which do engage in initiatives aimed at the diversity dimension sexual orientation only concentrate on homosexuals. His research, however, shows that companies, which for example name specific sexual orientations in their diversity management, offer a greater contribution to a supportive organizational climate than if they were to mention only initiatives aimed at non-heterosexual employees in general.

Apart from creating an organizational environment which is perceived as supportive towards non-heterosexual employees, Brenner, Lyons and Fassinger (2010) conclude that there is no definite answer to the question whether organizational variables such as productivity or retention are influenced by how non-heterosexual employees experience the organizational environment towards their sexuality. They did, however, find that "perceptions of organizational climate for heterosexism are directly predictive of levels of workplace outness" (p. 329). Furthermore, when an organization is perceived to support non-heterosexuals, these employees have to spend less time on actively hiding their identity which means they can perform higher at work-related tasks (Brenner, Lyons & Fassinger, 2010). Therefore, when considering the business case for diversity and the wish to increase workforce performance through diversity management, initiatives supporting non-heterosexual employees should not

be overlooked. This is especially relevant when for example considering that on average every fifth person at the workplace identifies as homosexual (Michael et al., 1994).

2.2 Voice and Silence

Considering the aforementioned business case for diversity which emphasizes that the successful integration of non-heterosexual employees into the organization can cause increased performance levels and our research topic which revolves around middle managers' ability to give voice to non-heterosexual employees, it is important to take a closer look at the existing voice and silence literature.

2.2.1 The voice and silence debate

There is an ongoing discussion about whether the concepts of silence and voice can be viewed as strongly interrelated (Morrison & Milliken, 2003) or should be treated as two separate concepts (Shahjehan & Yasir, 2016). According to Shahjehan and Yasir (2016), the former perspective implies that "an increase in silence would lead to a decrease in voice and vice versa" (p. 2), whereas in the latter perspective "voice is a deliberate individual choice while; silence can be explained as a behavior of automatic withdrawal, habitual behavior, or resignation" (p. 2). However, other authors disagree with this viewpoint on silence and argue that being silent can also be based on the employees' personal decision (Priola et al., 2014). In our thesis, we see silence and voice as two separate concepts possible to co-exist and that the employees themselves make a conscious decision whether to speak up or remain silent on their non-heterosexual identity.

According to Bowen and Blackmon (2003), sexual orientation is of particular interest when considering the concepts of voice and silence in the organizational context since the sexual orientation of a non-heterosexual employee is invisible until the employee decides to speak up and come out. The authors additionally point out, that when looking at phrases like 'coming out' or 'staying in the closet' one can notice that "sexual orientation is especially interesting because it is rich in metaphors for silence and voice" (p. 1401).

2.2.2 Various definitions of the terms voice and silence

Employees are often faced with decisions about whether to speak up or be silent about an issue in an organization (Morrison & Milliken, 2003). This is, as already indicated above, especially applicable to non-heterosexual employees, who have to decide whether to come out at work or stay silent and hide their sexuality. Bell et al. (2011) define silence as an "employees' intentional, conscious decision to withhold their opinions and concerns about organizational problems or issues" (p. 6). Additionally, Shahjehan and Yasir (2016) point out that various authors differentiate between acquiescent, defensive and prosocial silence. According to Bell et al. (2011), acquiescent silence refers to a "disengaged behavior based on resignation" (p. 6). Pinder and Harlos (2001) add that acquiescent employees are often unconscious about their own silence and thus also less willing to change their state of silence. While acquiescent silence describes a more passive behavior, defensive silence can be characterized as a proactive and planned behavior (Shahjehan & Yasir, 2016). Dyne et al. (2003) define defensive silence as "withholding relevant ideas, information or opinions as a form of self- protection, based on fear" (p. 1367). Lastly, prosocial silence is understood as "withholding work-related ideas, information or opinions with the goal of benefiting other people or the organization based on altruism or cooperative motives" (Dyne, Ang & Botero, 2003, p. 1368). Bell et al. (2011) apply these different forms of silence to situations and behaviors of non-heterosexual employees. According to the authors, acquiescent or defensive silence can be related to a fear of negative outcomes such as inequality or discrimination when coming out or expressing one's voice whereas pro-social silence can occur "when others fear for their GLBT friends and colleagues in an organization" (Bell et al., 2011, p. 7).

The concept of voice was defined by Hirschman (1970) as "any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objective state of affairs (...)" (p. 30). Shahjehan and Yasir (2016) see voice as the "intentional and voluntary sharing and expression of ideas, opinions and information" (p. 5). Their definition emphasizes the proactive behavior of individuals to raise their voice. According to Bell et al. (2011), voice in relation to non-heterosexual employees can be understood as "the ability to be "out" at work and to have the same rights, benefits, and privileges as everyone else" (p. 6). Additionally, having voice includes that non-heterosexual employees can make meaningful contributions to an organization whereby these contributions have to be valued and elicited (Bell et al., 2011). Furthermore, also voice can be differentiated into acquiescent, defensive and prosocial voice (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). According to Bell et

al. (2011), especially defensive voice is relevant to mention as non-heterosexual often have to make use of their voice as a means to protect themselves from discrimination. Moreover, acquiescent voice can be related to disengaged expressions that eliminate non-heterosexual employees from social life at work. Prosocial voice occurs when employees express their ideas with the intention to improve their working situation (Bell et al., 2011).

2.2.3 Negative effects of not having a voice or being silent

According to Day and Schoenrade (1997), especially non-heterosexual employees at work are constantly faced with the decision whether to express their voice about their non-heterosexual identity or stay in the closet. This decision of being silent or expressing their voice is often influenced by different context factors and a fear of possible negative outcomes.

Non-heterosexual employees often experience a feeling of being silenced, since cultural norms or policies can foster an organizational climate, where only heterosexuality is normalized (Priola et al., 2014). Herek (1990) describes 'heterosexism' as "an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual behavior, relationship, identity, or community" (p. 4). This how Priola et al. (2014) call it "climate of silence" (p. 5) forces non-heterosexual employees to stay in the closet. Moreover, also homophobia can create barriers and obstacles for non-heterosexual employees (Morrissey, 2010). According to Morrissey (2010), "homo/trans/biphobia is the irrational fear and/or hatred of lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual people" (p. 47).

Moreover, Bell et al. (2011) identify the fear of discrimination as an important reason why non-heterosexual employees remain silent. Non-heterosexual employees experience different forms of discrimination such as workplace incivility (Di Marco et al., 2018), harassment or social exclusion (Wright et al., 2006). Lloren & Parini (2017) distinguish between formal discrimination which can result in disadvantages regarding job applications, wages and promotion and informal discrimination which occurs on an interpersonal level and can be related to jokes, exclusion, and snubs. Pizer et al. (2011) point to various negative outcomes of discrimination that non-heterosexual employees often experience. According to the authors, the fear of discrimination or perceived discrimination against non-heterosexual employees can cause physical or emotional health issues such as low self-esteem, a feeling of loneliness and anxiety or depression. Additionally, discrimination has been linked to decreased job satisfaction

and productivity (Pizer et al., 2011). To avoid discrimination, non-heterosexual employees consequently often decide to hide their sexuality and create a facade by inventing stories about a heterosexual identity (Ozbilgin & Woodward, 2003; Day & Schoenrade, 1997).

Furthermore, Milliken and Morrison (2003) mention that individuals also decide to remain silent as they fear a possible negative reaction of their manager when speaking up about an issue. In another paper, the authors state that employees will also take into account their perceptions of how they think their colleagues will react when determining whether to speak up or remain silent about an issue (Morrison & Milliken, 2003). This uncertainty about the reaction of the counterpart can be linked to how Bowen and Blackmon (2003) name it "climate of opinion" (p. 1396). According to the authors, people will only express their voice and opinion when they think the majority will agree. Non-heterosexual employees may thus "hide aspects of their identity that do not conform with the majority or change aspects of their behaviour to make others more comfortable" (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003, p. 1399).

Overall, one can see that different context factors such as the organizational climate or the perceived reaction of coworkers including colleagues or managers and the fear of discrimination can cause silence on the part of non-heterosexual employees. When talking about silencing, one further needs to remark that "silencing does not necessarily lead to silence" (Rennstam & Sullivan, 2018, p. 15). This argument can be based on the fact that it remains the employee's own active decision whether silencing measures in place affect their decision to speak up.

As already mentioned above, employees that decide to remain silent about their non-heterosexual identity often feel the need to create stories about a fictious heterosexual identity. However, this causes emotional stress as it requires energy to invent these stories and it is challenging to maintain the secret about their actual non-heterosexual identity (Day & Schoenrade, 1997). Besides, remaining silent also leads to difficulties with networking at the workplace (Lloren & Parini, 2017). Following Day and Schoenrade (1997), "it is normal for coworkers to have some degree of knowledge about their colleagues' personal lives" (p. 148), as it is crucial for building up a trust for networking and mentoring activities. However, when employees have to invent an identity, this networking is hardly possible as silent non-heterosexual employees often avoid contact with their coworkers and the social interaction is often not natural. Hence, Day and Schoenrade (1997) determined that this lack of networking decreases the chances of career advancements for non-heterosexual employees.

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Furthermore, time spent on inventing stories and maintaining their secret detracts from productive work and thus also has an overall negative effect on the organization. In addition to this decreased job performance, staying in the closet can lead to a loss of job satisfaction and can cause the wish to leave the organization (Day & Schoenrade, 1997). These negative consequences of being silent make it relevant to also point to the positive effects of being out at work.

Following Lloren and Parini (2017), expressing the voice about one's sexual orientation can be positively linked to better health outcomes since stress and anxiety at work are reduced as well as to increased well-being and job satisfaction at work. Openness about one's sexual identity is also linked to better integration of the non-heterosexual employee into their respective workgroup (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003). Additionally, Lloren and Parini (2017) mention that also heterosexual employees tend to be less distracted and stressed at work when working for a company that promotes an inclusive workforce in which everyone can be open about their sexual identity.

2.2.4 Mechanisms that give voice to non-heterosexual employees

Researchers have identified various initiatives and practices that support non-heterosexual employees in expressing their voice. These practices are, for instance, supportive workforce policies (Gates, 2011), the establishment of trade unions and non-heterosexual networks (Wright et al., 2006), the support through individual people such as allies (McNulty et al., 2018) or managers (Milliken & Morrison, 2003) and lastly a welcoming environment and culture for non-heterosexual employees (Morrissey, 2010).

The implementation of workplace policies that protect non-heterosexual employees and prohibit discrimination, can be seen as a mechanism that can help organizations to combat discrimination against non-heterosexual employees or give them voice. However, nowadays there still remains an absence of supportive workforce policies (Gates, 2011). In the US, the United States Congress has suggested the bill "Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA)" to prohibit discrimination in hiring and employment, based on sexual orientation or gender identity but until now ENDA has still not become law. Some protections for non-heterosexual workers can be found in the "Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964" which does not allow gender identity-based employment discrimination because it is seen as a form of sex

discrimination (Eskridge, 2017). Considering Europe, one can note that for instance, the UK implemented the "Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations" in 2003 (Bell et al., 2011). However, Bell et al. (2011) imply that most of the legislation does not specifically focus on protecting non-heterosexual employees; it rather focuses on "reducing the silence of racial and ethnic minorities" (p. 9).

Furthermore, initiatives, networks or how McNulty et al. (2018) call it "employee resource groups" (p. 380) can present an opportunity for non-heterosexual employees to speak up. The overall purpose of these initiatives is "to improve workplace culture for LGBT employees by providing them with a voice mechanism that allows their needs and concerns to be heard" (McNulty et al., 2018, p. 831). Even though the networks are primarily founded by non-heterosexual employees, they consist of non-heterosexual employees as well as of supportive heterosexual coworkers (McNulty et al., 2018). The networks cannot only be addressed when a non-heterosexual employee is discriminated against, but they also contribute to providing an exchange platform where non-heterosexual employees can meet each other (McFadden & Crowley-Henry, 2018). Thus, the feeling of isolation is reduced as the networks create a feeling of belongingness to a group (McNulty et al., 2018). Bell et al. (2011) additionally emphasize that networks should not only be internal, but an organization should also participate in external initiatives as they help to strengthen the voice of employees also outside of the organization. Further, participating in external initiatives signals to prospective employees that the workplace is supporting non-heterosexual employees (McNulty et al., 2018).

Within organizations, not just initiatives aimed at non-heterosexual employees can lend support but also heterosexual colleagues as allies can encourage non-heterosexuals to feel comfortable about their own sexual orientation at the workplace. These "straight allies" are characterized as "co-workers, supervisors, other employees who support LGBT rights" (McNulty et al., 2018, p. 831). Brooks and Edwards (2009) investigated the motivation behind being an ally and found out that the main motive is their "profound sense of social justice" (p. 141). Allies see their responsibility in giving voice to non-heterosexual employees by supporting and advocating them and additionally confronting others when they behave inappropriately (McNulty et al., 2018). The findings of Grzanka, Adler and Blazer (2015) also suggest that the involvement of allies in non-heterosexual initiatives is influenced by the responses of others to their involvement whereby appreciation and recognition of their work are important. Relating again to Bowen and Blackmon (2003) and their investigations about the 'climate of opinion', meaning

that people will only express their voice and opinion when they think the majority will agree, one can say that the importance of allies can be stressed. When non-heterosexual employees notice that there are predominantly supportive coworkers who accept their sexual orientation, they will be more likely to speak up about their identity (Morrison & Milliken, 2003).

Among the group of supportive coworkers also the presence of managers is crucial according to Milliken and Morrison (2003). The authors point out that managers need to "actively [intervene] in organizational hierarchies to create a sense that is safe for others to speak up" (p. 1566) to prevent silence. Moreover, Bell et al. (2011) suggest that non-heterosexual employees need to have the possibility to complain about an issue such as discrimination or inclusion to their line manager which also entails that by listening to the employees' complaints managers can give voice to them or at least not silence them. Furthermore, when management clearly communicates that heterosexism is not tolerated (Waldo, 1999) and that non-heterosexual employees "are valued contributors to organizational success" (Bell et al., 2011, p. 12) employees are more likely to express their voice. Wright et al. (2006) additionally emphasize the importance of senior non-heterosexual role models as they can give voice to their non-heterosexual subordinates by fostering their inclusion. The findings of Wright et al. (2006) also suggest that the presence of managers acting as diversity champions provides valuable support for non-heterosexual employees.

As aforementioned also the organizational culture can on the one hand silence but on the other hand give voice to non-heterosexual employees. Morrison and Milliken (2003) indicate that an organizational climate in which employees feel comfortable coming up with problems is crucial for non-heterosexual employees raising their voice. This also includes that, non-heterosexual employees should have the possibility to complain about discrimination and exclusion (Bell et al., 2011). Existing literature further indicates, that a non-heterosexual friendly culture moreover should include different voice mechanisms such as initiatives and supporting individuals. It is important to create an inclusive work environment in which individuals "feel safe, authentic, supported, and trusted […] and importantly, they are able to contribute fully and effectively to an organization" (Cunningham, 2015, p. 427).

Overall, it can be said that the existing voice and silence literature demonstrates that the decision whether to express one's voice and be open about one's sexual identity or remain silent is complex and influenced by various factors. Of particular interest to our research question is the role of middle management. As it already became clear throughout the analysis of the current

literature, an influence of (middle) managers in giving voice to or silencing non-heterosexual employees is indicated. Therefore, the existing literature on middle managers will now be examined more closely in order to provide a better insight into their strategic position within the company and the role they take on during change processes such as the implementation of diversity management.

2.3 Middle Managers

Existing literature demonstrates that middle managers have for a long time appeared in a rather negative light, as they were identified as the ones resisting and inhibiting change processes within organizations (Huy, 2001; Harding, Lee & Ford, 2014). Moreover, Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) indicate that the relevant position of middle managers within a strategy process has traditionally been neglected. However, recent literature suggests that middle managers have a particularly great impact in the sense-making process of their subordinates on the one hand and can be seen as the strategic key figures between top management and the employees on the other hand (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011).

2.3.1 Who is the middle manager?

According to current literature, it is complex and hardly possible to find a direct answer to the question who the middle manager is (Harding, Lee & Ford, 2014). McConville and Holden (1999) acknowledge that it is indeed simple to define the senior and junior staff but there exists no straightforward definition for middle managers.

Sandwich position

Middle managers are referred to as having a special position within a company by often being labeled as the "filling in the sandwich" (McConville & Holden, 1999, p. 406). This can be further demonstrated when considering the definition of Mintzberg (1989) of the middle managers as those who are "between the operating core and the aspex" (p. 98). Harding, Lee and Ford (2014) hereby add that middle managers "maintain a central position in organizational hierarchies, are responsible for implementing senior management strategies, and exercise control over junior staff" (p. 1213). Moreover, also Huy (2001) defines middle managers as "any managers two levels below the CEO and one level above line workers and professionals"

(p. 73), which points to their 'sandwich position'. In our thesis, we understand middle managers as all employees with management responsibility which are situated in an intermediary position between the operating core and top-level management.

Position ambiguity – Controller, controlled, resister, resisted?

The role of middle managers within the 'sandwich' position entails a role moving between "the subject positions of controller, controlled, resister and resisted" (Harding, Lee & Ford, 2014, p. 1231). More precisely, this means that middle managers are on the one hand controlled by their supervisors and on the other hand have control over their subordinates. Further, they can either be the resisters, as they can withstand their supervisor's instructions, or they can also be the ones who have to deal with the resistance of their subordinates (Harding, Lee & Ford, 2014). Literature demonstrates, that middle managers are often the obstacle that slows down, manipulates or even inhibits the implementation efforts of most change processes (Mantere, 2008). Amongst others, Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) indicate that middle managers are capable of doing so since they own unique strategic knowledge. Middle managers stand out compared to other employees because of their "access to top management coupled with their knowledge of operations" (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992, p. 1192). Further elaborated this means, that they are able to combine the knowledge given by their subordinates with the strategic ideas and plans of their supervisors. This makes them into strategic actors who do not just accept the instructions of their senior managers but question and rethink their implementation plans which, however, eventually can lead to resistance (Harding, Lee & Ford, 2014; Rouleau & Balogun, 2007).

2.3.2 The strategic role of middle managers

The recognition of middle managers' strategic role was traditionally low, and they were rather seen as irrelevant side figures during the design of new organizational processes (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). More recently, however, their role has gained an appreciation and according to Balogun (2003) "middle managers fulfill a complex 'change intermediary' position during implementation" (p. 69).

Middle managers as supporters of creative ideas

The aforementioned sandwich position of the middle managers implies a particular position in regard to the creation and implementation of creative ideas for organizational development and change (Huy, 2001). This was also recognized by Floyd and Wooldridge (1994), who indicate that middle managers play a crucial role in communicating the entrepreneurial ideas they recognize by their subordinates to the senior managers. Again, middle managers are one step ahead of senior managers since the latter are often rather isolated from their companies' day-to-day activities (Hornsby, Kuratko & Zahra, 2002). Middle managers, however, "interact with diverse employees, which would allow them to use formal and informal approaches to encourage innovation" (Hornsby, Kuratko & Zahra, 2002, p. 257). Additionally, Kuratko et al. (2005) go one step further and see middle managers as the decision-makers who "champion projects that are intended to create newness" (p. 701). Furthermore, Huy (2001) suggests, that the group of middle managers is "more diverse than their senior counterparts […] in, for instance, functional area, work experience, geography, gender, and ethnic background" (p. 73), indicating that within this diverse group with different mindsets and perspectives, creativity is enabled.

However, Huy (2001) also points to the problem with the middle managers' own creativity. Even though they are considered to have a crucial role in promoting innovation within the company, the senior counterparts often do not listen to their ideas (Huy, 2001). Hence, the author states that this lack of attention to the middle managers' ideas can eventually cause resistance towards the senior managers' instructions and especially towards change processes. This is somewhat problematic since Rouleau and Balogun (2011) suggest that middle managers can actually facilitate change processes through their abilities to positively influence the sense-making process of their subordinates.

Middle managers as sense givers

During a change process, middle managers frequently take on the role of sense-givers meaning they convey to their coworkers why a certain change process is necessary and meaningful (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). In their case description also Alvesson and Sveningsson (2015) point out the importance of this role for successful change implementation. Middle managers, in particular, take on the role as sense-givers mentioned above due to their strategic

intermediary position in the organization between top management and employees. This position, according to Huy (2001) often establishes middle managers as great networkers. The networker position gives them the opportunity to spread the word and convey the planned change to their subordinates and influential colleagues (Huy, 2001). Rouleau and Balogun (2011) here refer to managers' ability to 'set the scene' which implies "the knowledge of who to contact, who to bring together, and who to use to influence things" (p. 973). A precondition for this, however, is that middle managers themselves are convinced of the change purpose, meaning they have the opportunity to first make sense of it themselves (Huy, 2001). When middle managers are not provided with sufficient information about the planned change and are not prepared by top-managers they are not able to successfully carry out this role. Alvesson & Sveningsson (2015) demonstrate that this can cause resistance on the middle manager' side which can eventually lead to a failed organizational change attempt.

Rouleau and Balogun (2011) point out that the communication of planned changes often lies in the middle managers' responsibility during a change process. However, when communicating change processes middle managers are often confronted by their subordinates' uncertainty about the new, changed situation (Huy, 2001). Resulting deflated morale or anxiety can significantly reduce employee productivity which is why middle managers feel the need to intervene and address employee well-being (Huy, 2001). This is where the importance of "clear and compelling communication throughout the organization" (p. 76) comes into play, which also is the stage at which Huy (2001) sees the highest probability for mistakes. Middle managers being assigned to conduct this key stage further underlines their influential role during change processes.

Middle managers as diversity champions?

Taking initiative in order to create a more diverse organization by implementing diversity management can be considered a significant organizational change process (Hampden-Turner & Chih, 2010). Cox and Blake (1991) describe the need for leader commitment during the implementation of diversity management and refer to managers who act as champions for diversity. They define these champions as "people who will take strong personal stands on the need for change [and] role model the behaviors required for change" (p. 52). Apart from support and commitment from top-management, Cox and Blake (1991) here specifically refer to the need for champions among line managers. Also, Maxwell, Blair and McDougall (2001) see the

middle managers' role as "pivotal in implementing a managing diversity approach" (p. 480). Furthermore, McDougall (1998) recognizes the increased responsibility of middle managers not just in HRM activities in general but also specifically relating to diversity management. Wright et. al. (2006) add that specifically managers acting as diversity champions can offer support for non-heterosexual employees. The attribution of the role as a diversity champion responsible during the implementation of diversity initiatives and ensuring equal treatment among employees is, however, also criticized due to "conflicting priorities, increasing HRM responsibilities […] [and] [middle managers'] own inadequacies" (McDougall, 1998, p. 78) which relates back to the complexities middle managers face in their role.

2.4 Chapter Summary

Overall, literature demonstrates that diversity management or the implementation of initiatives to support non-heterosexual employees in order to create a more inclusive work environment and harness potential business benefits can lead to a workplace in which employees do not feel the need to be silent about their sexual identity and can make their voices heard. Hence, non-heterosexuals no longer have to spend time and energy on inventing stories to hide their sexuality and can actively make their voices heard and thereby increase productivity. Existing literature on middle managers here indicates an important strategic position for middle managers when it comes to an organizational change process such as the implementation of diversity management. Many authors therefore appoint middle managers to the role of diversity champions, which we however want to challenge in our discussion chapter since we argue that literature's view neglects various complexities that come with this role.

3   Methodology

When presenting our methodology, we first want to connect our research to the critical research tradition which influenced our approach. Based on the gender studies tradition, our aim lies on giving voice to the underrepresented group of non-heterosexual employees by conducting semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, we will give the reader insights into the data collection process of our empirical material, including a description of our preparation phase for the interviews, an introduction of the 13 respondents we interviewed and our impressions of the interview process itself. Thereafter, we will demonstrate how we evaluated and sorted our empirical material so that it was possible for us to present our findings in a coherent way while also acknowledging relevant limitations that come with our research approach and that need to be considered in the discussion part.

3.1 Philosophical Grounding

We let our research be guided by the feminist tradition as described by Prasad (2018). This critical research tradition revolves around giving voice and visibility to suppressed groups within society, in particular women and sexuality (Prasad, 2018). In our thesis, we applied some of the key practices of this tradition, for instance striving for closeness with our interview partners and providing space for their voices, in order to critically examine the employment conditions of non-heterosexual employees. As Bell et al. (2011) describe in their research, non-heterosexual employees are often silenced at their workplace as they are perceived to not fit in with what is considered "normal" at organizations. Our focus when conducting interviews thus lied on giving non-heterosexual employees an opportunity to make their own voices heard as well as personalizing our research by paying attention and listening to individual stories (Prasad, 2018). We did this to make sure to achieve results that present a valuable contribution to existing literature.

Even though our research was inspired by the feminist tradition, we did not focus only on lesbian women but included all non-heterosexual employees in our analysis. Therefore, we consider our research as being part of the research field of gender studies. We expanded our research field since we are very interested in examining the working conditions of all non-heterosexual people in the workforce and not just women, whom the feminist tradition focuses on. According to literature, gender studies "is seen by many to further open up the field of

women's studies" (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004, p. xi) by taking into account the "prejudicial treatment of gay and lesbian individuals and the assumption that heterosexuality is the sexual choice of all people" (p. 68). This also indicates the need for giving voice to non-heterosexual employees to enable this choice of one's own sexual identity.

3.2 Research Design and Data Collection Process

In line with our critical research tradition of gender studies, which focuses on giving voice to suppressed groups in society, we followed a qualitative methodology. According to Ambert et al. (1995), qualitative research is consistent with the aim of giving voice to "those not heard before" (p. 883). Additionally, qualitative research helps us to get closer to the group of non-heterosexual employees by understanding their "subjective lifeworlds" (Prasad, 2018, p. 173; Kvale, 1994). To gain these insights into the lifeworlds and experiences of our respondents, we conducted semi-structured interviews, which will be further explained below.

The whole data collection process began with our preparation for the interviews. We started to read introductory literature about diversity management and the LGBTI topic and watched videos about different stories of non-heterosexual individuals. As we both identify ourselves as heterosexual and have never before conducted research focused on non-heterosexual employees, this was a necessary step to gain a better understanding and knowledge about the difficulties and problems non-heterosexuals face in private life as well as in work life. Furthermore, we informed ourselves about the two companies, we did research at, and their respective engagement in diversity management in general but also specifically about their supportive activities for non-heterosexual employees. Therefore, we talked to our contact people at each company, both working in the respective diversity management departments, who gave us a short overview of the companies' engagement. In addition to that, we analyzed the companies' web pages and social media profiles to gain an overall impression of how diversity is lived within both companies. Also, Qu and Dumay (2011) suggest that it is crucial for researchers to "develop as much expertise in relevant topic areas as possible" (p. 239) before conducting the interviews to be able to adequately ask informed questions and to collect data that is useful for one's research purpose.

Additionally, Doyle (2004) emphasizes that it is important to carefully decide whom to interview. In order to meet our research aim, which is to understand the complexities middle

managers face when giving voice to non-heterosexual employees, we determined that it is reasonable to on the one hand conduct our research at two different companies and on the other hand interview different groups of people within the companies. We did this to be able to examine complexities from different organizational backgrounds and employee perspectives. Thus, we want to underline that we did not aim to make a comparison between the two companies and their respective engagement in diversity management and initiatives for non-heterosexual employees. We rather aimed to listen to the individual stories of the different employees to discover their "lifeworlds" (Kvale, 1994, p. 6). As already indicated above, our interview partners belong to different groups of employees including non-heterosexuals, people from the diversity and sustainability management department and middle managers. Considering the topic from different perspectives supported our aim to gain comprehensive insights into differing viewpoints.

Different authors (see for example Qu and Dumay (2011) or Longhurst (2003)) also point to ethical issues that need to be taken into consideration when conducting interviews. Longhurst (2003) claims that it is important to treat the collected data confidentially and anonymously. Hence, due to data protection reasons, the two companies and moreover the names of our interviewees were anonymized. Nevertheless, to give insights into whom we interviewed, we generated an overview of the employees, including their position, gender and sexual orientation, which can be found in *Table 1*. Overall, we interviewed 13 respondents including three employees who work in diversity management departments, five middle managers, seven non-heterosexual employees, including one lesbian woman, one transgender man, and five gay men. One of the gay men also had a middle manager position in his company.

	Position	**Gender**	**Sexual orientation**
Respondent 1	Diversity Manager	Female	Heterosexual
Respondent 2	Diversity Manager	Male	Heterosexual
Respondent 3	Diversity Manager	Female	Heterosexual
Respondent 4	Employee	Male	Gay
Respondent 5	Employee/ Manager	Male	Gay
Respondent 6	Employee	Male	Gay
Respondent 7	Manager	Male	Heterosexual
Respondent 8	Manager	Male	Heterosexual

Respondent 9	Employee	Male	Transsexual
Respondent 10	Employee	Female	Lesbian
Respondent 11	Manager	Male	Gay
Respondent 12	Manager	Female	Heterosexual
Respondent 13	Employee	Male	Gay

Table 1: Overview of interviewees

We conducted half of the interviews face-to-face at both companies in Vienna and Munich. The other half of the respondents were interviewed via telephone since some of the respondents were located in Berlin or Nuremberg or were not available in person at the time, we did our interviews in Germany or Austria. Even though Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) indicate that there exists critique about telephone interviews, as "qualitative researchers generally rely on face-to-face interviewing when conducting semi-structured and in-depth interviews" (p. 108), the authors highlight various advantages of conducting interviews by telephone. Telephone interviews are particularly beneficial when talking about a sensitive topic (Fenig et al., 1993) since they can positively influence the interviewees' "perceptions of anonymity" (Greenfield, Midanik & Rogers, 2000, p. 278). This applies to our research field since we address employee's sexual identity and sexuality, which are both highly personal topics which some respondents might thus feel uncomfortable to talk about. Even though we enjoyed talking to our respondents face-to-face, to for example see that some of them had pride flags or pictures from pride parades hanging in their offices, we could not notice any difference concerning the responses and the openness of the interviewees between face-to-face and telephone interviews.

To conduct the interviews, we made use of an interview guideline. Following Wengraf (2001), semi-structured interviews should include questions that are prepared in advance but that are also formulated openly, so that "the subsequent questions of the interviewer cannot be planned in advance but must be improvised in a careful and theorized way" (p. 6). Hence, we focused our interview guideline on three main topics, including questions about the perceived corporate culture in general, the role of and relationship to the middle management and employees' knowledge on existing (LGBTI) initiatives. The overarching questions were adapted to the respective interview partners, meaning that we asked middle managers modified questions, different from non-heterosexual employees. For instance, we asked middle managers to

describe their relationship with their subordinates. We subsequently improvised and adapted the follow-up questions to the respective answers of our respondents. When conducting the interviews, we wanted to give our respondents the time and space to bring up own stories that we could not have anticipated, by giving them the opportunity to talk about their own experiences at length. This ensured that we gained deep insights into actual happenings, the feelings of the interviewee's and into their "own stories of their lived world" (Kvale, 1994, p. 4), which in the end proved to be the most interesting findings. To summarize, it can be said that the interview guideline was used as an orientation guide, while we maintained certain flexibility in the progression of our qualitative research. Furthermore, Longhurst (2003) points out that some respondents might need some time to warm-up, which we were aware of. Before asking the questions related to our research question, we started with introducing ourselves and our thesis project and continued with posing some introductory questions about our interviewee's position within the company.

The interviews lasted for forty-five minutes on average, with the longest interview, our first interview, being one hour and fifteen minutes long. Reflecting on the first interview we conducted, we can say that it was helpful for us that the respondent extensively shared his experiences about his life as a gay man and as an employee, as this gave us a good personal introduction and overview of our topic and especially the problems employees face when not being able to express their voice. This enabled us to approach the remaining interviews with more detailed knowledge about the topic. Another aspect we observed during our interviews was that respondents frequently thanked us for giving them an opportunity to talk openly about their personal opinions, wishes for the future and fears regarding LGBTI initiatives at their company. They were glad to make their voices, regarding this often-overlooked topic, heard. As a matter of fact, we perceived a real desire among most respondents to share their stories with us. Moreover, one middle manager told us, that he took our interview, not only as an impulse for himself to think about the topic for the first time but that he also used it as a way to start communicating about the topic with his colleagues. We are very happy to have contributed to the increased awareness of the topic in his department. Overall, our respondents' reactions demonstrated and confirmed the importance of giving voice to non-heterosexual employees to us.

3.3 Data Analysis Process

Our analysis process was guided by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) who presented the steps of sorting and reducing as a way to spend time with the material, become more familiar with it and be able to present a clear overview of all knowledge gathered. The authors furthermore add the third step, arguing, which is introduced by the presentation of our empirical findings and represented by the discussion chapter of our thesis. Regarding the data analysis process, Alvesson (2003) emphasizes the need to be open and "acknowledging the uncertainty of all empirical material and knowledge claims" (p. 25). Therefore, we consciously maintained a reflexive approach by challenging each other's ideas. We did this for example while transcribing our interviews. Since we simultaneously worked on different transcripts, we frequently exchanged initial interpretations of what our respondents said and how this relates to our research topic.

In order to be able to analyze the empirical material gathered during our interviews, we transcribed all our audio recordings. We did this very soon after conducting the interviews, most of them on the same day, to still be very close to our material (Longhurst, 2003). During this process is it essential to acknowledge that "to transcribe means to transform, to change from one form to another" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 3). Transforming here refers to the fact that during the transcribing process researchers translate their empirical material from oral to written language (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Therefore, we tried to both be very present during the interviews, by not taking notes, which according to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) can be a distraction for respondents and interviewers. Besides, we paid particular attention to non-verbal communication stemming from our interviewees during face-to-face interviews, such as their body language, which we would not be able to pick up when listening to our audio recordings later on.

What followed was the sorting process which we started by reading the transcripts separately, carefully and slowly to ensure no important details were overlooked (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Sorting was our way to approach the "problem of chaos" (p. 71) which Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) define since the complexity of qualitative material entails a certain level of chaos. After each of us highlighted the quotes that appeared most relevant to us in the transcripts, we got together to discuss our findings and reach common ground regarding the sorting process. By first examining the material separate from each other, we wanted to ensure

to keep an open mind and remain flexible regarding the sorting categories (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). While reading the transcripts, we also already made note of literature fields that our findings relate to and used these insights as a way to code our material. Coding is hereby understood as putting labels on the overarching themes we identified. Our process of open discussion and challenging each other's viewpoints led us to create a table listing all significant quotes identified by us. In the next step, we grouped the quotes into categories according to common themes we recognized. In a final step, we defined three main themes around which our findings revolve:

- How the organizational environment influences middle managers' voice giving abilities
- How non-heterosexual employees respond to voice giving efforts by middle managers
- How middle managers see themselves and their possible ways of action to give voice to non-heterosexual employees

As Styhre (2013) points out, the analysis process cannot be viewed as a clear cut step-by-step process but as rather messy with several things happening at the same time. Which is why throughout our sorting process we also continuously reduced our qualitative material by combining several categories into one. Reducing qualitative material is essential to ensure that the amount of data is more manageable (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). We thus took the approach of illustrative reduction and reduced according to our wish to illustrate the phenomenon of middle managers and their ability to give voice to non-heterosexual employees (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Hence, we excluded respondents' references of which department they work in within the company, how they deal with their non-heterosexual identity in their private life or whether they perceive employees representing other diversity dimensions i.e. disability to have a voice in the organization. However, since we as researchers lack personal experiences in our research field, interviewees' personal stories, gave us a great introduction into the environment non-heterosexuals and middle managers operate in and which challenges they face in everyday life. Furthermore, the stories told were very interesting and we followed them curiously since the aim with our interviews, as aforementioned, was to give respondents time and space to talk about their experiences at length.

After presenting our empirical findings to our readers, we combined them with existing literature in our discussion chapter. This is where researchers frequently face the "problem of authority" (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 143) when trying to make a valuable contribution to academic literature. We argued our contribution to the existing literature by engaging in a dialogue with it while adding our own perspective.

3.4 Critical Reflections on the Data Collection and Analysis Process

We are aware that our qualitative research was possibly influenced by different limitations. In the following, we thus want to reflect on our data collection and data analysis process by pointing to the limitations of our study and to factors that possibly influenced our process and the quality of our empirical material.

First and foremost, we are aware that our study, due to the restricted time and resources we had, was limited by our sample as we overall interviewed only 13 people including only one lesbian woman and one trans man. Thus, our findings are not "statistically representative" (Ambert et al., 1995, p. 885) and consequently not transferrable to every non-heterosexual employee, middle manager or company. However, one needs to remark that it was also not our aim to be generally representative, but rather to listen to individual stories. Hence, it was important for us to gain insights into differing viewpoints. Nevertheless, it was crucial for us to bear in mind, especially for our findings and discussion part, that the answers of our respondents cannot be taken for granted, and we thus always have to be reflective when analyzing them and using them for building arguments in our discussion chapter.

In relation to this, we have to mention that we had limited influence in regard to the selection of our respondents as they were chosen by our company contact people. Therefore, it can be assumed that we had a sample of highly motivated employees, meaning that we only interviewed people that generally support the LGBTI and diversity topic. Moreover, regarding the non-heterosexual employees, we only talked to people that are "out" and want to openly talk about their sexual identity with us. As a result, we only got the opportunity to talk to employees that, to a certain extent, already have voice and make themselves heard. However, as we got positive as well as critical insights into the companies, we conclude that this was not a problematic issue for the findings of our research. In addition, we were able to ask our company contact people, that we want to interview middle managers, people from the diversity

department and different non-heterosexual employees. Hence, we could make sure that we have respondents that are suitable for examining our research question.

Furthermore, we acknowledge that our study considers non-heterosexual employees as one collective group by not differentiating between the single voices of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex people. Köllen (2013), however, indicates that it is somewhat problematic to see non-heterosexual employees as members of the LGBTI group overall, as they are frequently not seen as individuals with different needs of support. Nevertheless, we are aware of these potential flaws of our study and took them into consideration when writing our findings and discussion chapters.

4   Empirical Findings

Over the course of our interviews, we identified three main themes which our respondents referred to when talking about middle managers and their voice giving abilities in organizations. First, the *organizational environment middle managers operate* in plays a crucial role in influencing their voice giving efforts. The organizational environment can, on the one hand, be an enabler when an organization and its employees are open towards diversity initiatives and on the other hand be an inhibitor when individuals or groups of employees do not see a need or stand behind the topic of diversity management. Second, our findings show complexities middle managers face in regard to *how the non-heterosexual employees themselves respond to voice giving efforts*. Here our interviewees pointed out how the personality of non-heterosexual employees, a fear of discrimination or their workload can have an effect on their response to voice giving efforts. Third, respondents referred to the *middle managers' personal traits and their ability to allocate resources*, such as money and time, as a way for them to inhibit or enable employees to speak up within the organization. To guide the reader through our empirical material, our findings are structured according to the aforementioned themes.

4.1 How does the organizational environment influence middle managers' voice giving abilities?

Through our interviews, we gained insights into how an organization's positioning towards diversity management can act as an enabler or inhibitor for both non-heterosexuals to make their voices heard as well as for middle managers and their abilities to support these employees. In particular, our findings show how the organizational culture resembles our silencing society and how existing diversity initiatives and individual people influence middle managers' likeliness to give voice to non-heterosexual employees.

4.1.1 The organizational culture as a mirror image of a silencing society

Within both companies, we recognized that respondents frequently pointed towards a lack of awareness for the diversity topic in general and particularly for the LGBTI topic. While the interviewees clearly state that diversity in their opinion has to be seen as an enrichment and that organizations lose potential when not engaging in diversity management, they did point out that

there is a lack of awareness for the importance to create an inclusive environment for non-heterosexual employees:

> *"I have heard of managers above saying: 'Well, I've never heard that there are problems with the LGBTI topic.' They don't even think there might be problems." (Respondent 1)*

People who lack awareness, according to our respondents, often consider the LGBTI topic to be a purely private topic which has no need to be discussed at work. However, almost every interviewee pointed out that employees' sexual identity is indeed relevant for the workplace. This was for instance explained by the following gay respondent:

> *"What is the problem with LGBT? Is it private? No, it is not private. When I come back on Monday and someone asks: 'How was your weekend?', then I don't have to lie and say I was somewhere with my girlfriend. I was there with my husband." (Respondent 4)*

Here the gay respondent points to the disparity between heterosexual employees and non-heterosexual employees when it comes to making usual small talk at the workplace. While the former do not have to spend any time or energy on deciding which story to tell about their weekend since they do not feel the need to hide anything, the latter frequently do not have the possibility to talk about their free time and family life since that would imply opening up about their sexual identity.

According to our respondents, this lack of understanding of how omnipresent the topic of the own sexual identity is not just in private life but also at the workplace can be traced back to the society we live in. During the interviews, our respondents emphasized that organizations are a *"mirror image of society" (Respondent 2)* meaning that the culture we live in, which has certain views on and prejudices against non-heterosexual people, also influences the culture of organizations. Nowadays, especially regarding the LGBTI topic, there are still differences, in how certain countries or industries stand towards non-heterosexual employees. These differences according to our interviewees originate in individual cultural backgrounds, with some cultures not accepting the LGBTI community. This mindset is often transferred from private life to the workplace. Some interviewees, for example, stated that they often have contact with less open-minded colleagues from *"Eastern Europe" (Respondent 4)* or *"more*

conservative plants" (Respondent 10). One respondent named this a reason why one of his colleagues did not feel like he could take part in an LGBTI supportive initiative:

> *"We once had a colleague, who was working in one of our manufacturing plants, who said he wanted to connect with our network but sees no possibility to do so. This is because his work environment is so male-dominated, and everything is about 'being a real man' and this colleague didn't feel able to deal with that." (Respondent 13)*

Especially in manufacturing plants our respondents frequently pointed out that there still persists a male-dominated environment in which people have this conservative picture of traditional role distribution between men and women. Therefore, employees working on these plants, still consider it almost impossible to be "out" as a non-heterosexual. One respondent, who actively participates in diversity initiatives, in this context stated that she has heard from employees at the plants "*that it would be a problem if a man were to hang a picture of a pin-up man in his locker" (Respondent 12).* According to her, this would certainly entail jokes being made at the expense of gays.

Overall, the influence of society is hardly negligible and will also be recognizable throughout our analysis. However, the organizations that we studied also actively try to overcome the different viewpoints by creating a common mindset among employees. They do this by means of internal or external initiatives that on the one hand give voice to non-heterosexual employees and on the other hand support the awareness creation for the LGBTI topic within the company.

4.1.2 Existing diversity initiatives in organizations as voice mechanisms for non-heterosexual employees

Both companies we examined offer internal support for non-heterosexual employees by providing the possibility to address collegial advisors or diversity ambassadors in times of need. The advisors or ambassadors are either themselves homosexual or heterosexual employees who have the knowledge and experience to deal with possible LGBTI-related issues and are moreover available at all the company locations. In addition to that, our respondents mentioned internal breakfast and lunch activities, which are open for all employees, as an important way to draw attention to the topic and, most importantly, like one respondent mentioned: *"reduce the fear of contact" (Respondent 8).*

As external initiatives, which also show the public that the organization supports non-heterosexuals, the respondents referred to hoisting rainbow flags outside the office buildings on the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT) or during the pride month June. Furthermore, one company participates in the Christopher Street Day (CSD) and other pride parades. These external initiatives are not only noticeable by the external audience but sometimes also more easily recognized by employees than internal initiatives are. One respondent even said that some coworkers first discovered that the company actively supports non-heterosexual employees at a pride parade.

> *"I was at the CSD and heard: 'Oh you [the company] are also here. That is great! I'm also part of the company and didn't know that.' A woman ran along last year at the Nuremberg parade but didn't know before that her own company was active regarding the LGBTI topic. These events give us another opportunity to get in contact with people and let them know about what we do." (Respondent 10)*

Additionally, our respondents stated that this external positioning and participating in the initiative can lead to increased openness about employees' own sexual identity and sometimes even to a coming-out:

> *"I can definitely say there was a colleague from our network who did not want to come out at work for a long time because he was afraid. But through working in our network he became more and more involved and over time became publicly visible and then he just came out and there was no problem." (Respondent 9)*

When talking about the existing initiatives and what else can help raise the awareness for the LGBTI topic, many respondents told us about unconscious bias trainings which were offered by the companies, to be completed voluntarily. They suggested that in order to start promoting and addressing the LGBTI topic it is particularly necessary to explain to managers and other coworkers the overall relevance of diversity management. Interviewees argued that when individuals understand why diversity matters, they might also be more likely to support non-heterosexual employees. In many interviews, we recognized the wish for mandatory unconscious bias trainings because *"trainings on a voluntary basis might only reach people who are already interested and engaged in the topic" (Respondent 7).* However, other respondents disagreed and said that it would not be effective to force employees to complete

the trainings and moreover pointed out that in their company it is rather uncommon to have mandatory trainings.

4.1.3 Supportive coworkers and their role as voice givers

Apart from the initiatives, our respondents identified other groups of people who have a crucial role in giving voice to non-heterosexual employees and moreover support in raising awareness for the topic.

The board

Both companies we researched are characterized by hierarchical structures in which strategic actions and messages are communicated top-down. One group of people whose opinion is valued very highly is the board. Respondents emphasized how positive remarks by board members can and should be used to create awareness for the importance of diversity management and for the LGBTI topic. Moreover, according to our interviewees, the board can play an important role in promoting the initiatives. However, during the interviews we additionally recognized a clear wish for authenticity when the board promotes diversity:

> *"She [member of the board] makes herself tangible and approachable so that you can easily contact her regarding these topics. The topic is just really important to her and I think that's very good. You can say that she contributed a lot to the fact that the topic can be lived so openly now." (Respondent 9)*

As one can see from the quote, the board can have an especially significant impact when standing behind the topic. However, when the board members' communication is not authentic and does not seem to come *"from the heart" (Respondent 1) e*mployees are less likely to adopt it. This was also pointed out by one middle manager sharing his expectations with us:

> *"I would expect from our board, that they bring a certain energy to the diversity topic. Any communication that is not prepared for them (…). This can be an e-mail or an impulse at any event, but something where you notice that it was not written for them by the initiative, but it comes from them. That would be valuable." (Respondent 7)*

Straight allies

Apart from the board, our respondents also mentioned straight allies as an important group of people supporting non-heterosexual employees. This was the case either by interviewees referring to themselves as straight allies or by highlighting the importance of allies bringing forward the initiatives. Also, the role of site managers as supporters was mentioned as they often function as event coordinators at the different locations and thus provide money and other resources for initiatives such as the CSD. However, some of the interviewees also admit that it is often difficult to identify who considers him or herself to be an ally. One employee told us about the campaign "I'm an ally", which he perceives as valuable:

> *"[…] people can hang a sticker, that says 'I'm an ally', on their desk which lets LGBTI colleagues know 'this is a safe zone for me, where I can go to in times of need'. I think that helps a lot on the emotional level, especially if you are unsure." (Respondent 11)*

Bottom-up initiators

According to our respondents, the LGBTI topic is special compared to the other diversity dimensions in the sense that the initiatives and networks are typically not founded by the organizations but initiated bottom-up by individual non-heterosexual employees. One respondent who works in the diversity department states:

> *"With the LGBTI topics I have the feeling that the initiatives appear bottom-up by colleagues, directly out of the workforce, they say: 'Hey the company says we are diverse, we want a diverse society and we are part of this.' And then they started with the initiative." (Respondent 2)*

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that the success of certain initiatives is thus also highly dependent on individual people that bring the initiatives forward. One gay respondent who identified himself as one of the bottom-up initiators in his organization admits that he is not sure whether the initiative would continue to exist if he left the organization. Additionally, during the interviews, we observed that these particular bottom-up initiators are also perceived as role models. We recognized this since the employees, we talked to, again and again, mentioned and referred to the same people and acknowledged their important contribution to promoting the LGBTI topic at the company.

Role models

During the interviews, we noticed an explicit wish for role models. Role models according to our respondents can occur in a variety of positions. Many of them refer to public figures outside the organizations such as artists or actors as role models who influence how employees view non-heterosexual colleagues and have the ability to initiate a *"mind shift" (Respondent 4)* among the workforce. As mentioned above, bottom-up initiators are frequently viewed as role models within the organizations by our respondents. But also, middle managers as well as more senior managers, such as members of the board, are considered to have a highly influential role in portraying and spreading values. Our interviewees argued that especially homosexual middle managers would have a meaningful impact on contributing to the awareness creation for the LGBTI topic as role models:

> *"But I also believe that they [middle managers] would have the most impact. I would really wish that more middle managers find the courage and also consider it important to come out in order to get ahead in the topic." (Respondent 10)*

Additionally, the respondents argued that the presence of more non-heterosexual role models would encourage other non-heterosexual employees to come out at work and be open about their sexual identity. Apart from more non-heterosexual middle managers, one respondent even wished for more representation of non-heterosexual managers on the board:

> *"Just imagine somebody from the board of our company would openly say they are homosexual, then people would think 'wow'. Role models are very important to create this mind shift." (Respondent 4)*

However, referring back to the point that organizations are a mirror image of society, different respondents admitted that even though the positive change taking place in society, with different sexual identities being accepted more and more, in the organizations *"there is still a long way to go" (Respondent 10)*. This very slow change process can also be seen when talking about middle managers that are "out". During the interviews, we posed the question if there are any middle managers that publicly identify themselves as non-heterosexual. We received the answer that out of a couple of thousands of middle managers at one of the companies they know of only two managers that openly communicate their homosexuality.

4.1.4 Silencing voices in organizations

Apart from supportive individuals, our respondents mentioned that there are also many people who do not stand behind diversity initiatives. According to our respondents, "silencing voices" are characterized as members of the organization who do not understand the relevance for the diversity topic, are homophobic or who feel that they are not able to deal with the LGBTI topic because it is perceived as uncomfortable. These people continuously voice their opinions on the hallways or on online company message boards. Especially the non-heterosexual employees, who actively engage in diversity initiatives, talked about the resistance stemming from "silencing voices" which they had to deal with when running the initiatives. They explain how they often had to cope with colleagues that perceived especially the external initiatives and the associated public representation of the company as defamatory for the company. Additionally, many people do not understand why the company provides money for the initiatives but at the same time fires people:

> *"People sometimes write really unpleasant things. But partly also understandable things such as: 'If we have money for these initiatives why are there people being fired?' That's always a very important point." (Respondent 9)*

While most of our respondents were quite critical of these comments, one respondent tried to find an explanation for this silencing behavior. She points out that the company has clients with different cultural and religious backgrounds and thus that in some instances it is important to consider other people's opinions to ensure good business relationships:

> *"After the CSD there were some voices that openly said: 'We have Muslim clients and how should we approach them?' There we have to cut back and have to think about how far we want to cut back so that we don't lose business." (Respondent 12)*

Overall, the responses from our interviewees showed that there are certain elements of an organizational environment which can make it easier or more difficult for middle managers to give voice to non-heterosexual subordinates. If an organization and its workforce recognize the value of diversity and have initiatives in place to help non-heterosexuals to make their voices heard, middle managers can more easily become role models who inspire their subordinates.

4.2 How do non-heterosexual employees respond to voice giving efforts?

Throughout our interviews, we continuously recognized how difficult it can be to provide non-heterosexual employees with opportunities to openly express their sexual identity and create an environment in which they feel comfortable to do so. This is derived from our respondents pointing out that every non-heterosexual employee has different needs and wishes which influence their attitude towards voice giving efforts by middle managers.

4.2.1 Individual reasons for non-heterosexuals to not openly communicate about their sexual identity

Personality

Our respondents pointed out that it strongly depends on the individual's personality whether a non-heterosexual employee talks openly about his or her sexual identity or participates in initiatives. Some employees are more likely to speak up about their sexual identity as they consider themselves to be a rather outgoing person like the following gay respondent:

> *"Ultimately it means to run around like a colorful dog every day, saying: 'Hello, by the way, I am homosexual'. And I personally like that very much." (Respondent 13)*

Others, however, are more introvert and do not want to openly communicate about their sexual identity which can be illustrated with the next statement also from a non-heterosexual man:

> *"But I personally, I'm not the front runner, who has to communicate that everywhere. Some say you need role models so that you can reach and motivate other colleagues, but I don't see myself as a role model on other topics either. It is how it is, I'm gay, but I don't have it written on my door sign." (Respondent 6)*

Instead of speaking openly, some non-heterosexual employees prefer to remain silent about their sexual identity or to tell only a few people about it. According to interviewees, this is also a reason for them not to take part in diversity initiatives. Here respondents, however, stressed that this does not mean that employees are automatically silenced when they just do not want to talk about their sexual identity or participate in the initiatives because of their personality.

Some respondents also referred to non-heterosexuals wanting to keep work and private life separate as a reason for them to not speak up. According to them, some non-heterosexuals consider the topic of their own sexual identity to simply not be worth mentioning at the workplace. Other respondents, however, disagree with this argument stating that a strict separation is hardly possible, since it is "*not effective*" *(Respondent 6)*.

Sexual orientation

Our interviews moreover indicate that the sexual orientation of an individual influences the decision of whether to speak up and/or participate in voice giving initiatives or not. According to our interviewees, this applies especially to transsexual and lesbian individuals. After their transition, trans individuals often want to leave their old life, before the transition, behind. Thus, it is possible that they do not want to participate in the initiatives because they no longer want to *"be confronted with their old gender" (Respondent 11)*. Additionally, one female middle manager told us about her experiences with the coming-out of her homosexual female subordinates:

> *"However, in my experience, it is apparently 'easier' for men to have their coming-out than for women. When somebody 'confessed' to me that he or she is homosexual but at the same time asked me not to pass it on, it was usually a female colleague" (Respondent 12)*

This rather silent behavior of lesbian woman was also noticed by one of our gay respondents:

> *"I don't know any lesbian colleague who is actively involved in the initiatives, I don't even know one who is 'officially' out, which is very unusual. But there are 20-25 where I know that they are lesbian." (Respondent 5)*

According to some respondents, this can be traced back to lesbian employees being afraid of *"double discrimination" (Respondent 12)*. This stems from the fact that lesbians belong to two minority/disadvantaged groups at the same time, being a woman and homosexual. Our interviewees argue that it is probable that they are thus more inclined to remain silent about their sexual identity than non-heterosexual men.

Fear of discrimination

Not just the fear of double discrimination by lesbian employees can act as a silencing factor but our respondents pointed to an overall fear of discrimination as a reason for non-heterosexual employees to remain silent. Even though our interviewees told us that they personally never knowingly experienced discrimination, they pointed out that they know many non-heterosexual employees who decide to remain silent or do not want to actively engage in the initiatives as they are afraid of experiencing negative consequences. Further, they told us that some of their non-heterosexual coworkers fear discrimination in forms of not being promoted or hearing jokes about their sexuality. According to our respondents some non-heterosexual employees hence invent stories to cover up their true sexual identity:

> *"At the CSDs people told me that there once was a gay manager who had to put a picture of a woman on his work desk because if it had come out that he was living with a man he would have been out of favor with his colleagues and that's why he created this facade" (Respondent 2)*

One actively supporting middle manager pointed out how difficult it can be to affect an employee's decision to remain silent once he or she has made this decision:

> *"(…) it's hard to address that because if employees do not speak up themselves, that is their right. And when confronting them [by asking them about their sexual orientation] as a subordinate, they would feel discriminated against, which I don't want. It is a sensitive topic where I don't know if there is already a solution for that. You can only create a climate in which people feel that they can talk about their sexual identity, but if they don't want to, then not." (Respondent 8)*

Also, another respondent referred to the importance of creating an open and comfortable environment for all employees by emphasizing that *"conditions so that nobody has the feeling that he or she has to hide" (Respondent 12)* should be established.

4.2.2 External factors that inhibit or enable non-heterosexual employees' voice

Several interviewees mentioned that one reason that inhibits non-heterosexual employees from engaging in initiatives, is that they *"simply don't have enough time" (Respondent 6)*. Many respondents admitted that they would be willing to participate more actively in the initiatives

or LGBTI projects, but they have many other tasks to complete. Moreover, they see this lack of time as a possible reason why some of their coworkers do not participate in the initiatives at all. However, one respondent shared his view on this issue:

> *"But my engagement in the initiatives has also become part of my job. It is in my employee goals, that I can get actively involved in the LGBTI topic. Although, if there are any external events during my working hours, I can go there because it is part of my job. My boss always supports and encourages me." (Respondent 5)*

If the engagement of employees for the initiatives would be included in their employee goals the time factor would not be as problematic anymore as their engagement would be seen as part of their job and managers would thus also have to give their subordinates the time to fulfill this task.

Our interviewees additionally pointed out that in today's world there exists an information overload in organizations which makes it difficult for employees to filter out exactly those emails or messages most relevant and interesting to them. Moreover, there are other trends or change projects which capture the employees' attention within organizations. For example, *"the topic of digitalization" (Respondent 7)* or *"the aim to become a more agile company" (Respondent 3)* are often perceived as more relevant to the employees and the middle managers. In order to capture the attention of the employees, initiatives thus have to be interesting and relevant:

> *"Fundamentally, I would engage more actively in the initiatives, but only when there is an exciting project. There has to be a purpose behind it. I mean, I also have a private life." (Respondent 6)*

As respondents describe it, not just meeting up to talk about something other than current projects and events can add significant value and attractiveness to initiatives, otherwise, some employees are not willing to take part in the initiatives. This implies for middle managers that they need to create awareness for the topic within their teams and frequently need to emphasize the importance of the topic.

4.3 How do middle managers see themselves and their possible ways of action to give voice to non-heterosexual employees?

Our findings additionally suggest that the demographic characteristics of the middle managers and their own attitude towards diversity management and the LGBTI topic limit or increase their likeliness to give voice to non-heterosexual employees. Moreover, during the interviews, it became apparent that middle managers can either give voice to or silence non-heterosexual employees by providing them with resources for their engagement in LGBTI initiatives and communicating their support or not.

4.3.1 Demographics of middle managers

Interviewees describe most middle managers to be male, white, heterosexual and to presumably never have experienced any career barriers as they do not belong to a minority. Hence, they wish for a more diverse management team to support their cause. The respondents stated that especially a non-heterosexual manager would gain more trust and would be more relatable. As already mentioned above, they could then be viewed as more authentic role models for their non-heterosexual subordinates. Furthermore, one respondent suggested that the gender of middle managers influences their likeliness or ability to give voice to non-heterosexual employees:

> *"My last manager was a woman who was very involved with the LGBTI initiatives, she also recognized how difficult it is to persist in such a male-dominated world. Therefore, I was always able to talk with her about my concerns and discuss very openly that I would like to engage in the initiatives. And she also gave me the okay to moderately engage in the initiates during my working hours because she acknowledged that it also benefits the company."* (Respondent 13)

He hereby referred to women as being members of an often-disadvantaged group in organizations similar to the non-heterosexual minority. Hence, female managers according to our respondents have a better understanding of what it is like to be a minority and how to persist in a male-dominated society. This drive is something they adopt when becoming a middle manager in order to fight for other minorities.

Our findings additionally suggest that middle managers are often long-term members of an organization, meaning that our respondents perceive most middle managers to be older. When referring to their age, one interviewee described his previous direct supervisors to have *"grey hair, grey faces, everything about them is grey" (Respondent 4)*. According to our respondents, the age of middle managers affects their attitude towards the LGBTI topic as many older middle managers are perceived to have a rather conservative attitude. During the interviews we thus observed employees recurrently mentioning their hope for the "new generation of leaders":

> *"I think that the new generation of managers is growing up now with a completely different matter of course. They perceive the topic as natural and I think they will also bring that to the workplace." (Respondent 12)*

According to interviewees, younger generations grow up with a very different understanding and mindset among non-heterosexual people in society and therefore perceive the topic as more "normal" than their predecessors. This attitude results largely from exposure to media representing non-heterosexual members of society more frequently than before. For instance, one respondent hereby referred to the German TV crime series *Tatort* that nowadays more often shows *"woman as criminal investigators or gay or lesbian protagonists" (Respondent 2)*.

Overall, it emerged that our respondents hope for middle managers, who themselves represent a diversity dimension which puts them in a minority position. Thereby, middle managers will have the greatest probability to effectively give voice to employees and create an environment of trust among them. However, due to the very diverse responses we received from our interviewees when talking about influential and highly recognized direct supervisors, it is indicated that even the "perfect" middle manager representing all diversity dimensions referred to here would not be the one effectively giving voice to all non-heterosexuals. This is due to the employees' individual personalities and them all requiring at least to some extent different types of support.

4.3.2 Middle managers' attitude towards the LGBTI topic

Middle managers' personal behavior and attitude regarding the topic of non-heterosexual employees is another factor which respondents stressed to be an important way in which middle managers can influence their organizational environment. During our interviews, it became apparent that our interviewees expect middle managers to function as role models not only by

living the culture and values of the company but also by indicating the tone within the department. Furthermore, middle managers have the opportunity to represent values within their departments which offer a supportive environment for non-heterosexual subordinates even though those might not be the ones represented by the organization in general. Respondents even argue that middle managers have the responsibility to comply with the company values and live them in their departments even if they do not correspond with their own beliefs, which was emphasized by one respondent working in the diversity department:

> *"In my opinion, a manager has to communicate clearly that he supports the values of the company. For me, this also means, that even if the manager is rather conservative and thinks it goes against his ethical beliefs to support LGBTI employees, here at work he has a professional role and needs to live the company's values." (Respondent 2)*

According to our interviewees, however, middle managers often fail to recognize the significance of the LGBTI topic overall which can significantly weaken their position as role models. To create awareness for the topic some respondents thus wish that diversity management would *"become part of the middle managers' performance goals" (Respondent 4).* As mentioned above, including active engagement in supporting non-heterosexual employees in performance measurement tools can act as a strong motivational factor. Respondents argue that this would also be the case for middle managers who have "managing diversity in their departments" as one of their annual performance goals. This way, middle manager, that are not intrinsically motivated to actively engage with their non-heterosexual subordinates, would find this external motivator provided to them by the organization. Other respondents, however, bring into consideration that it is also highly questionable to which extent integrating a diversity performance goal is feasible since "*diversity management measures are known to be difficult to measure numerically" (Respondent 1).* Whether this measure actually acts as a motivational factor for middle managers, highly depends on the middle managers' personalities and whether they respond to external motivators.

Another aspect pointed out by respondents is that of how available middle managers make themselves for their subordinates. Only if they are approachable by their employees, they can exercise their influence. We recognized, that it can be difficult to build a meaningful relationship between subordinate and supervisor since interviewees frequently refer to their numerous previous managers and their new middle managers, who just recently joined the department and whom they do not yet know a lot about. In addition, some respondents

mentioned that their supervisors or subordinates often do not work at the same office, which results in only limited regular direct contact between manager and employee. This situation was described by the following middle manager:

"I'm used to act in a setting where I don't know where my employees are and what exactly they are doing. Therefore, I often also don't know how they feel, if they don't come to me and talk to me. Or if I ask because I haven't heard anything from them for a long time." (Respondent 7)

Hence, it can be difficult for middle managers to build up a trust-based relationship and create the opportunity to openly communicate with their subordinates.

4.3.3 Resources middle managers can provide non-heterosexual employees with

During the interviews it became clear, that middle managers have several resources at their disposal which they can provide to subordinates, who wish to participate in diversity initiatives. Here, respondents referred to time as a valuable good at organizations. They argue that having some amount of their working time at their disposal to engage in diversity initiatives can act as a motivational factor to participate and engage:

"When there are any external events, I can go there during my work hours. Also, when something happens over lunch, that counts as part of my job." (Respondent 5)

Additionally, interviewees emphasized how important financial resources are when planning big campaigns such as participating in pride parades and how middle managers can act as enablers or inhibitors of diversity initiatives in this context. This was illustrated by the following respondent:

"Often managers don't provide you with a budget for the initiatives. They wash their hands in innocence and quickly silence everything because they say: 'You can gladly do it but look for money on your own'. There, you cannot say that the company is discriminating. But arguing with money is a convenient way for them to stop things. Many good initiatives are nipped in the bud this way." (Respondent 11)

This is not only the case when big events are being planned but also when it comes to members of diversity initiates being allowed to use the company's infrastructure such as technical

equipment or locations for their activities. Even though this was the case in both organizations we researched, respondents referred to previous companies, they worked at, not permitting their employees to use company computers to communicate among members of the initiatives. This, however, in turn, can also significantly increase the amount of time individuals have to spend on the projects outside of their working hours.

4.3.4 Communication of middle managers' support of non-heterosexual employees

Middle managers furthermore take on a complex role, when deciding how to communicate their support of non-heterosexual employees. First of all, some respondents emphasize that middle managers do not have to openly communicate their support but should rather simply not actively inhibit their engagement in the initiatives:

> *"I think it's already a huge step when a manager is not against it. He doesn't necessarily have to promote it. When it is promoted that's an extra step." (Respondent 5)*

Some interviewees expressed that the middle managers' role here lies mostly in not inhibiting them from their engagement in diversity initiatives. All of their other efforts to prove to their subordinates that they support their cause can be viewed as a *"cherry on top" (Respondent 10)*.

However, other respondents disagree with this viewpoint since they perceive it as crucial that their middle managers actively offer support when for instance experiencing discrimination or when managers are directly approached by subordinates asking for help during their coming-out process. This was described by the following non-heterosexual respondent:

> *"I as an employee, I want to have the feeling that I could just go to my boss and ask him: How do you evaluate the situation? Do you think I can have my coming-out here?" (Respondent 9)*

This is further indicated by another non-heterosexual respondent, who emphasized how important it is for him that his middle manager communicates and appreciates his engagement in the initiatives:

> *"These steps where you notice in general, I don't feel discriminated, but I feel especially encouraged when I advocate for the topic because I create added value for the company*

which can maybe not be put into numbers right away. This support is really important to me and I think this way managers can really do a lot." (Respondent 13)

Also, one middle manager we interviewed considered it crucial to openly communicate how he supports non-heterosexual employees in order to show his appreciation:

"I have one employee that actively participates [in the initiatives] and I support that. I communicate that he does that and that I think that's good. I communicate that to the other employees as well as up to the management. I communicate that he has my full support and that I consider the topic to be important and I think that has positive effects." (Respondent 7)

In addition to that, one middle manager had the feeling that when he actively communicates his personal attitude towards non-heterosexual employees, he can through exchange with other managers positively influence other departments.

4.4 Chapter Summary

Overall, we identified three main complexities middle managers face when getting in contact with non-heterosexual employees and which influence their likeliness to give voice to non-heterosexual employees. *First*, our findings suggest that managers are influenced by the organizational environment they operate in since it reflects how diversity and the support for non-heterosexual employees is generally lived in the company. More precisely, existing initiatives or individual people such as board or supportive allies influence middle managers' way of giving voice to non-heterosexual employees. *Secondly*, it became clear that individual non-heterosexual employees differ in their expectations and wishes for support and having voice. Some simply choose to remain silent because of personal reasons and thus also do not want to have voice. Others, however, feel the need to have a voice and thus also want to be supported by the organization. According to our findings, this makes it complex for middle managers to identify and differentiate between the non-heterosexual individuals that want voice and the ones who just do not want to be silenced. Our respondents wish that middle managers overall act as role models and persons of trust, do not force coming out of their non-heterosexual employees but rather create a climate where everybody can be him or herself as much as they feel comfortable. *Third*, middle managers themselves differ in their personal characteristics and attitude towards the LGBTI topic which also affects their likeliness to give voice to non-

heterosexual employees. Additionally, middle managers have different tools at their disposal such as resources or their means of communication, which they can use as a way to either silence or give voice to non-heterosexual employees.

5 Discussion: Middle Managers as Champions for Diversity – just an Illusion?

While examining our empirical findings, we were able to increase the understanding of different complexities middle managers face in giving voice to non-heterosexual employees. Accordingly, we will in the following chapter discuss whether middle managers can take on the role of voice givers or if the complexities they face, are possibly too difficult to overcome. In doing so, we will combine and discuss our findings with existing literature, by challenging its view on middle managers as diversity champions.

Current literature suggests, that middle managers, due to their strategic position in the organization, should take on the role of "diversity champions" (Tatli & Özbilgin, 2007; Cox & Blake, 1991; Maxwell, Blair & McDougall, 2001; Wright et al., 2006). Cox and Blake (1991) define champions for diversity as "people who will take strong personal stands on the need for change [and] role model the behaviors required for change" (p. 52). In line with this, we understand champions for diversity as people holding a strategic intermediary position in organizations, as being aware of the importance of diversity management and as having the resources and the economic liberty to take actions aimed at giving voice to an overlooked group of employees.

However, we challenge the literature's straightforward attribution of middle managers with this role as diversity champions, since we perceive this understanding as too simplistic. We argue that previous research neglects to acknowledge various complexities that inhibit middle managers from taking on this role. In our opinion, it has to be recognized that middle managers often do not see a need for supporting non-heterosexual employees and are moreover limited in their sphere of action since they do not have the ability to allocate the necessary resources to implement diversity initiatives. Additionally, we believe that it is questionable whether middle managers are the truly the 'right' group to hold this position of diversity champions in the first place since there are other (more) influential groups within an organization whose voice giving efforts non-heterosexual employees might respond to better. Eventually, we argue that the role of diversity champions might be redundant for silent non-heterosexual employees since they often do not want to have a voice regarding their sexual identity at all.

5.1 Middle managers' lack of awareness for the importance of diversity management

Even though we agree with most researchers' assumptions that middle managers, in their intermediary position between top management and the operating core, hold a strategic position which gives them the opportunity to effectively give voice to non-heterosexual employees by acting as champions for diversity, we claim that existing literature overlooks the problem of middle managers often not recognizing the importance of supporting non-heterosexual employees.

According to current literature, middle managers hold a strategic sandwich position between the top management team and the operating core. In line with different researchers, we argue that this position would actually make middle managers the key people who can create awareness for the importance of giving a voice to non-heterosexual employees. This position enables middle managers to have an especially significant influence on the sense-making process of their subordinates by demonstrating to them why a certain change process, such as the implementation of diversity management, is meaningful (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Rouleau & Balogun, 2007; Hampden-Turner & Chih, 2010, Sims & Brinkman, 2002). We see particular significance in middle managers' strategic position since we agree with Weaver, Treviño and Agle (2005) who suggest that middle managers behavior is observable and imitable by top management and subordinates because they closely interact with both groups. Researchers thus often refer to middle managers as diversity champions, who out of their personal convictions, actively engage in diversity initiatives by leading by example (Cox & Blake, 1991).

Adding on that, we see great relevance to emphasize the role of non-heterosexual middle managers, which was mentioned by different researchers and is reflected in our findings. We suggest that especially non-heterosexual middle managers can create the awareness for the need to implement diversity initiatives aimed at non-heterosexual employees. In line with different researchers and based on our findings, we argue that non-heterosexual middle managers would have a particularly relevant voice giving impact on their non-heterosexual subordinates since they are closer to the topic and thus more likely to acknowledge the relevance of the inclusion of non-heterosexuals. This is because non-heterosexual role models have "similar identities" (Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011, p. 332) to non-heterosexual employees and can contribute to

non-heterosexual employees feeling that they can express their true sexual identity at the workplace (Wright et al., 2006). Thus, in accordance with existing literature, we are of the opinion that non-heterosexual middle managers could authentically foster the awareness creation surrounding the LGBTI topic and can encourage other non-heterosexual employees to express their voice.

We, however, see a significant issue here since our empirical material shows that in our organizations of interest there currently exist hardly any non-heterosexual middle managers that are 'out' at the workplace. This is either because there are only a few non-heterosexual individuals that even hold a middle manager position or because the existing non-heterosexual middle managers feel like they cannot openly express their sexual identity at work. In line with our findings, also Greene and Kirton (2006) recognize that nowadays management teams in organizations are still dominated by white heterosexual men. In a similar manner, Priola et al. (2014) found out in their study that the few gay middle managers that do exist often do not openly communicate about their homosexual identity, since they are afraid of losing their "masculine credentials" (p. 21), which would negatively affect their authority. We further recognize that also lesbian women are less likely to express their voice because of their fear of double discrimination, since they belong to two minority groups, being a woman and homosexual. Hence, we claim that even if there were non-heterosexual middle managers, hardly anyone would notice, since the non-heterosexual middle managers often decide to remain silent because they fear negative outcomes after a coming-out.

While these non-heterosexual middle managers, who would have a great impact as champions for diversity, are very few, one could assume that there is still a large number of heterosexual middle managers who, according to literature, could also act as champions. However, in our opinion one deeper problem is overlooked here - namely that actually not all middle managers understand the importance of diversity management and the inclusion of non-heterosexual colleagues. Indeed, we want to propose that some middle managers are silencing voices themselves. We define silencing voices, based on our findings, as members of an organization who are critical towards diversity management, do not understand its reasoning, have a homophobic mindset or view the topic as too uncomfortable and intimate to talk about. Most importantly, these employees do not see the relevance, necessity and advantages of including and supporting non-heterosexual employees. Consequently, we argue that certainly not all middle managers are able to act as role models for inclusion, who live corporate values and

give voice to their non-heterosexual subordinates since they often lack the awareness for the importance of diversity management.

To summarize, we agree with existing literature and are of the opinion that middle managers would be in a good strategic position to successfully take on the role of diversity champions. However, we argue that literature's view is too simplistic since implicit assumptions about middle managers being aware of the need of supporting non-heterosexual employees are made which we cannot ascertain as a result of our empirical findings. In other words, based on our research, we claim that middle managers lack a prerequisite for being able to give voice to non-heterosexual employees as champions for diversity since they often do not recognize the awareness for the importance of diversity management.

5.2 Middle managers operating in a limited sphere of action

To be a voice giving champion for diversity, existing literature and our findings suggest that middle managers need to be able to take actions since simply communicating about the topic of supporting non-heterosexual employees is perceived as insufficient. Actually, while middle managers orally reinforcing employees' engagement are perceived as important, actions as a way to show commitment, are requested. Existing literature partly supports the significance of this demand, but we argue that researchers fail to sufficiently point out the limitations middle managers face in this context since their sphere of action is limited.

In accordance with Bell et al. (2011) our findings suggest that non-heterosexual employees perceive their workplace to be more inclusive and that they are more likely to be comfortable being out when managers' appreciation of them is clearly articulated. While Oswick and Keenoy (1997), by stating that 'doing means talking', stress that action and communication cannot be viewed completely separately from each other but are closely intertwined, we conclude from our findings that employees do see a clear differentiation between just talking about inclusion in a positive way on the one hand and taking actions to further diversity within the organization on the other hand. This insight was also perceived by Reese (2014) who suggests that line managers can show action for example by being the first ones to complete certain relevant trainings which is how they "support the employees in their journey toward experiencing the vision" (p. 242).

According to our findings, clear articulations which demonstrate middle managers' obvious support for employees wanting to participate in initiatives, mostly consist of providing them with necessary resources. We thereby identified three main resources needed for the implementation of and the engagement in diversity initiatives: work time that can be spent on diversity projects, money which is needed to finance projects and infrastructure such as company electronic equipment or locations to hold network meetings. All of which can be opportunities for middle managers to enable non-heterosexual employees and their engagement in LGBTI initiatives. This is in line with Bell et al. (2011) who stress the importance of providing non-heterosexual employees with the necessary resources for their initiatives. Furthermore, our findings point to the importance of actions with external effects such as middle managers showing dedication by hoisting pride flags in front of office buildings or participating in pride parades by standing on the company truck.

However, what current literature does not recognize enough is the limited scope of action middle managers operate in, both when allocating resources and taking public actions for diversity. We argue that this aspect is crucial to consider since middle managers' ability to take noteworthy voice giving actions which their subordinates value is significantly restricted. Especially when considering actions, such as the allocation of resources, as the most effective tool middle managers have at their disposal, we argue that their position does not necessarily entail the ability to freely dispose of resources such as money and time. This is supported by Harding, Lee and Ford (2014) who claim that middle managers do not have time to engage in diversity management since they are merely responsible for "implementing senior management strategies" (p. 1214). This is also in accordance with what other authors have observed. For instance, Floyd and Wooldridge (1994) suggest that it is the middle managers' responsibility to efficiently deploy already existing resources to fulfill their everyday tasks, while making additional resources available is rather the task of senior managers. Our findings suggest that raising financial resources is one of the biggest challenges that supporters of diversity initiatives, on a not so senior organizational level, face. Hence, we see the utilization of resources as a tool for in particular diversity management, to mainly be available to senior managers whose scope of action is not too limited. Therefore, we argue that middle managers cannot fulfill the role of champions for diversity described by literature, since they do not have the appropriate authority necessary to take significant actions which could give voice to their non-heterosexual subordinates.

Additionally, based on our findings, we suggest that when it comes to actions with external effects in public, such as hoisting pride flags or participating in pride parades, it has to be acknowledged that middle managers operate within an organizational framework, which they have to respect and comply with. Thus, we argue that this represents another limitation of middle managers' scope of action since every external action, that middle managers would like to implement and which would most likely affect the organization's public image, has to be aligned with the organizational culture and its values and does not lie solely in the middle manager's sphere of action.

Summing up, we want to emphasize that existing literature on middle managers as champions for diversity overlooks that middle managers themselves are often restricted in their scope of action and often do not have necessary resources available to give voice to non-heterosexual employees. Additionally, middle managers underlie corporate values which they have to adhere to, and which inhibit them from demonstrating actions to support non-heterosexual employees. These complexities underline again that not all middle managers can simply take on the role of diversity champions.

5.3 Middle managers as the biggest influencers?

Next, in our opinion one needs to question if the middle managers, above all, are truly group of people with the greatest influence on non-heterosexual employees since our findings demonstrate that there exist other, possibly more influential, groups of people such as the top management team and other co-workers. Also, current literature shows that researchers have mixed opinions about whether the top management team, middle managers or co-workers have the highest impact on employees (Weaver, Treviño & Agle, 2005; Mayer et al., 2009; Shin et al., 2015).

Our findings indicate that especially at the two companies we conducted our interviews, the top management team might even have a greater influence on giving voice to non-heterosexual employees than middle managers. In line with prior research, we understand the top management team as "managing directors responsible for one or more functional areas in their organization" (Shin et al., 2015, p. 44), such as for instance chief financial officers or chief human resource officers. Both companies are characterized by hierarchical structures in which strategic actions and change processes are communicated and implemented top-down and in

which actions and opinions of the top management team are strongly appreciated and taken as an orientation guideline. The importance of the top management team was also recognized by Brown and Treviño (2014) who argue that top managers set the "ethical tone" (p. 590) in an organization and their "lofty position provides them with status and legitimacy, making them potentially attractive role models" (p. 591). Mayer et al. (2009) hereby add that the behavior of top managers influences middle managers and employees, as their behavior cascades down the different organizational levels. In line with Shin et al. (2015) we thus claim that when the top management team demonstrates that they live diversity and that it is important to give non-heterosexual employees a voice, also the middle managers and their subordinates are more likely to adapt this LGBTI supportive behavior.

Apart from middle and top managers our findings suggest that supportive coworkers, such as bottom-up initiators for LGBTI initiatives, can give voice to non-heterosexual employees by inspiring and motivating them to be open about their sexual identity. This is in accordance with a point Weaver, Treviño and Agle (2005) make since they suggest that "employees often are influenced most by those closest to them – the people they work with every day" (p. 314). They see not the distant executives, but rather co-workers and immediate supervisors as the role models with the most impact for ethical behavior at the workplace.

Overall, one cannot simply say that the group of middle managers has the biggest influence among the workforce since we, in alignment with other authors, argue that also the top management team and supportive coworkers can give voice to non-heterosexual employees and might even have a greater influence. Thus, we claim that by labelling middle managers as diversity champions, existing literature neglects the fact that there are other influential groups of people. Adding to that, we recognize that middle managers' ability to fulfill the role of diversity champions depends on the organizational structure since for instance in a top-down oriented culture, the top management team is more likely to have a bigger impact on giving voice to non-heterosexual employees than middle managers.

5.4 The big 'but': How much voice do non-heterosexual employees even want?

Eventually, we argue that existing literature, by referring to middle managers as diversity champions, attributes middle managers a too powerful role they cannot fulfill since one big

question is neglected: How much voice do non-heterosexual employees even want? We suggest that the middle managers' role as diversity champions, who give voice to their subordinates through actions, might even be redundant for some non-heterosexual employees since they chose to remain silent because of personal reasons and do not want to have a voice to express their sexual identity.

Existing literature, suggests that generally all employees within an organization should make their voices heard, as they otherwise would have to invest energy into inventing stories and presenting themselves as somebody they are not on an everyday basis which can significantly reduce their productivity and wellbeing at work (Morrison & Milliken, 2003; Bowen & Blackmon, 2003). In our opinion this does not necessarily apply to voice regarding the own sexual identity. Our findings clearly point out that there are personal factors, such as the wish for privacy and not wanting to talk about such an intimate topic, which make non-heterosexuals not feeling the need to be open about their sexual identity. This is supported by Priola et al. (2014) and Shahjehan and Yasir (2016) who point out that both voice and silence can be viewed as the employees' own personal choice which is also what our findings indicate. Milliken and Morrison (2003), however, highlight the complexities middle managers face when identifying why subordinates to not speak openly since "there are so many motives for silence [which] means that it is hard to diagnose the meaning of silence" (p. 1565).

Our findings are partly in line with this and show, that the topic of coming out as non-heterosexual at work and being open about one's own sexual identity is perceived as very complex. This is because there are numerous non-heterosexual employees who are not out at work and who would not respond to any measures set by LGBTI networks or supportive middle managers trying to give them voice. Attempting to give voice to silent coworkers through initiatives would not only not achieve the desired result of conveying to them that the organization welcomes their sexual identity, but that they would rather perceive it as too much pressure on them. Some non-heterosexual employees would, in this way, even be prevented from coming out or participating in initiatives all together, since they do not want to put their sexual orientation on display for everyone to see. They do not consider themselves to be silenced because of their sexual identity but merely do not want to speak up about it.

We therefore argue that middle managers find themselves in a balancing act between creating and actively promoting an open environment for their subordinates while not putting too much pressure on individual non-heterosexual employees who do not want to participate. Here middle

managers encounter the complexity of identifying who of their subordinates wants to come out at work or participate in initiatives, and thus expects the manager to openly support them and speak up for them in times of need, and who would rather keep their sexual identity private. Our findings predominantly show a lack of interest or time and the desire to keep work and private life completely separate from each other, as the main reasons stopping non-heterosexuals from openly speaking about their sexual identity. Moreover, some non-heterosexual individuals do not want to speak up because of their rather introvert personality. According to literature, even co-workers, supervisors or even policies "can do little if homosexuals do not accept themselves and 'choose' to remain silent" (Priola et al., 2014, p. 15).

Based on this, we argue that also middle managers as diversity champions can do little to nothing if non-heterosexual employees decide to stay in the closet and not to participate in initiatives. The position of the middle manager as a champion for diversity is thus in our opinion seen as too almighty by literature since even middle managers cannot get close to every single employee and adapt all their actions to individual needs and wishes. This would be almost impossible in today's fast-moving organizations because today's workplace, as our findings suggest, is characterized by frequent changes in managers as well as an often-occurring lack of availability of the manager, due to different workplaces, finding a "one size fits all" solution appears to hardly be possible.

When acknowledging that not every non-heterosexual wants to speak up about his or her sexual identity, it is however important to stress that every non-heterosexual employee should at least have the feeling that they themselves can decide if and when they want to speak up or remain silent. Thus, it is important to create an environment in which employees do not have to fear negative consequences related to their sexual identity while simultaneously not feeling pressured to raise their voice. This is where we see the role of middle managers in supporting their non-heterosexual subordinates.

In conclusion, we want to emphasize that we do not consider middle managers to be able to fulfill the role of diversity champions as it was described by existing literature. This is because literature's description of the role is too straightforward and lacks the acknowledgement of various complexities. We argue that middle managers often do not see a need in supporting non-heterosexual employees and are moreover restricted in their sphere of action. Based on this, we claim that middle managers are not 'right' group who should take on the role of

diversity champions since are of the opinion that also the top management team and individual coworkers can effectively give voice to non-heterosexual employees and might have an even greater impact. Eventually, we criticize that existing literature, by labelling middle managers as diversity champions, goes too far since we argue that there are some silent non-heterosexual employees that do not even want to have a voice.

We therefore want to propose to reconsider whether the terminology of diversity 'champions' is generally suitable. For us the word champion implies that middle managers would fully succeed in their role by 'winning' and reaching all non-heterosexual employees with their voice giving actions without being set back by complexities. However, as we have demonstrated throughout our discussion, this is not possible.

6   Conclusion

6.1 Main Findings

In accordance with the aim of our thesis, we challenge the literature's simplistic view on middle managers as champions for diversity. Through our findings, we were able to identify complexities, which existing literature overlooks in its almighty portrayal of the role of diversity champions middle managers are supposed to take on.

In line with existing literature, we argue that middle managers, due to their intermediary position between top-level management and the operating core, could be the ones to effectively give voice to non-heterosexual employees. This is because they can have an especially great impact on the sense-making process of their subordinates by demonstrating the importance of diversity management and supporting non-heterosexual employees. Existing literature, however, by assuming implicit awareness for the LGBTI topic, makes this seem easier than it actually is, since we argue that middle managers themselves often do not recognize the importance of the topic.

Additionally, we claim that existing literature overlooks the restrictions middle managers face when giving voice to their subordinates due to their limited sphere of action. Often, they are bound to the senior managers' instructions, and cannot freely dispose of resources such as time and money which inhibits their actions to support non-heterosexual employees' engagement in diversity initiatives. Besides, we claim that middle managers have to accept the rules and cultural norms of their organizational environment before taking actions which further limits their scope of action.

Based on this, we question whether middle managers are truly the group of people with the biggest voice giving influence among the workforce. In line with different researchers, we argue that other groups such as the top management team or coworkers also have significant influence on non-heterosexual employees which demonstrates that overall middle managers' position as champions for diversity is viewed as too influential by literature.

Eventually, we argue that the non-heterosexual employees themselves represent the greatest complexity middle managers have to deal with and inhibit them from succeeding in their role as diversity champions. Some non-heterosexual employees do not want to have voice in their

organization due to many individual reasons such as their personality, a lack of time or interest, or because they make a clear separation between private and work life. For middle managers, it is thus difficult to identify those employees who want to have voice and those who want to remain in the closet.

We conclude by saying that not all middle managers are able to act as diversity champions due to the aforementioned complexities. We rather see the middle managers' role in creating an environment where non-heterosexual employees themselves decide if and when they want to speak up about their sexual identity.

6.2 Suggestions for Future Research

As stated at the beginning of our thesis we included all members of the LGBTI community in our research without differentiating between sexual orientations. We would thus consider it to be of interest for future studies to focus on the individual "letters" of LGBTI. We hereby imply looking into how specifically lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual or intersexual people respond to voice giving efforts by their middle managers and what their individual needs and expectations are. We find this to be relevant since literature suggests that it can be problematic to overlook potential differences between these different groups by simply viewing them all as members of the LGTBI community (Köllen, 2013). Furthermore, our findings indicate a difference between how for example women and trans individuals react to voice giving efforts, which would thus be interesting to explore further.

Apart from looking more closely at the different groups of people that make up the LGBTI community, we see relevance in conducting research aimed at uncovering how the topic of voice and silence is viewed by members of other diversity dimensions. Some of our middle manager respondents, for example, hinted that giving voice to employees with disabilities and reducing unconscious bias among their colleagues is a topic of interest to them. We consider this different research topic to be a great way to uncover an even wider range of complexities middle managers face and also uncover potential ways in which they could be dealt with and be overcome.

When it comes to the organizations at which we conducted our research, we see it as significant to examine companies based in other cultural areas than the Central European one, which we focused on. Throughout our analysis, we recognized hints at the importance of the cultural

background of employees and how it can influence the organizational climate. If individuals from a different culture can have an impact on how much voice non-heterosexual employees have in an organization, it can be relevant to explore how and if at all voice is given to non-heterosexual employees by middle managers in other countries.

6.3 Afterthought

As our respondents stated, "organizations are a mirror image of society". Thus, how organizations approach diversity management and in particular the inclusion of non-heterosexual employees into the workforce is highly dependent on the society they operate in. This aspect further diminishes the impact middle managers can have, as they, in their limited sphere of action, do not just have to deal with their superior managers and the organizational culture but are also confronted by a general mindset in a society which often still views heterosexuality to be the only acceptable sexual orientation. In a globalized world, it is, however, inevitable and unavoidable to recognize the indispensability of a diverse workforce. Even though a change in society is happening and awareness is rising, there is still a long way to go until it becomes a matter of course. With this in mind, we asked our respondents at the end of our interviews about their hopes for the future. The following statement is one which summarizes our interviewees' wishes very well:

> *"I hope that one day my sexuality is no longer a topic of discussion, that there is nothing worth pointing out, that everybody sees it as normal as I do." (Respondent 10)*

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