LGBTQI police officers going public? An interplay of gender regimes, LGBTQI identities, authority belonging and activism

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Our paper deals with the tension between being an (active) member/activist of the LGBTQI community and being a state official.

The LGBTQI police officers in Germany serve as an empirical example form the research conducted. Members of this group identify as non-hetero or non-cis and are affected in their sexual and gender identity by their profession and their conception of sexual citizenship as framed by being state officials. The negotiations of private/public boundaries are related to their gender, sexual and professional identities as well as forms of political action as sexual citizens (or restraining from political participation) result from the self-positioning within the respective occupations.

Activities of some LGBTQI police officers are political activities of sexual citizens (Richardson 2000) for they promote rights and protect themselves as minority. These activities are political in the sense of influencing power relations in the society (Gabriel/Völkl 2008; Gallagher 2008), and hence they are an articulation of state-individual or state-power institutions relationship, the citizenship. Simultaneously, the LGBTQI police officers are part of an executive authority, and their professional occupation confronts them as authority members with the problems and conflicts they, as sexual citizens, try to solve.

Concentrating on this case of sexual citizens and considering theories of participation (Barber 1984; Norris 1999; Kymlicka/Norman 1994: 362ff.), sexual citizenship (Richardson 2000, 2005, 2015 etc.) and belonging (Pfaff 2012 etc.) as well as elaborating on gender regimes, we want to reflect how professional paths and belonging to state authorities affect the switch between public and private in gender and sexual identity. We aim to show, under which conditions the switching between public and private results in political activism (of sexual citizens).
1.) Framing sexual identity and sexual citizenship

It is important to know that most of our interview partners contacted us themselves and wanted to talk to us about their LGBTQI identity within their policing job\(^1\). So they knew, the interview would touch upon their sexual identity and they would have to take initiative and talk about that. Many of them are organized within the association of the LSBTTIQ police officers (http://www.velspol.de/), so they did not need to come out of the closet during the interview, as they already have articulated their non-cis/non-hetero identity as becoming active members of organisation. Nevertheless it is important to note that many of our interview partners manage not to use the words “gay” or “lesbian” with respect to themselves for a big part of the interview, they manage to stay implicit about it. The sexual identity is somehow an insider-talk and concealed. So they articulate it like “I have no problems with it...”. The verbal articulation of sexual identity still seems to be a permanent outing process, even if under the circumstances of the interview a heterosexual outing would be rather surprising.

Another remarkable point is, that the interview partners often present the coming out within the police as something, what is happening beyond the will or the influence of the person and something unstoppable, so “it” comes out and not that being gay is articulated actively.

One thing that it is mentioned mostly latent in connection with the sexual identity during the interviews is discrimination or exclusion at the workplace. Here it is important to know that it is extremely difficult to operationalize discrimination as it appears in the interview data (Steffens/Wagner 2009; Maier 2010). Some of the interviewed police officers speak about discrimination and name concrete situations for example not being promoted for the next job position or talking about mobbing. Still this kind of explicit articulation of discrimination is rather rare. Discrimination or the expectation of discrimination is articulated more implicit and hidden. In many cases they said in the beginning of the interview that they never experienced discrimination while telling us later several examples of situations that could be framed as discrimination.

For example we did not record a single interview in which the interview partners did not tell us that they expect the colleagues to talk about their sexual identity behind their back. Moreover, they always look for explanations why they did not experience strong discrimination. This means that their expectation to be discriminated against is rather strong. Relating to this we found in the interviews something we would call “ironical framing”, this means that the possible discrimination experiences are framed as “not so bad” or even funny. For example detailed (sometimes even very personal) questions about their sexual life and practices are framed as completely normal questions and a normal

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\(^1\) Detailed discussion about LGBTQI police officers as hard to reach group can be found here: Zimenkova, T. / Molitor, V. (2017) Approaching LGBTQI-Police officers: an easy to reach group? Paper for 5th European Conference on Politics and Gender, Session on Researching Intersectionality and Exclusion. ECPG, University of Lausanne, Switzerland, 8–10 June 2017
conversation among colleagues. This behavior can be explained as the “natural” interest of hetero-colleagues in the “unknown” sexual practices of LGBTQIs. This ironical framing appears quite often in interviews with lesbian or trans* police officers. One of our interview findings is that the (sexual) identity is also framed by them as an expertise, and in a way a forced expertise. This means that they are confronted with the expectation to be experts for all LGBTQ- questions and they find themselves in the positions of consultants; sometimes this happens unexpectedly or unwillingly. Being open automatically makes them consultants in regards to questions concerning LGBTQ matters. For example a gay person turns automatically in an expert for trans* issues regardless of whether he/she possesses real expertise. This expertise results almost automatically in becoming engaged and proactive – but it cannot result in non-activity. The reason for this is not only their aspiration to participate and act, but as well knowledge, that if they do not promote knowledge anybody does. In a way there is an institutional distrust in police as supportive organization which makes them take action. Another important point here is also that being an expert somehow protects from being discriminated against. They make a decision to be framed as experts which is a way to escape the discriminatory discourse and to promote knowledge and rights for the fellow-LGBTQI, for nobody else would.

Another phenomenon we observed with respect to the articulation of the LGBTQI-identities is the so called “over-performing”. Our interview partners demonstrated the conviction, that the over performing as police officer would protect one from being labeled as LGBTQI. They share the same message: if you just manage to demonstrate that you are really good performing police officer everyone would ignore that you are part of minority (Peterson/Uhnoo 2012). Definitely, this strategy cannot be successful and is more likely produce the twofold exclusion of the “gay careerists”. Still, it demonstrates that the LGBTQ police officers themselves frame their own identity as handicap which can and should be overcome by themselves with help of hard work.

These examples show that the LGBTQ police officers are always confronted with their sexual identity at their work place. Furthermore, it also always a matter of how proactive they are in dealing with their sexual identity. The sexual identity seems to be a reason for becoming proactive and might even force the police officers into different kinds of activities they cannot withdraw from as soon as they come out. Being proactive and raising their voices for their rights is their choice. However, partly they are pushed into the choice between the discrimination and proactivity. A passive, included position in the discourse becomes rather and illusion. Nevertheless, it is a matter of citizen’s agency that they use mechanisms of civic engagement to face the exclusions.
2.) Civic engagement of the LGBTQI police officers: Between minority and executive power – role models and role conflicts

One special group we are dealing with in our research is VelsPol. VelsPol is an association for gay, lesbian, and trans* police officers in Germany. It is an association besides the police that has officially nothing to do with the police authority. For example it is also possible for none police officers to be a member of the association and the organizational structure resembles a normal civic society association for example a sports club. VelsPol as an organization provides LGBTQI police officers opportunities to can become proactive in one way or the other. The participants themselves frame the goals and activities of the organization in multifaceted ways. In our interviews we asked the police officers questions about their personal engagement in VelsPol and about the meaning of the association to them. The result was a range of quite different framings of opinions, feelings and activities and expectations of the police officers concerning VelsPol.

To conclude VelsPol’s provides for the police officers who join the organization a social/special interest network where people meet and get in touch with others who share some communalities. For some people it is just an organization that offers the possibility to meet and talk or a place of refuge for help, e.g. for questions on coming out on the workplace.

Furthermore, it is striking that police officers report a mixture of internal functions of VelsPol (within the police authority) and external functions and it is not clear (even for the members of VelsPol) how these are arranged. VelsPol has somehow a double role, and partly the members position themselves as if they were a structural unite of the police authority. However, they know that it is juristically not the case.

A telling example for the role of VelsPol within the police is the introduction of an official position “contact persons for same-sex way of live” in some police departments in some federal states in Germany (where they did not exist before). Concerning VelsPol’s engagement in that process in one particular federal state one interviewee from this state answered:

> And (-) [Name] has via VelsPol already developed a CONCEPT. It is actually already completely elaborated, the concept proposal. It is even already at the ministry of the interior, already for YEARS by now.

Based on this statement one can assume that VelsPol is more than a normal association existing besides of the police and organizing only meetings for gays and lesbians. The people from VelsPol get in touch with the ministry and try to fight for their rights, partly they are being successful. For example, introduction of an official “contact persons for same-sex way of live” in the police in the respective federal state the interviewee was talking about. Here being part of VelsPol would be some kind of activism, fighting for rights, participating and trying to influence the official organs and even partly changing the police structures.
Another interviewee pointed out that it is important to be a member of VelsPol to be asked to become a contact person for “same-sex way of live” within the police:

Yes, of course! I mean if we – VelsPol – would not have been active, then it would also not have happened like this, that we somehow would want to go in this direction [of introducing the contact persons for the same sex living] (...) and then it was clear, that those, who are already known [for being active] are asked [to take over this position]

The example shows that the role of VelsPol is really unclear. On the one hand they have influence and as we have seen from the quotation, the interviewee draws a direct connection between being a member of VelsPol and becoming the official police internal contact person for same-sex way of live. Therefore, VelsPol is more than an external association where homo- and transsexual police officers meet. On the other hand, they themselves see the organization as an external one meaning they strive for establishing the expertise on LGBTIQ not only outside but inside the police. Here, they become sexual citizens, taking political action to change the authority structures by means of civic engagement.

One example of the diverse and questionable relationship between being a sexual citizen and the belonging to the authority took place 2014 during the Christopher street day/Pride in Berlin. There the police officers claimed their right to wear the uniforms while marching but the minister of justice of one federal state did not allow his/her police officers to do so. Still, one officer opposed the written ban of wearing the uniform during the CSD and wore the uniform. This caused a controversy amongst the police officers. Some police officers think very positively about the incident and claim that it was the right of this special police man to march with the uniform on a (political) event to show and protect the LGBTIQ rights. But there are other opinions among the LGBTIQ police officers as well. For example one of our interview partners said about this action:

“We happen to be police and police is simply an organization, a structure where one is in need of orders, where orders also have to be followed and there I can’t say just because I’m gay I’m resisting that and do what I want, that doesn’t work.”

This quotation shows that for the speaker’s sexual citizenship is subordinated to the belonging to the authorities. While he is acting as police man he has to follow the rules and there is no space for activism or fighting for personal rights.

The example of the Berlin Pride shows that there are changes of roles between belonging to a minority and being a police officer within the LGBTIQ group and also within a person’s identity. As one can see it might sometimes be conflicting.

Another example showing the tension between being a sexual citizen and being a police officer is the story of a trans* interviewee. She reported that at the time when he began to change the appearance and moved more and more towards a woman also in the outside, the so called “life check” of living within the wished gender, her
personal request was to be removed from the street into the office work and not to work as a uniformed officer anymore. Because this might be a burden for the citizens out on the streets to see a gender-changing person in uniform. Here one can see the conflict between being a sexual citizen and a person who belongs and represents the power of the state and the negotiation between the identities as a trans* person and a police officer who is responsible for the comfort feelings of the fellow citizens.

3.) Conclusion

The numbers of empirical examples provided in this paper demonstrate the multidimensionality of the LGBTIQ-activism phenomena within the police. The analytical approach on the LGBTIQ-police going public embraces the notions of citizenship as agency (the articulation of the self and the promotion on ones’ own and fellow police officers rights), the sexual citizenship (as rights and claims of the sexual citizens within the police), and the LGBTIQ-identity as an essential source for (partly forced) activism.

Our reconstruction of how identities are being negotiated between authority belonging, activism and minority-belonging points to the essential relevancy of private/public divide for the LGBTIQ-police officers. The focus on the private/public divide allows for understanding the key tensions the LGBTIQ police officers have to (as activists) face. One of the key tensions is for example between the wish of uniformity/invisibleness within the police (the wish of a complete integration) and the wish of LGBTIQ-visibility within the police in order to change the police and the society. Are the police officers claiming the right not to be private (Richardson 2000) or the right to be able to be private again?

The activism of the police officers is a dialectical one, switching

- between the addressees of the activism (the society as such or the authority and the fellow LGBTIQ-police officers);
- between the liberal (freedom- based) or communitarian (the primacy of the community interests) conception of citizenship;
- between the desired circumstance of the police (visible diversity vs. uniformity);
- and between the goals of the activism (improving the job situation of the LGBTIQ-police vs. changing the society in general).

Understanding the tensions and the divides of the activism of LGBTIQ police officers helps to see the hierarchies of belongings and to make a contribution to the study of identity-activism interlinking. Our current research, particularly the sub-research on trans* policing, demonstrate how the negotiations of identities form the positioning and political activities of sexual citizens. It can be seen in how far the activism is a bridge bringing together loyalty to the authority and LGBTIQ-identity which makes police officers fight for their rights as sexual citizens.
4.) Who we are:

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5.) Literature


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