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The (in-)visibility of difference: gay and lesbian identities and the German police

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Abstract
While modern police organizations have included diversity in their portfolio of guiding orientations, there has been little research on the sexual identity of police officers and their perceptions in Germany. Based on current scientific discourses on the construction and impact of human categories, this article provides an explorative empirical-qualitative analysis of views, perceptions, and experiences of German police officers with gay and lesbian sexual identities. We conducted in-depth semi-structured interview with officers who identified themselves as gay or lesbian (n = 8). Applying a reflexive thematic approach to data analysis, the results point to an internal police dominance of a two-gender identity concept, in which heterosexual masculinity forms the guiding value and third possibilities remain largely invisible. The findings offer a reason to critically reflect on the existing dominance of heterosexually formatted distinctions and thus to further expand German police organization's claim to diversity.

Keywords Heteronormativity · Hegemonic police masculinity · Sexual identity · Gender identity · Reproduction

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Introduction

In Germany, there is a growing acceptance of employees of different sexual and gender identities, as evidenced by the increase in progressive diversity plans and policies, as well as the rise of corporate brands that promote an inclusive work environment. Diversity is also being understood in the police as a quality criterion of a modern police force in a pluralistic society (Model 2021). As such it may seem that modern organizations and professions are inclusive places. Yet, it is not difficult to imagine a scenario in which the organizational mission statement and organizational culture do not match (Hatch and Schultz 2003). For example, a gay or lesbian employee might work for an organization that describes itself as an institution with an inclusive agenda, calls itself an inclusive organization, and yet our employee might experience subtle exclusion, such as being uncomfortably silent about one's personal life or enduring jokes about gay or lesbian identity (Rennstam and Sullivan 2018). While on the one hand inclusion would be the official goal of this organization, this might manifest itself differently in lived attitudes and practices within the organization: through subtle forms of exclusion (Humphrey 1999; Ward and Winstanley 2003) or through more difficult access to positions within the organization (Fleming 2007; Muzio and Tomlinson 2012). Thus, our employee would be part of the organization, but not part of all the processes taking place in the organization. Although included by membership or employment contract (organizational inclusion), he or she is excluded from organizational procedures (procedural exclusion).

Zooming in on the organization of the German police, there is evidence of a similar pattern: inclusion agendas and efforts on one side, with advertising campaigns focusing on diversity, diversity officers, and organized associations for queer police officers. On the other side, reports of homophobia and discriminatory practices (Juckeland and Grüninger 2022; Molitor and Zimenkova 2017, 2020, 2021). This provides the starting point for our investigation. From an internal perspective, we want to explore the perceptions of police officers who identify as gay or lesbian on gay and lesbian identities in the police. In the following, we will first examine these perceptions through the lens of hegemonic heteronormativity (Butler 1999; Marchia and Sommer 2019).

Theoretical background

Hegemonic heteronormativity and (in-)visibilities

For decades, the construction of human categories has been a highly relevant and well-researched topic in the social sciences (Butler 1997). In terms of system theory, these are markings of relevance by people through communication (Luhmann 1995), which receive particular attention under aspects of inclusion and exclusion (Anonymized).

The term heteronormativity describes socially constructive practices along the categories of gender and sexuality (Marchia and Sommer 2019). Heteronormativity refers to a view of heterosexuality as a social norm in a binary gender order (Warner 1991). Underlying the concept are the observations of Michel Foucault, who deconstructed the notion of a justified oppression of homosexuality in his 1978 work on the history of sexuality (Foucault 1978). By noting that the concept of homosexuality was historically conditioned and perpetuated by the emerging framework of nineteenth century Western sexuality, he deconstructed the idea of a seemingly innate sexuality. The concomitant construction of "homosexuals" isolated gay and lesbian identities from their heterosexual counterparts and subsequently marginalized them. The idea of the construction of sexuality and the accompanying possibility of differentiation from the assumed counterpart enables segregation and exclusion on the most diverse levels as well as a hierarchization of sexualities. Accordingly—in the context of culturally accepted norms—heterosexuality is presented as a prescribed standard and heteronormativity is nourished by the corresponding dominant visualization, representation and discourse (Butler 1997). Thus, in turn, they act as mechanisms of power and control that limit, for example, the ability of non-heterosexual people to construct and speak about their own identities in the workplace (Priola et al. 2014).

In the theoretical position of *hegemonic heteronormativity*, heterosexuality is reproduced as a norm within patriarchal structures (Marchia and Sommer 2019). Hegemonic heteronormativity recognizes that hegemonic ideals strive to reproduce and shape each other, and that this mutual construction is an effect of power relations[1] that influence each other. Hegemonic heteronormativity thereby encompasses constructs such as hegemonic masculinity and idealized femininity and how these construct categorical framings for interpreting gender and sexuality that allow for attribution as "normal" or "non-normal" (Marchia and Sommer 2019; Nielsen et al. 2000).

In many areas of society, hegemonic heteronormativity remains largely intact, with heterosexuality as the leading sexuality against which other sexualities are measured. However, this cannot function without other marginalized and subordinated forms of sexualities, such as gay or or lesbian idenities, bisexuality, and other sexualities. For heterosexuality to succeed, it needs other subordinate sexualities to reinforce and affirm its superior position (Javaid 2018).

Looking at contemporary work contexts, it is striking that formal discrimination based on sexual normativity hierarchies appear less and less observable (Rennstam and Sullivan 2018), which is related to social change processes, legislative changes, and organizational policies. On the other hand, studies across diverse work contexts suggest that heterosexist and homophobic markers of relevance still exist and are

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[1] In this article we observe how others observe based on distinctions. Thereby we use distinctions ourselves. Making a distinction itself, e.g. on the meta-level in the context of this paper, establishes a power structure (power of observation). However, we point out that the observation could also turn out differently. The article could in turn focus on power relations, however this would distract from our primary focus of observation.

evident in informal and subtle practices. This leads people who do not identify as heterosexual to feel treated differently because of their orientation (Bell et al. 2011; Buddel 2011; Priola et al. 2014). In this context, Priola et al. (2014) speak of a "culture of silence" in the context of "peripheral" sexualities. In their analysis on the experience of non-heterosexual identities in four companies in Italy, the culture of silence emerged as a functional mechanism to deal with the pressure of equal treatment of sexual identities (as enshrined in company mission statements) and existing discriminatory practices such as silence, gossip, or derogatory remarks: "The solution to this ambiguity is the denial of both the importance of sexual orientation in the workplace and the discrimination that LGBT employees are subjected to" (p. 499). Sexuality is shifted into invisibility here because making gay and lesbian identities visible in the face of heteronormative worldviews can disrupt the ideal functioning of the organization (Simpson and Lewis 2005). Yet it is precisely here that a contradiction reveals itself. Making invisible (consciously or unconsciously) marks the relevance and thus forms the disruptive signal. After all, work contexts are not devoid of sexuality (Sias and Shin 2019): romantic relationships take place in the workplace (Möbius 2014) and sexual identities of clients, depending on the employment field, are also relevant in the work context and thus also tangential to the sexual identities of the employees (Bernstein and Kostelac 2002; Miles-Johnson and Death 2020). Relevance markings of sexuality also occurs through expressed sexism or homophobia (Miller 2021), as well as living a congruent work environment positively affects mental health and job satisfaction (Colgan et al. 2008; Day and Schoenrade 2000; Ward and Winstanley 2003). The practice of coming out and considering to what extent one's sexual identity should be made public (and for whom this question even arises) also shows that sexuality matters in the workplace. Reflectively, discussions about coming out also reinforce the structures against which the discussions are fighting (Benozzo et al. 2015). Because only those who are considered "not normal" have to come out and think about this at all.

Publicizing is thus a prerequesite and a consequence at the same time. It is a *consequence* of the leading distinction heterosexual//homosexual,[2] which thematizes an unequal treatment. Publicizing thereby refers to the distinction (otherwise there would be nothing to publicize) and thus continues to mark the distinction as relevant (Luhmann 1988, on the binary coding man//woman). It is a *prerequisite* because the focus of a possible publicizing (and discussion about it) also reinforces the guiding distinction. Silence would thus have to be interpreted against the background of motivation with a view to (non)distinctions, or as Luhmann states: "The ideology of sameness postulates for distinction the ideal of indistinguishability and pushes it in that direction. Distinction remains relevant as long as it serves to crystallize inequalities" (Luhmann 1988, p. 59, translated from German). When it no longer makes a difference, it no longer makes a difference. Silence would be prerequisite and consequence at the same time. Inclusive working conditions could exist from these considerations when one's own sexual identity has no more any relevance in the workplace and not, when it is no longer granted any relevance. The attribution is

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[2] We use the double slashes „//" as a marker of distinction.

based on a distinction. Differences generate differences. From this perspective and in view of the structures of hegemonic heteronormativity, silence and invisibility are also worthy objects of analysis.

Sexual identities and the police

Our research context is the police and its organizational culture (Vera and Jablonowski 2017), which varies depending on the scope of tasks and the composition of working groups (Gutschmidt and Vera 2020). Research on police culture nationally (Behr 2006, 2020; Seidensticker 2021b) as well as internationally (Burke 1992; Loftus 2009; Marenin 2016; Miller 2021) point to a "concentrate" (Vera and Jablonowski 2017; p. 475) of a value and norm system, which is characterized by values such as masculinity, strength, aggressiveness, honor, and solidarity.

Within this culture, the "cult of masculinity" (Silvestri 2017) is (re)constructed through different social practices: the focus on fighting crime (Silvestri 2017), on physicality (Behr 2017; Seidensticker 2021b; Silvestri 2017), or the construction of street policing as "real police work" (Seidensticker 2021a). Career moves that require a lot of overtime also enable the construction of differences and hierarchies in a logic of thoughts based on binary-oriented gender constructions and traditional role understandings (Silvestri 2017; Yu and Rauhaus 2019), which grants "masculinity" the position of supremacy: hegemonic masculinity. In this context, hegemonic (police) masculinity is heteronormative: early studies on police culture already pointed to homophobic practices in the police (Burke 1992, 1994), which was shown in further studies on sexual identities in the context of the police (Cherney 1999; Colvin 2015; Miller et al. 2003; Myers et al. 2004). Thus, from this perspective, gay police officers were not constructed as fit for the police (Lyons et al. 2008; Praat and Tuffin 1996), constructed as "deviant" (Burke 1994) or faced homophobic communication in their everyday duty (Colvin 2009).

Societal developments in the years since the advent of studies on the perception and construction of sexual identity and police work may lead to the hope that the police as an organization has also evolved into a more inclusive work environment. Recent studies confirmed this evolution within the police (Colvin 2015; Rennstam and Sullivan 2018); however, full inclusion does not yet appear to have been achieved. For example, in studies from the United Kingdom (Colvin 2015) and Germany (Molitor and Zimenkova 2020, 2021), gay and lesbian police employees still reported discriminatory practices and experiences of exclusion in the workplace. These include sexist and homophobic jokes, denial of shared professional activities such as patrolling, or barriers to career advancement. Results that are also confirmed by recent media reports in Germany also pointing to discriminatory and exclusionary practices within the police (Juckeland and Grüninger 2022).

With regard to homophobia, Gutschmidt and Vera recently presented an analysis on police culture in organizational working groups and group-based hostility in Germany (Gutschmidt and Vera 2019). The authors reported a significantly higher score for male police officers in terms of devaluing gay or lesbian identities than female police officers. It is interesting to note here that the correlative relationship between

the individual value of devaluing gay and lesbian people and the proportion of men in the organizational unit. This is an indication that police officers who identify as men are more likely to be heteronormative. Differences along the categories of gender and sexual identity can also be found in the survey of Colvin (2015). Male police officers identifying as gay reported more professional obstacles than female police officers identifying as gay and were also more likely to feel they were treated as a symbol of equality (token). From the perspective of a hegemonic, hetero-normative police culture, the hierarchization along gender and sexuality thus becomes reciprocal. The gay police officer fits most poorly into the police identity constructed within police culture and consequently struggles the most with visibility. They gain visibility, but not too much, a phenomenon, that has also been termed "peripheral inclusion" (Rennstam and Sullivan 2018). In this context, Molitor and Zimenkova (2021) point out a striking observation. Queer police officers perceive their own sexual and gender identities as a failure to be solved on their own initiative as opposed to a structural problem. In this context, the achievement of exceptional professional performance is the performance-based attempt to overcome the experienced exclusion. One's own sexual and gender identity is experienced as a "flaw" that must be compensated for through performance. The marking of relevance of one's own identity in relation to performance is taken over (unconsciously). One's own sexual and gender identity is reproduced as exclusionary.

Our research aim

Research on sexual identities of police officers and their perceptions in Germany is sparse. As far as we know, only Molitor and Zimenkova investigated perceptions and views of queer police officers in Germany (Molitor and Zimenkova 2017, 2020, 2021; Zimenkova and Molitor 2017). Given this paucity of studies, we aim to contribute to further insights with our study. Our aim is to explore the views, perceptions, and experiences of police officers with gay and lesbian identities in the German police, with a special focus on communicative markers of relevance. In doing so, we focus on police officers who identify as gay or lesbian. The rationale in this selection lies in the situational possibilities that arose through the third author (RW). As a self-identifying lesbian police officer, RW had contacts with other gay and lesbian police officers, which allowed us as a research team to gain the present insights and perspectives.

Methods

The present study is designed as an explorative qualitative interview study. The qualitative approach lends itself particularly well to this work, as it examines an area that has been little researched in Germany and this approach represents an opportunity to capture the unknown experiences and perceptions of gay and lesbian police officers.

Table 1 Background data of our interviewed police officers (n=8)

Person	Gender identity	Year of recruitment to the police
B1	Male	2017
B2	Male	2002
B3	Female	2017
B4	Female	2017
B5	Female	2011
B6	Female	2011
B7	Female	2017
B8	Female	2011

Participants

Eight police officers from North Rhine-Westphalia who self-identified as gay (n=2) or lesbian (n=6) were recruited for the investigation of the research question (see Table 1). Among them were four police recruits (n=4), and four fully trained police officers of different ranks (n=4). Interview subjects were recruited through RW's personal network. The sampling was opportunistic. The age range of the officers at the time of the interviews was 26—39 years.

Data collection

The topic of gay and lesbian identities within the police as a police officer sometimes reaches deep into the private sphere of the individual and deals with quite personal experiences and perceptions of these. For this reason, interviews were conducted as face-to-face conversations. In addition, communication was limited to individual interviews with the respective interviewees, since this type of interview allows a deeper examination of the person and his or her experiences. The interviews were conducted by RW in the winter of 2019/2020. As a lesbian and fellow police officer, RW was deemed best to provide a safe space for participants to talk openly about their experiences. In order to grant the anonymity of the interviewees, only the age and the duration of the affiliation to the police were collected. The interviews were conducted in different cities in North Rhine-Westphalia. Before the start of the interview, participants were informed about the aim of the study, about the audio recording of the conversation and the handling of the data, assured of anonymity and were given room for further questions. Informed consent to participate in the study was given by all participants.

The interview was conducted as a semi-structured interview using an interview guide. This was developed in advance by the research team and included questions about (1) professional career and access to the profession, (2) colleagues' perceptions of their own gay or lesbian identity, (3) colleagues perceptions of gay or lesbian identities of others, and (4) questions about the process of coming out (see

appendix). The complexes were each divided into main questions and sub-questions. The main questions were questions relevant to the epistemic interest and were asked in each case. The sub-questions had an auxiliary character in this respect. They served to create possible narrative stimuli or to promote the flow of conversation within the interview.

Data handling

The audio recording of the interviews was subsequently transcribed according to rules defined by the research team (Gläser and Laudel 2010). Colloquial words or expressions such as "nix" were transcribed into "nichts", or "haste" into "hast du". If the interviewee paused for a longer period of time, which plays an important role for the meaning, this was indicated by the three dots ("…"). If participants made non-verbal statements and laughed, for example, this was noted in parentheses (laugh) if this influenced the significance of the answer. In order to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees, as already described above, all hints, references, names, etc. that allowed conclusions to be drawn about the participant were changed in such a way that they could not be traced back to the person. Care was taken to ensure that the meaning of the statement was not distorted. For the purpose of an international publication, statements in the final manuscript were translated from German into English.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed the procedures of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019) using MAXQDA 2020 software (Braun and Clarke 2019). The analysis strategy was chosen according to the objectives of the study and has its strengths "on the exploration of participants' subjective experiences and sense-making" (Braun and Clarke 2021, p. 3). Due to the rather open-ended approach to the field of inquiry, which served as an initial qualitative exploration of the perceptions of gay and lesbian police officers, the dataset was subjected to a "data-driven" inductive thematic coding (Graneheim et al. 2017) that accounted for the systematic development of relevant themes.

The analysis was not free of deductive formatting. The theory of heteronormativity described in the beginning as well as the setting of distinctions in the context of gender and sexual identities represented our analytical lens. We locate the strength in the process in our three basic assumptions shared with reflexive thematic analysis on the qualitative process of knowledge: creativity and flexibility in the process, reflexivity in relation to our presuppositions about research, and subjectivity as a constitutive feature of our research (Braun and Clarke 2019). Specifically, our analytic procedure took the following form: Inductively, meaning units relevant to the research question were identified and assigned to further (sub)themes (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019). As part of the inductive coding strategy, the dataset was analyzed, and raw data themes were generated and clustered into lower and higher order themes. Raw data themes were generated from coding relevant meaning units within

the data set. Identity in focal meaning (e.g., " in our class the word 'faggot' is voiced here and there" B7) led to the formation of raw data themes that encompassed the generalized meaning (e.g., "prejudice/swear words") and allowed further subsumption of similar items under the existing theme, while differences in meaning led to the formation of a new theme (e.g., "partially taboo topic", derived from "still a bit of a taboo topic", B4). In a next step, the raw data themes were coherently built up into lower-order themes by generalizing their main meaning (e.g., "prejudice/swear words" to "visibility" based on the visibility due to expressing prejudice and swear words) in view of the underlying theories. The lower-order themes were re-examined on the part of the second author (SK) and agreed upon between MS and SK in discussions. Subsequently, the subtopics were generalized at a further level of abstraction of meaning and built up to higher order topics (e.g. "visibility" and "reproduction" to "(in)visibility" , since both aspects are related to (in)visibility in the organization). The higher order topics were again critically evaluated and finally determined on the part of the second author (SK). The third author (RW) critically reviewed the final result after the analysis was done. No changes were made based on the review. Table 2 displays an overview of the construction processes of the themes.

Results

With regards to our research question, data analysis by means of reflexive thematic analysis revealed two higher-order themes that are presented in Table 3: (1) (In)visibilities and (2) hegemonic-heteronormative hierarchies. In the following we present the higher-order themes in the context of their origin from the raw data themes and lower-order themes in sequence.

(In)Visibilities

The topic of (in)visibility describes the visibility and invisibility of gay and lesbian identities in the police, perceived differences and the associated reproductions. With regard to visibility, it is noticeable that gay and lesbian identities become visible and are made visible in various areas of police work and within the organization. This concerns swear words and prejudices that are voiced, as expressed by B7, for example:

> Also, in our class the word "faggot" is voiced here and there. And this isn't the case for synonyms referring to lesbian women. (B7, female)

In other places, gay and lesbian identities are brought into the focus of attention if the reason for the assignment relates to the subject of sexual identity. Here, B2 reports on a police operation in a "gay bar" in which his sexual identity was addressed as a characteristic that—according to the perception—would enable him to act at eye level with citizens.

Table 2 Coding examples for building raw data themes, lower order themes, and higher order themes

Quote	Raw data theme	Lower order theme	Definition	Application rule	Higher order theme	Definition	Application rule
"In our class the word 'faggot' is voiced here and there" (B7)	Prejudices/ swear words	Visibility	Visibility of gay or lesbian identity in the sense of a relevance marker (in contrast to invisibility if the topic is not considered relevant)	Subsumption of raw data themes that relate to the visibility of gay and lesbian identities in the sense of a relevance marker	(In)Visibility	Aspects that deal with the distinction between visibility and invisibility of gay and lesbian identities in the sense of a relevance marker through communication (in contrast to aspects that do not address the distinction)	Building up of low-order themes related to visibility and invisibility
"It's just so widespread by now and so normal that it's part of it. And it simply doesn't play a role anymore" (B6)	No relevance / not worth talking about	Invisibility	Invisibility of gay or lesbian identity in the sense of a relevance marker (in contrast to visibility)	Subsumption of raw data topics that relate to the invisibility of gay and lesbian identities in the sense of a relevance marker			
"And now you don't have to hide for anything [...] that has simply changed significantly in recent years" (B2)	Dynamics to irrelevance	Differences	Differences in the visibility of gay and lesbian identities over time (change) and in space (working groups) within the police	Subsumption of raw data themes related to temporal and spatial differences with regard to the visibility of gay and lesbian identities			
"We have one in my class, he's just gay [...]" (B7)	Gay and lesbian identities as an exception to the norm	Reproduction	Reproduction of the relevance marking of sexual and gender identities through one's own thinking, communication and behaviors	Subsumption of raw data themes that reproduce the relevance marking of sexual and gender identities			

Table 2 (continued)

Quote	Raw data theme	Lower order theme	Definition	Application rule	Higher order theme	Definition	Application rule
"And since one must be, in quotation marks, 'manly' and be assertive, there is the reason, in my opinion, why lesbians are rather seen, than gays. Because the gay man is, after all, from the general social image rather the softer, perhaps whiny type, who is not so assertive. And that is something that does not correspond as well to the role image of the policeman as that of the lesbian woman" (B2)	Police are male—gay is not male	Male gay and lesbian identities as a problem	Problematization of male gay and lesbian identities in the police (as opposed to non-problematization)	Subsumption of raw data topics when they relate to the problematization of male gay and lesbian identities in the police	Heteronormative hierarchy	Aspects that indicate a heteronormative hierarchy within the police (in contrast to aspects that indicate equality along the categories of sexual and gender)	Building up of low-order themes related to aspects of heteronormative hierarchy in the police force

Table 2 (continued)

Quote	Raw data theme	Lower order theme	Definition	Application rule	Higher order theme	Definition	Application rule
"I believe that women are more open than men. You can see this in the fact that there are much less known gays in the police than lesbians" (B8)	Dealing with gay identities more problematic than with lesbian identities	Asymmetry concerning gay and lesbian identities	Asymmetries of behavioral or perspectives gay and lesbian identities as binary coding of sexual identities	Subsumption of raw data themes when they include asymmetries between gay and lesbian identities in a binary coding			
"Women can handle it better than men" (B2)	Women respond to gay and lesbian identities better than men	Asymmetry concerning man/woman	Asymmetries of behavioral or viewpoints between men and women as binary coding of gender identities	Subsumption of raw data topics when they include asymmetries between men and women in a binary coding			

Table 3 Raw data topics, lower and higher order topics

Higher order themes	Lower order themes	Raw data topics
Hegemonic–heteronormative hierarchies	Male gay and lesbian identities as a problem	Male gay and lesbian identities is soft, but police needs toughness
		Police is male and male gay and lesbian identities is not male
		Police is not open to male gay and lesbian identities
	Asymmetry concerning male//female gay and lesbian identities	Dealing with male gay and lesbian identities is more problematic than dealing with female gay and lesbian identities
		More visible police officers that identify as lesbian than gay
	Asymmetry concerning man//woman	Women respond to gay and lesbian identities better than men
		Police is masculine and female character traits don't fit in
(In)Visibility	Visibility	Partly taboo topic
		Prejudices / swear words
		Concealing gay and lesbian identities
		Conscious selection of people during outing
		Outing as liberation
		Advantages in police operations
	Invisibility	No relevance / Not worth talking about
	Differences	Differences in working groups
		Changes to irrelevance
	Reproduction	Gay and lesbian identities as an exception to the norm
		Reproduction of traditional man-woman images
		Prejudices normal, but not problematic
		Addressing and encouragement of gay and lesbian identities
		Equating of police, masculinity and toughness

> Yes, we had an operation in a gay bar and I was deliberately given the operation because they knew that I was logically the most likely to handle it. And it was about the theft of a wallet. And basically, they didn't send me ahead, but they said that we were glad that you were there. And if you can talk to them at eye level, then that's okay. The operation was a normal theft but they overestimated the issue of sexuality and then they said, come on, you have to go there. I don't want to say that they were afraid of the operation, but they tried to communicate that it was easier for me [...]. (B2, male)

But the fact that gay identities are deliberately concealed or hidden also brings the topic into focus and thus makes it visible as an issue. It marks the relevance.

> I believe that women are more open than men. You can see this in the fact that there are much much less known gays in the police than lesbians. Well, I personally know three. But there is one individual, that not all colleagues know about it. There is another one, where nobody talks openly about it. I think that society reacts to it, or colleagues react to it, a bit differently than if her were a women. (B8)

The same applies to marking the issue of gay identities as a taboo topic. Yet, marking it as taboo, brings the topic into focus.

> So I think that's still a bit of a taboo. (B4, female)

This focus—and thus the visibility—is also reflected in thoughts about coming out and in the perception of it as something liberating. B1 reports on his strategic plans when preparing for his coming out.

> So I didn't intend to stand up in front of the whole team and tell them about my sexual orientation. I actually planned to pick out people I could trust, so that I could somehow be more relaxed during my studies. And, yes, I then found such people. (B1, male)

Thinking through the process and being strategic about it shows that the topic of sexual identity binds B1's attention; here in the context of thinking about how to communicate one's sexual identity to other colleagues. Also, in B2's report, in which he felt "more comfortable and liberated" after coming out, shows that his own gay identity had an attention-binding influence on him.

> And at the moment when you always pretend and make sure that you don't talk about your boyfriend or your husband, but about your better half to keep it neutral. At that moment it's also exhausting. You always have the feeling that you are not only somehow holding something back, but rather hiding it, maybe even lying. And, for that reason in the end it was always more comfortable and of course also liberating, when I have come out of the closed. Then there was no more room for speculation. Instead, everything was on the table and that was the end of speculation. (B2, male)

The difference in focus on gay and lesbian identities is particularly evident when compared to the issue of *invisibility*. Some female police officers did not have to

worry about coming out of the closet and the process because in their context the difference between heterosexuality and lesbian identity was not seen as relevant. A lesbian identity, like heterosexuality, was "normal". B5 describes this related to the question of coming out of the closed in her private environment as follows:

> So, I didn't had this classic coming out at all. In the sense, that I now tell the world how it is. In most areas of life there was such a smooth transition. For example, I have practiced a lot of sports. Club sports, team sports, and it was somehow normal, really normal. No one took interest in it and there it was somehow clear from the beginning. (B5, female)

Even in the police environment, she reports no perception that her lesbian identity was marked as relevant. Her lesbian identity is thus invisible.

> I hardly perceived the issue, just because that is so normal, actually. I have actually never somehow had a situation where I was somehow negatively [ehm], evaluated or wehre I was evaluated at all. So I think I've just been lucky that [ehm] I actually never noticed anything, that someone has a problem with it, or so. Or would have gazed at me stupidly. Nothing. (B5, female)

This dissolution of difference is also described by B6. The non-differentiation of sexual identities makes its thematization superfluous. I doesn't play a role. It is irrelevant:

> In the subject area in which I now work, it is just that there is no negative experiences or the like. It [the lesbian identity] is dealt with very openly and [ehm], what is actually even better is, that it is simply regarded as normality. The bottom line is that it's not even a topic, but not for the reason that it's kept small or that it's hushed up, but because it's just so widespread by now and so normal that it's part of it. And it simply doesn't play a role anymore and that you don't have to talk about it in a big way somehow. (B6, female)

B6 perceives the non-relevance of a distinction between sexual identities in her current field of work. This was not the case in her former work areas. Here the topic was made visible.

> By the fact that I have now already worked in two different areas at the polic, I can also say that I have now perceived it [the thematization of homoosexuality] differently. (B6, female)

This shows, as in the reports of other interviewees, that there are differences in work areas with regard to making gay and lesbian identities visible. These differences are also perceived in an increasingly better way (in the sense of successive dissolution of difference). B2, who had already been working in the police service for 17 years at the time of the interview, describes this as follows:

> There may certainly be setbacks, there will certainly still be people today who don't necessarily deal with it well. Who have prejudices. But the rest of society, whether within the police or not, is so open and tolerant in the meantime that you will always have support from your superiors as well as from your

> colleagues and you have nothing to fear. And that has simply changed signifi-
> cantly in recent years. (B2, male)

At the same time, B2's statement point out that difference is reproduced through
the thematization of asymmetries. B2 speaks of "having support" and "having noth-
ing to fear", which represents an asymmetry with respect to the implicitly conveyed
norm. Support is only needed by those who lean too far out. Fears exist only beyond
the safe center in the periphery of inclusion. The reproduction of gay and lesbian
identities appears here as the deviation from the norm. This reproduction is also
achieved through other practices. For example, by B2 marking prejudices and gossip
as "common" but not problematic. "Peripheral inclusion" is not problematized. B6
also reports gossip, but separates a possible homophobic intention from it.

> Maybe a little gossip behind one's back. But I find that difficult to [ehm] yes
> difficult to differentiate whether this was really only due to [ehm] sexuality or
> due to the fact that one actually did not like the person and just simply took
> that the obvious leverage point (B6, female).

Finally, a reproduction mechanism becomes apparent in the addressing and ascrib-
ing of gay and lesbain identities. The thematization—in this case perceived as posi-
tive—remains a thematization and thus marks the sexual identity as relevant. The
difference remains visible. The description of B7 shows this mechanism.

> People have continued to treat me as before. Of course, there were always
> inquiries, like 'Wow, I wouldn't have though that. Nobody does see this'. And
> people are rather interested in it and ask how it came into being and how life is
> with it and how other people deal with it. (B7 female)

Another reproduction of differences can be seen in reports that address gender and
associate it with character traits. Thus, gender-stereotypical character images are
shown in the reports in a binary coding man//woman.

> So I for myself have found, eh that the typical actually cliché image of the
> lesbian is rather the short-haired combat dyke who is assertive and sometimes
> more masculine than some colleagues. And since one must must be, in quota-
> tion marks, 'manly' and be assertive, there is the reason, in my opinion, why
> lesbians are rather seen, than gays. Because the gay man is, after all, from the
> general social image rather the softer, perhaps whiny type, who is not so asser-
> tive. And that is something that does not correspond as well to the role image
> of the policeman as that of the lesbian woman. (B2, male)

Also evident in this section is the reproduction of "hegemonic police masculinity".
The police is associated with masculinity and assertiveness, both of which are con-
sidered synonymous.

 In summary, the results of the main topic (in)visibility show that situations exist
in which gay and lesbian identities is made visible. On the other hand, there are con-
texts in which the difference heterosexual//homosexual is no longer relevant, and the
differentiation and with it gay and lesbian identities has disappeared into invisibil-
ity. The interviewees also report positive movements of the police in this direction.

Finally, the results also show that our police officers partly reinforce differences themselves and thus reproduce themes (Körner, 2017).

Hegemonic-heternormative hierarchies

This higher order theme of hegemonic-heternormative hierarchies encompasses the identified themes around participants' descriptions of asymmetries along the categories of gender and sexual identity. Binary-coded asymmetries between male// female and gay//lesbian identities are reported here. Furthermore, a gay identity is described as problematic within the police organization.

According to the reports of the participants, the *problem of gay identities* is constructed in the police through several aspects. The paragraph of B2 mentioned in the context of reproduction logics describes this construction: The police are perceived as "masculine". Masculine is thereby associated with assertiveness and toughness ("standing his 'ground'"). Thus, B2 reports on picked-up clichés about how gay men would behave:

> It really is like that that. You hear things like 'he is gay. He cannot be tough'. In the service there are times a resistance must be broken, then there is the perception, that he is the first to just stand around and doing nothing. The he is weepy and rather howls around. It's really a cliché. That the gay-soft-howling-can't grip firmly and so on. This was something that was brought to me, but no one would have said this to my face. (B2, male)

The gay man is constructed as "soft" and "weepy" and thus is not suitable for the police field of activity, which is then again reflected in a lower visibility of gay identities.

> And that's why I would tend to think that [ehm] the gay man [ehm] is seen more skeptically than the lesbian policewoman. I for myself would even speculate that there are also more lesbians than gays in the police. Precisely because of this understanding of roles and because of the [ehm] values that prevail in the police. (B2, male)

Even though B2 speculates here that there are fewer gay police officers than lesabian police officers, B1 describes this as a problem of visibility. Gay colleagues would come out of the closet less—precisely because of the prevailing heteronormative police culture.

> [Ehm] I find that the police as far as gay identities is concerned [ehm] is not so open yet, because I also know some people who do the same job and are also gay, who absolutely do not deal with it openly at all. And they would never consider coming out of the closet within the police. (B1, male)

The police are thus said to have a problem of openness with regard to gay identities, which seems to be improving continuously, but still seems to exist—especially from the point of view of the two gay police officers interviewed. Related to this is another issue: the *asymmetry of gay and lesbian identities*. The participants report

less visible gay colleagues, which partly also leads them to the conclusion that fewer gay colleagues exist in the police force.

> [...] because a relatively large number of women I know [ehm] are lesbian. With men, I would rather say that the number of gay officers is very low. (B7, female)

Accordingly, the handling of gay identites within the police is described as more problematic and rather seen as a taboo subject.

> Well, I think that's still a bit of a taboo subject. I think with men more than with women. (B4, female)

Another asymmetry can be seen along the gender identity in the binary coding man// woman. On the one hand, the profession is "masculine." Lesbian women are attributed this masculinity. B1 also sees this as the reason why a lesbian identity is met with more acceptance within the police compared to a gay identity:

> So I for myself have found, eh that the typical actually cliché image of the lesbian is rather the short-haired combat dyke who is assertive and sometimes more masculine than some colleagues. And since one must must be, in quotation marks, 'manly' and be assertive, there is the reason, in my opinion, why lesbians are rather seen, than gays. Because the gay man is, after all, from the general social image rather the softer, perhaps whiny type, who is not so assertive. And that is something that does not correspond as well to the role image of the policeman as that of the lesbian woman. (B2, male)

In essence, the asymmetries reported also indicate a hierarchy that is constructed through asymmetries in the categories of gender and sexual identity. Character traits ascribed as masculine (toughness, assertiveness, non-weepy) are constructed as mandatory for the police profession. Along gender and sexual identities, these traits are also distributed, and placed in a hierarchy: Men are better suited than women. Homosexuality, constructed as a reversal of character traits, leads to an upgrading of women, but to a devaluation of men. The gay man thus falls back to the bottom of the hierarchy; the lesbian woman, on the other hand, experiences an upgrading.

Discussion

Our work provides further insights into the perception of police officers in Germany who identify as gay or lesbian. In doing so, the results of our analysis with regard to gay and lesbian identities in the police coincide with other studies, especially from the international arena. Gay and lesbian identities in the police are becoming more visible and "normal" (Colvin 2015; Rennstam and Sullivan 2018) and thus also reflects the societal shift towards a diverse and open society. However, gay men in particular still have a difficult time in the police force (Colvin 2015), as evidenced by the hegemonic heteronormativity still prevalent in the police force. The police officer who identifies as heterosexual and masculine or is identified by others as such

is far—if not at the top—of the police status hierarchy. Seidensticker's recent analysis for the German context also impressively shows this dominance of masculinity (Seidensticker 2021b). Our results here provide the additional orientation based on sexual identity. The "police masculinity" described by Seidensticker is heterosexual. With these two existing distinctions male//female and heterosexual//homosexual, an intra-police status hierarchy is generated whose negative effects have been extensively documented in social sciences (Colvin 2009, 2015; Gutschmidt and Vera 2019; Molitor and Zimenkova 2017, 2020, 2021; Rennstam and Sullivan 2018). Accordingly, we want to discuss our results primarily from the perspective of the distinctions that are drawn. Our discussion perspective is by no means arbitrary. The identified replications in the interviews have informed our perspective here. This is where we locate the greatest gain in knowledge (which, of course, also depends on our perspective).

The results show that the communication of the distinction alone (re)produces the distinction. Thus, the thematization of the asymmetries between gay and lesbian identities is itself based on an adopted binary coding hetero//homo. The possible third—other sexual identities—thus remains invisible. The same applies to the category of gender. Binary codings are taken over and man and woman are distinguished. The third—all further sexual identities—remains invisible. Based on the fixed distinction in the double binary coding male//female and hetero//homo, events are then interpreted and reported in this binary coding: lesbian police officers have fewer problems than gay ones. The police profession as masculine versus feminine. The characteristics ascribed by police culture to the individual sides of the distinction are thereby adopted: Men hard, women soft. Real men (whatever this may be) are better fitted for real police work (whatever this may be).

This process of (re)production of distinctions and the subsequent asymmetries based on a once set distinction is not new. As early as 1988, the systems theorist Luhmann pointed out the fatality of the initial distinction, especially with regard to gender identity (Luhmann 1988): "The fact that there is only this one basic operation [note: the distinction] also has the consequence that it makes history. Once it has been set, it cannot be erased again, because there is no operation of its own available for it. There is no way back to the 'unmarked space'. The beginning is fatal" (p. 49, translated into English). The demand for equality and the observation of current events against this background, itself presupposes a distinction that has been made. Thus, the discussion about asymmetries in equality itself stabilizes this distinction. The asymmetries are thereby conceived as "relics of older societies" (Luhmann 1988, p. 56). The striving for equality thus appears to be justified, but overlooks the fact that the distinction (man//woman; hetero//homo) itself is used to observe reality and thus cements these "leading distinctions". The drawing of the distinction constructs reality along these distinctions with all subsequent consequential distinctions. "Draw a distinction" and "a universe comes into being" (Spencer-Brown 1979), p. XXIX). To what extent gender distinctions prove responsible for consequential distinctions in the police and their self-understanding would be worth analyzing elsewhere. In essence—according to the analysis here—distinctions along gender and sexual identity seem to be relevant in the police. They lead into and at the same time condition the reported hierarchy of heteronormativity.

That it is possible otherwise is shown by the expressed irrelevancies of these distinctions, which can be seen especially with regard to lesbian identities in the police. When sexual identity no longer matters, it no longer matters. The normality is non-distinction. Non-discrimination as the default mode. Thus, the visibility of gay and lesbian identities in the police can also be considered under this distinction (of non-distinction): If gay or lesbian identites are not addressed because it no longer plays a role (mode of non-differentiation) or because it is shifted into invisibility due to existing asymmetries, for example, it is tabooed, concealed or kept quiet (mode of differentiation).

For the police and equality and diversity efforts there (Genkova 2019), a potential for reflection arises from this perspective, at the institutional level, but also at the individual level. At the institutional level, remedying unequal conditions presumably requires diagnosing those conditions and taking appropriate countermeasures. The research literature provides sufficient evidence for diagnosis and discusses appropriate measures (Molitor and Zimenkova 2021). At the same time, it is important to be reflexive with regard to these measures (and the diagnosis), because: it cements the distinction as such. We locate the potential for reflection precisely in this insight. This could lead to the fact that organizational structures that deal with inequalities may at some point withdraw; not only because it is no longer relevant, but also in order to no longer attribute relevance to the topic. We deliberately leave open when this is or could be the case. The same applies on an individual level. Each police officer could decide for themselves what relevance they want to attach to the distinction and when the time has come for a change with regard to a non-distinction: In one's own thoughts, in linguistic formulations (Gabriel et al. 2018; Gygax et al. 2019), in conversation with colleagues. The contribution to cementing the distinction by maintaining it would be a variable worth considering in this decision.

With a view to who seems suitable for what within police tasks, it is necessary to focus on requirements and skills beyond gender and sexual identification. But beware: differentiating categories with regard to requirements and needed skills is also fatal. What constitutes "police work" and what does not is the subject of attribution processes and as such is more open to debate than ever.

Limitations

The validity of the study`s results is subject to important limitations on two levels. *First,* from a methodical perspective, the study had only limited access to German police officers with gay and lesbian identities. Due to its small sample size the results of the study are explorative in nature and do not allow for further generalization. *Second*, limitations on an epistemological level have to be acknowledged. Although qualitative research in general has its strength in delivering insights form subjective perspectives and sense making, the qualitative data are subject to perspectivity and bias due to the perceptions of police officers and the analysis and interpretation of us as the researchers.

Conclusion

With our explorative analysis of the perceptions of gay and lesbian police officers, we turn the spotlight on a central human category whose use within the police can be observed as both as a solution and a problem. Seen from the outside and through the eyes of affected police officers, the attribution of people to characteristics of sexual orientation resembles a practice of "relevance marking of people through communication" that is problematic in modern societies, largely normatively and empirically outdated anyway. For the police itself, however, the attribution routine continues to produce a consistent image of man, gender, and society that gives expression to its own hegemonic-heteronormative orientations. We see the fact that the police thinks and acts in categories of gender, for example in operational situations, as a circumstance that is in great need of reflection. Our proposal is to seriously reconsider and correct this practice. Accordingly, we plead for a slow withdrawal of heterosexually formatted distinctions. For example, choosing officer for operational demands based on competencies (e.g. the ability to resolve certain types of conflicts) without referring to gender categories could be such as step. Likewise, in police use of force training, the use of semantic distinctions that only revolve around behavior (e.g. someone that can perform a takedown) may be a powerful tool in the socialization of young police officers rendering gendered distinctions more and more obsolete.

What we have identified and problematized in the subject area of the police applies to our analysis itself. It is the result of observation and as such is dependent on the distinctions we apply. The central paradox is that our view of the hegemonic-heteronormative culture of the police cannot avoid reifying the object of our own observation. But this is—as always—necessary in order to make the subject visible as a subject and thus to create the prerequisite for de-thematization.

Author contributions MS, RW and SK equally contributed to the current study and the final manuscript. The study was designed by MS and RW. Data were collected by RW and analyzed by MS, SK and RW. MK wrote the first draft of the manuscript. SK revised the draft and helped to reach the manuscript to its final form.

Data availability Data will be made available on reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval As the University of Applied Science forPolice and Public Administration does not have an ethics committee, we discussed our researchproject with the ethics faculty of our institution. They have affirmed that our study adheres to ethicalprinciples and standards in research involving human participants.

Informed consent   Informed consent was obtained from all participants who took part in the study, and whereapplicable, from their legal guardians. The consent process ensured that participants were fullyinformed about the nature and purpose of the research, their rights as participants, and the use ofany collected data.

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