



The Veiling of Queerness: Depoliticization and the Experiences of LGBT Engineers

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Abstract

The ideology of depoliticization within the culture of engineering is the belief that “social” issues can and should be bracketed from the more “technical” aspects of engineering. Through this ideology, issues of equality, justice and power are marked as tangentially important but largely irrelevant to the work of engineers. This paper explores how depoliticization operates to veil issues of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) equality within engineering, and ultimately make it more difficult to discuss—and rectify—the inequities this population may experience. Depoliticization not only means that promoting LGBT equality is a low priority within the profession, but that the very discussion of LGBT equality issues is considered irrelevant to “real” engineering education and engineering work. I draw from pilot interviews with LGBT engineers in academia and industry to parse out some of the particular processes through which depoliticization acts to silence LGBT equality issues in engineering. After presenting my findings, I suggest ways in which engineering may challenge these processes of depoliticization and lift the veil surrounding queerness in engineering.

Introduction

The last several decades of engineering education and engineering studies research has made clear that not all identities are equally valued or rewarded within the profession.^{1,2,3,4} Those who do not fit the stereotypical image of an engineer (white, middle-class, heterosexual male) not only experience stereotyping and exclusion, but their minority status may mean they are simultaneously visible as “different” and invisible as engineers.^{5,10}

Scholars of inequality in engineering have also noted a certain level of resistance within the culture of the profession toward discussing (and working to address) issues of inequality. This resistance comes in part from the professional culture of engineering, the system of meanings, values, norms, and rituals built into and around engineering tasks and knowledge.^{6,7,8,9} One particular ideology within the culture of engineering, *the ideology of depoliticization*, misframes questions of inequality within engineering as marginal and largely irrelevant to “real” engineering work.⁷

The ideology of depoliticization is defined as the belief that engineering work should be disconnected from “social” and “political” concerns because such considerations may bias otherwise “pure” engineering practice.⁷ Through the lens of this ideology, the social and political forces that are at the core of all engineering work are made invisible, leaving many engineering students and practitioners to believe that all messy “social” aspects of life can and should be “left at the door” of engineering work. “More importantly, the ideology of depoliticization means that aspects of social life that have to do with conflicting perspectives, cultural values, or inequality are cast as ‘political’ and thus irrelevant, perhaps even dangerous—to “real” engineering work.^{7,11}

Depoliticization, then, means that discussing and promoting equality within engineering education and engineering workplaces is seen by many in the profession as a low priority. It also means that the very *discussion* of issues of equality is seen as largely irrelevant to “real” engineering work. As literature on women and under-represented minorities have argued for decades,² we cannot begin to change cultures and climates in engineering without cultural space for frank discussions about how those inequalities are (re)produced.⁷ In short, the ideology of depoliticization veils issues of queerness in engineering, rendering issues of equality as tangential or irrelevant to most corners of engineering.

An important task in the process of understanding how depoliticization affects inequality in engineering is to identify some of the *concrete processes* through which depoliticization is enacted in day-to-day workplaces, and some of the *particular consequences* that arise from this ideology. This paper uses the case of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals in engineering workplaces to illustrate some of these processes and consequences—specifically, how the ideology of depoliticization veils queerness within engineering. I rely on an exploratory set of in-depth interviews with LGBT engineers in industry and academia. These data were collected as a pilot for Tom Waidzunas and my much larger, multi-method study of LGBT science and engineering professionals in the U.S., to be conducted beginning in Fall 2013.

Looking for evidence of depoliticization within the experiences of LGBT engineers is important for two reasons: first, there is very little know about the experiences of LGBT individuals in engineering,^{1,10} so any research that expands our understanding of how inequality is reproduced for this population is valuable. Second, this is a useful case theoretically because of the way LGBT identity usually manifests. For most lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals, their sexual identity cannot be “read off of them” in the same way that race and gender categories might be.¹⁰ For many transgender individuals who are “stealth” (who desire to operate fully within a single gender category), their trans status is not necessarily knowable to others.¹¹ Thus, the (potential) invisibility of queerness makes it an interesting population within which to think about processes and consequences of depoliticization. For women and most under-represented racial/ethnic minorities, their “otherness” is visible in ways that make it difficult for the dominant group in engineering (white heterosexual males) to completely ignore such otherness. However, the “don’t ask, don’t tell” spirit of depoliticization in engineering likely means that LGBT inequality issues can be more easily bracketed and ignored by the dominant engineering culture.

Interviews with a small sample of LGBT individuals, described below, suggest ways that depoliticization might operate within workplaces to veil inequality issues for LGBT individuals, as well as illustrate some of the consequences of such veiling. The paper ends by discussing the possible repercussions of this exploratory analysis for engineering workplaces and engineering education.

Depoliticization of Queerness in Engineering

Exploratory Interviews and Focus Groups

In order to explore the possible processes through which depoliticization operates to bracket LGBT equality issues from engineering, and a few of the possible consequences of that

depoliticization, Tom Waidzunus and I conducted interviews and focus groups of practicing engineers in industry and academia. These data were collected as pilot data for a larger project on the experiences of LGBT engineers and scientists in the U.S. Although exploratory, they provide some important insights into how engineering contexts may disadvantage LGBT individuals.

Waidzunus and I interviewed a total of 15 people, six through focus groups and nine in in-depth interviews in person or over the phone. The sample includes five respondents who identify as lesbian women, nine who identify as gay men, and one Trans woman. The sample includes three African-Americans (two women, one man), two Asian-American men, 4 white women (including a Trans woman), and six white men. Three of the fifteen respondents are scientists, so I do not draw on their data in this paper. Respondents were identified through advertisements at the “Out to Innovate” conferences, through communication with an LGBT employee resource group in a large, multi-national oil company; and through personal contacts.

With respondent permission, the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Detailed notes (and, occasionally verbatim quotes) were taken during interviews that were not recorded. The themes discussed below emerged from a focused coding procedure that coded interviews for the following: (a) the extent to which LGBT issues were discussed in respondents’ engineering workplaces, (b) *how* these issues were discussed, and (c) the consequences of those discussions (or lack thereof) for LGBT respondents.

Processes of Depoliticization

The interviews covered a wide range of topics, from respondents’ education history, to their coming out process in college, to their experiences with mentors, co-workers, managers, and friends. Although a small sample, respondents’ description of their workplaces clearly illustrated the ideology of depoliticization in operation. Depoliticization seemed to play out through two processes in particular: in norms of colleague-to-colleague interaction, and in informal workplace policies set by management.

First, most respondents noted that norms in their work environments whereby conversations were supposed to remain firmly rooted in the realm of the “professional,” i.e. predominantly about work-related tasks and activities and not about “social” topics.

A gay chemical engineer working for a large, multinational oil company in northern California reported:

“You [are expected to] focus on getting the work done; [work] really isn’t supposed to be about anything other than that.” (R2)

Here, “anything other” than work refers to “political” topics like LGBT equality. This “focus on getting the work done” is assumed in the respondents’ workplaces to be the predominant norm of interaction. Similarly, a gay mechanical engineering professor at a major research university notes that he and the other faculty in his department “have a great working professional relationship,” but don’t talk about their personal lives (R5).

Some respondents expressed their own discomfort over breaking norms of colleague interactions by introducing queer issues into informal workplace conversations. A lesbian mechanical engineer, for example, noted that engineers “should be recognized for the quality of their work, not by how they identify. No one’s going to pay you to be a queer engineer—just an engineer. No one gets paid to be a professional queer” (R7).

But depoliticization is a false ideology. Workplace interactions are never completely about work. In small and big ways, the incorporation of “tell us about yourself” icebreakers, Monday morning chatter about the weekend, and after-work drinks in most workplace environments means that work interactions are not always about just “professional” matters. Depoliticization is thus applied unevenly in ways that silence the discussion of LGBT matters, but not heterosexual topics or issues. This point was echoed in an interview with a graduate student from a previous study who talked about the hypocrisy that his heterosexual peers seemed free to discuss their dating lives but he was not:

[My colleagues] are fine with you being gay, but they don’t want you to talk about having a boyfriend. They’re fine in the abstract, but let’s just not go there. And the fact that they talk about their girlfriends in the lab I find kind of hypocritical” (Cech & Waidzunas 2011, p. 14).

In other words, LGBT related topics *become* politicized, and thus at risk for being labeled illegitimate through depoliticization. Topics of conversation about heterosexual families or relationships, however, are not similarly policed as “political” and thus illegitimate.

Informal norms of interaction with colleagues is one way depoliticization is enforced within the workplace. But depoliticization is also reinforced in more explicit ways. Several respondents gave examples of managers or supervisors explicitly bracketing discussions of LGBT issues. While the respondents believed that their supervisors were attentive to making the workplace a “neutral” environment, management’s informal decree of neutrality silences those who might complain to management about LGBT individuals, but it also leaves little cultural space for open discussions about the improvement of the workplace climate for LGBT individuals.

For example, a Trans woman working as an operations engineer in a defense-related organization shared what she overheard about a managers’ meeting where someone had brought up the topic of her transition.

The [boss], from what I understand, said, “I don’t want to hear [of anyone’s concern about the respondent’s transition from man to woman]. This is the last time I want to hear about it. You’re going to let the contractors handle it if somebody makes this an issue. We have a job to do here. This is old. I don’t want to hear about it again. Are there any questions? ...I don’t care if A likes B, you’re both going to shut up, you’re going to do your freaking job and I don’t want to hear about it.” That’s usually the position military types take towards [LGBT issues]. (R1)

The respondent appreciated that her boss did not openly express bias toward her and was willing to silence anyone who did. But, not wanting to “hear about it again” also implies that her boss is unwilling to hear complaints that the respondent may have about how she is being treated by her colleagues. In fact, the respondent confided that she believes she is “underpaid by about \$10,000-15,000,” but remains in the position because she feels a “certain amount of personal loyalty to the people who brought [her] on and took a chance on [her].”

Defense-related organizations are not the only workplaces where depoliticization is made into a sort of informal workplace policy. Speaking about a multinational oil company, R2 explains,

[At a multinational oil company,] it’s just so very top down and almost militaristic in terms of how they manage people...they don’t even think [diversity’s] an issue, because “if you’re here, you’re working. Why do we need to know if you’re - why do we need to know anything else about you? Just do your job.” (R2)

But, just because the manager claims that he/she does not “want to know anything else” about the workers’ experiences does not necessarily mean that the manager will not participate in subtle practices of heteronormativity. As with the previous example, this informal managerial policy also closes off cultural space for discussions of what non-“technical” things that engineers might need (e.g. tolerant workplace climates) to “do their job” successfully.

Outcomes of Depoliticization

The reinforcement of depoliticization through these two processes (depoliticization in interactional norms and in informal workplace policies) may have important consequences: as we know from research on women and minorities in engineering,³ interactional norms in the workplace have consequences for whether under-represented groups feel welcomed and included in their workplace. Interactional norms among colleagues, where informal discussions about LGBT equality are understood as political flash points in violation of these interactional norms of depoliticization, likely marginalize LGBT persons.

Second, the reinforcement of depoliticization through top-down workplace policies effectively *builds depoliticization into* the workplace structure. This may restrict LGBT professionals from feeling as though they can approach their management with problems related to experiences of marginality or homophobia. For example, a chemical engineer in a multinational oil company described when a coalition of LGBT individuals in his workplace presented the Vice President of Human Resources with a letter asking whether they could have sexual orientation added to the benefits clause.

[We] got a letter back from the VP of HR basically telling us that we had overstepped our bounds, that we were restricted from organizing on company property, and it was like, “what the hell is this?” [We responded,] it’s not a union, it’s for a conversation. (R2)

The interviews suggest another way that depoliticization produces problematic outcomes for LGBT individuals. Several respondents noted that their workplaces had a certain (sometimes uneasy) sanitized feeling of “neutrality,” whereby LGBT issues “just don’t come up.” The silencing of LGBT issues through this neutrality makes it difficult for LGBT individuals to be

able to judge the climate. An engineering student described his initial response to his department in this way:

It was a frightening neutral environment when I walked into it, and I had no idea what was going on under that surface. There was just this veneer of, I didn't see any problems, but I didn't see any support, I didn't know what to expect. (R10)

Although the student eventually found his department fairly supportive, the depoliticization of this “frightening neutral environment” made it difficult for him to determine the environment he would need to negotiate, and to identify resources therein.

This student's experience suggests a fourth consequence of depoliticization: if LGBT issues are silenced within engineering departments and workplaces, than it is less likely that allies will make themselves known. The same respondent tells a story of how he and a fellow student approached their department head about gender identity biases, since another student was about to transition genders, and, to their surprise, found that his department head was actually very supportive.

Since then I've found some incredibly strong allies and a lot of very active support...they were just quiet. I had no way of knowing that the support was there until we started taking some risks (R10).

From the perspective of leaders of employee resource groups, having supportive, vocal allies is a vital piece in successful change of workplace culture. The ideology of depoliticization not only appears to silence LGBT individuals' voices about their experiences, but also quiets ally expression of support for LGBT equality.

Implications for Engineering Workplaces and Engineering Education

This is an exploratory study that included respondents from a wide variety of experiences in engineering. Despite this variation, their experiences resonate with ways that the ideology of depoliticization has been theorized elsewhere.⁷ LGBT equality issues are understood as “political” and tangential in engineering departments and workplaces. Instead, engineers are expected to “keep things professional.” The implicit heteronormativity of the deployment of this ideology shows itself in the hypocritical manner with which discussion about heterosexual relationships and families are expected and encouraged.¹ In other words, depoliticization appears to be deployed *selectively* in defense of norms such as heteronormativity within the culture of engineering.

Furthermore, these interviews illustrated two processes through which depoliticization can be reinforced in the workplace, both through norms of interaction between colleagues, and by manager decree. These processes suggest that the ideology of depoliticization is not something that is just learned by neophytes through professional socialization in engineering education and then is brought with them to the workplace, but rather that this ideology may be actively reinforced in day-to-day workplace interactions.

Finally, depoliticization not only appears to silence voices of LGBT individuals, but also silences allies who quietly support of LGBT equality.

More research is needed to understand how the ideology of depoliticization might be undermined. From these respondents, it seems that direct confrontation of the ideology, in the form of bringing up the topic of LGBT equality loudly and often, can force the issue into light.

Engineering education, as the first place where students learn the dominant ideologies within the professional culture,⁷ is an ideal space in which to challenge the ideology of depoliticization. If students can be led to understand that depoliticization is a false ideology that is selectively deployed in defense of existing cultural norms (such as heteronormativity, sexism, etc), then they may be quicker to point out hypocritical deployment of depoliticization in informal workplace interactions and to push back on managerial decrees of neutrality. As the people who will fill the ranks of engineering workers (and managers) in the future, our best hope for undermining existing cultural structures of inequality such as depoliticization is to socialize our students into them in the first place.

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