

Episode 4 — Marco on covering his sexual orientation

Sarah Kaplan: This limited series podcast is from GATE Audio. GATE stands for the Institute for Gender and the Economy at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, and I'm GATE's director. Our goal is to engage current and future leaders in rich conversations around inequities in our society and how we might address them. In this podcast series one of GATE's MBA Fellows, Narjis Premjee, explores the different ways that people cover and uncover their identities at work. Through interviews, first-hand accounts, and rich storytelling, Narjis ventures into the world of covering, why it happens, and what employers can do to make workplaces more inclusive. You'll be moved and inspired by her deeply personal takes on these issues, as was I. So up next, listen to what Narjis has to say.

Narjis: Welcome to covering in the workplace, a podcast from the Institute for Gender and the Economy or GATE. I'm Narjis Premjee, in each episode, I will be interviewing one individual on how they have covered in the workplace or perhaps never felt the need to do so. Today we are joined by Marco Chan, a consultant at Bain company which is a management consulting firm. Marco has degrees in business and public administration and a range of other experiences working for the government of Canada, the province of Quebec, the World Bank, as well as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. His story of covering in the workplace is about his sexual orientation. Marco, thank you for joining us today. Let's start off by hearing a little bit about your story of covering.

Marco: My story of covering I would say is actually many different stories of covering and uncovering. I think for me, the most salient identity that comes to mind on the subject of covering is usually sexual orientation. I identify as a gay man, a queer man. Of course like everyone else I have different identities you know, I'm also a first generation immigrant, I'm also Chinese Canadian and many different things. But I found that for me, the most salient dimension has been that of sexual orientation. So that's what most of my experiences have been around covering and uncovering in the workplace. But I say that there's stories rather than story singular of covering and uncovering because like we were chatting about just a bit before starting it's funny because sexual orientation is one of those identities that may or may not be immediately obvious upon meeting someone right? And so, especially working in consulting, an industry in which I switch colleagues and clients every three to six months, every time I make different decisions about how much of myself and how much of my identity I choose to share with them at what points, and in what ways so for that reason I say there are plural stories of covering and uncovering.

Narjis: Can you describe the process of transition, where you had previously covered maybe in your past life and now you have uncovered. What was that transition period like?

Marco: The transition period of covering and then uncovering was long and uneven. And it depended on the situation like I alluded to a little bit, right. I think the situation, for example, with my parents and my family was very different from that of my high school friends who were the first people I came out to as gay or queer and that was different from my conservative evangelical church in which I grew up, that was different from later my college or undergraduate friends and that was different from later my colleagues, it was different from my home stay family in Venezuela and Brazil where I studied. So it's hard to really pinpoint any particular moment because with each of these different situations and each of these different people, I made different choices about what to share, how to share, in what tone, in what way. So there's not, there was not really a moment, but if I had to summarize that I would say I started coming out to my friends as gay or queer at about age 13, 14. And then it was a slow journey from there until I came out much more broadly, I would say by default, I was out with most people by, 17 or 18, my last year of high school. And from then on, it's just been this, like I said, steady meandering negotiation, renegotiation, depending on the context.

Narjis: Which one would be easier or more difficult, like coming out to colleagues versus family versus friends?

Marco: For me personally, the difficulty of coming out or uncovering my sexual orientation, that correlates with what I perceive to be the risk and there's different dimensions to risk, right. On one hand there's how important is this relationship to me? Because if I'm just going to go grab a coffee I don't really need to come out to the barista. That relationship is not really a long term one. Doesn't really matter to me that's okay. And so that's one measure, whereas obviously on the other end of that spectrum, my parents, that is very important to me, and I have different considerations. I would say the second dimension to this risk is how much I perceive that person, where I perceive them to be on the issue of sexual orientation and gender identity. And so particularly if you think about it like a two by two, like all consultants think, you have, you know low importance in relationship, high importance. You perceive them to be pretty open on LGBTQ+ issues versus less open. And so on the bottom left corner of it's not important. They're likely to be open then, whatever I'll say anything right. But if they're on that upper right of this is really important, and I think there's going to be some challenges with LGBTQ+ issues and them, that's where it gets really, really difficult.

Narjis: Absolutely. I can imagine. I love the matrix. You just described! I can totally visualize that.

Marco: There's always three buckets. There's always two by two.

Narjis: How would you say you have reached a level of comfort with this part of your identity being so open?

Marco: I think for me reaching a certain level of comfort around my LGBTQ+ identity really came very early. It's a bit odd, I guess, because I've spoken with so many friends for whom it was this very long journey of trying to figure out, is this me? What does this mean? What does this mean to my family? What does this mean to community? Whether it's church, whether it's friends, whether it's the policy in the country. For me, it just was really obvious that I couldn't cover forever. The moment I realized at some point at age 13, That this was immutable to me. When I first realized, I was attracted to people of the same sex, I thought, you know, people talk about this like a phase, it'll go away. I thought "I really liked this girl before and she still seems really nice so maybe that will change." But after I had those thoughts for about a year, I realized wow this was a really long phase. I don't think it's going away. And that was actually exactly when I decided to tell someone else for the first time because I just realized this is a part of me.

Narjis: So, I'm curious to know more about the workplace and you mentioned that you have worked in multiple organizations like the World Bank, multiple parts of the Canadian government and now Bain. Can you describe how your experiences have been different in each company or in each country you've worked in?

Marco: The interesting thing about consulting is that it's like working in many different industries at once, right? Because for anywhere from two to six or even seven eight months so for a matter of months you switch projects and it can be radically different in terms of both industry and geography and consequently, the types of people you work with, right? So, while in consulting I've worked with a retail company in the midwest of the US. I've worked with a major research university in the south. I've worked with an automotive company also in the south. I've worked with a non-profit that works on LGBTQ+ related issues in California. So, it really runs the gamut and it's been a range of different experiences. And then you layer on kind of the work that I did across government. I traveled to different parts of Canada, when I worked in the world bank I principally worked with a government in Asia and those were all very different experiences.

Narjis: Do you feel different when you've uncovered at work? Is there like when people know and it's a fact that's out there, do you feel that you work differently in that setting?

Marco: I think often about how, when I was looking at jobs after undergrad, I thought I'm never going to work in a place I choose or how would I put it, I refuse to work in a place where I can't be myself. I

think I was lucky enough that I could make that call for the most part. Not everyone can because of social economic circumstance because of where they are because of the way they have a relationship with their families and communities, but for me, I could. And so, I said, I'm not working anywhere where I can't be myself. And I remember I actually did a summer at Bain as an intern before joining full time when I was still an undergrad. And I performed in drag in front of the entire office, hundreds of people at our annual meeting that was off site. And once I realized I could do that and be comfortable and people were comfortable with me, I thought that's fine.

Narjis: Yeah, that's good. Wow. Like you said, you refuse to work in an organization where you cannot be yourself. So, what have you found in the organizations you've worked for that allow you to be yourself? Is it something about the colleagues? Is it something about the policies?

Marco: The elements of a workplace that have allowed me to be myself have been a patchwork of different things. On one hand, there's the official stuff, right? There's the, if you want to call it hardware, right? There's "what are the benefits that are in place? What are the policies that are in place if something came up?" or "do I have faith in the system that it would stand by me and it would resolve for example, an issue of a discrimination complaint" or if I ever choose to have a family, is the policy structured in such a way that it would allow me to participate as part of a same sex household? So, there's things like that, but I think almost more importantly, is the software side of it. Which is just, what are people doing and that's culture, right? Like what do people do when someone isn't looking? How do people relate to one another in a meeting, as you're waiting for your plane for three hours at the airport, as you're driving three hours to wherever the heck you're going for your project, what are people doing in those moments and how do they relate to one another? I think for me on the first one, I, I we've talked that through. It's fairly obvious in terms of having equal access to resources and non-discrimination, and respect for different identities. That's all written in the policy and that's great, but it's the second side, the software side, where you just end up experiencing a lot more variation because people all bring into the workplace their own, baggage sounds negative, but just their own previous experiences and lenses that they can't help but walk around with. And so you'll just experience a much wider variety.

Narjis: Have you faced any personal or professional challenges? As a result of being out in any of the organizations you work?

Marco: I think actually one clarification I would want to make in terms of having difficulties being out in the workplace or whether or not I feel like there's a culture of support where I work, one clarification is that I don't necessarily expect everyone to be on the same page in regards to LGBTQ+ issues. And certainly, I've worked in places where people have had different opinions about different parts of LGBTQ+ issues that matter to me and to my community, right? I've had colleagues, I've had clients that have different stances on same sex unions and marriages, I've had colleagues with different stances about how they would react if their own child came out as LGBTQ+ to them. And my point is, I don't necessarily need them to agree with me on every word. It's more a combination of if there were something adverse that were to happen, if there were hardship, do I believe that the company, do I believe that the leadership, do I believe that my peers would have my back? So let's say a client makes a series of homophobic or transphobic remarks. Do I believe that my colleagues have my back if I wanted to do something about it? It's also a matter of sometimes when there are disagreements about issues, do we have enough trust? Is there enough of a safe space for us to really have those difficult conversations? So, if my colleague has made a comment about families and how they would define a family, would I feel comfortable? Am I in a place where I feel comfortable approaching them about that and having a conversation, even if I know we don't leave that conversation necessarily with the same answer. I think for me support and my comfort in being out and being open and being myself is predicated on those different things. More specifically to your question of whether I've experienced hardship as a result of coming out or not, I would say actually I've been incredibly lucky in that I've never perceived anything to explicitly happen that was negative as a result of someone finding out that I was a gay man or a queer man. But it's always hard to tell because that's the thing about systemic issues, right? It's rarely something that personal or that explicit or that obvious. And so while nothing's happened where, you know, I've, again, lucky enough, I've never gotten fired based on

my sexual orientation or identity although that shouldn't have to be lucky that just should be. Let me rephrase that, I think I'm just reflecting on the fact that when you do research and when there are surveys, even in Canada, about whether or not people have faced harassment or discrimination, or even fired from their workplace as a result of their LGBTQ+ identity. The answer that we often get back is yes. We have single digit percentages of people that say yes to these different questions. So I'm just reflecting. I am fortunate in that I have not experienced it that way, myself and at the same time, there are moments where I reflect and I think, "huh, they didn't say it was because I was gay and they may not think this because explicitly in their minds, because you know, consciously because I'm gay." But when I often get feedback, like "you need to be more assertive" I think anyone who's known me is quite aware that I have a lot of opinions. I do not hold back on many of my opinions. And so to constantly get the feedback that I need to have more presence, need to be more assertive, I need to be more confident, I think what if that is a reading of different identities that I hold or the ways that, that I express myself, that just don't necessarily fit a traditional long standing model of what it means to speak with a powerful and often masculine voice cause man, I assert a lot of opinions.

Narjis: No, that is very interesting. So for those of the people out there who might be considering uncovering specifically with regards to sexual orientation what advice do you have for them?

Marco: My advice for people that are thinking about uncovering in the workplace in regard in particular to sexual orientation is I think actually something that they intuitively know really well, which is just reading the situation and thinking strategically about what you want in that environment. And it sounds really dry, and I wish I could say everyone should just be out and throw glitter everywhere and it's all going to be fabulous and it's all going to be great. The reality is it's not, right? The reality is, like I said, there are people that are still fired from their jobs because of their LGBTQ+ identity. There are, I forget the exact number today, but there are upwards of close to 30 states in the US where you can be fired based on your sexual orientation and gender identity and have no legal recourse. And so, in that world, and in a world where I've walked down the streets in major cities like Washington DC and been pushed and called homophobic names in places where you know people will roll down the car window and yell epithets. I realize we're not in a perfect world and so we just have to make do .and part of making do is, like I said, thinking about what is the nature of this interaction? What is the nature of this relationship? How open do you think, or what do you think the possible responses would be? And depending on the response, what is it that you can or cannot do? Those are all, I think legitimate questions to think about as you decide to cover on or uncover. And like I said, not every situation you need to do that, right? Like I've been in a cafeteria in a client site where I worked and it was clear to me that one of the cashiers was trying to figure out whether I was gay or not and you know, in that case, it doesn't matter right? I don't really care. So, I'm not sitting there asking myself four or five deep questions all the time. But certainly, if I'm there, you know, overall, at that client site, I was there for about five months and I was on a pretty high visibility project where I met with senior leaders and in that way, I did think about "What do I want to share? How do I imagine my relationships with these people and how important is that? How long am I here for? What am I trying to do? What do I need in terms of my own comfort and authenticity for me to do what I'm trying to do?"

Narjis: So, switching topics a little bit, I know you mentioned you were also Chinese Canadian. Is there any aspect of that you've covered in the workplace?

Marco: In terms of covering other identities like ethnicity like being Chinese Canadian I haven't thought about that as much because maybe subconsciously I just perceive that to be generally less of an issue. It's also maybe because it's something that doesn't come up where I don't make as active of a decision in my head about it, right? Because, like I said, whether or not I'm gay, sometimes it's obvious sometimes it's not obvious. It depends on how I choose to act but it's not something that people immediately know, whereas my ethnicity it's, it's clear. I'm pretty brown. I remember actually one time I started work on a new project with new clients whom I didn't know and I walk into the room with another colleague of mine who's actually German so he's white but has a strong German accent and this client said, this was in north America, they said, "Why are they sending us all the foreigners now?" and I thought, well, I don't, I don't really have an accent. As far as I'm aware like, my English is pretty good and I realized, "oh yeah, I'm brown. That's what she meant." And so I guess sometimes I

don't think about it in the same way because it's not something I actively do or don't do as much. Although there's certainly been situations where, for example, recently I've been working on a pretty remote client location so it's pretty rural. It's pretty far from major cities and there just aren't a lot of other people of color. There just, aren't a lot of visible minorities. And so, I'm a little more conscious with little things. I don't think there's much consequence, but it does make me a little bit more self-aware when or self-conscious when, you know the other day I had a cold I used traditional Chinese medicine, so herbs. And so I had all these little satchels of herbs that just look like these brown things I'm dumping into a glass and it smells really bitter and it smells kind of funny every time I noticed people that I didn't really know walk by I did kind of hover over my stuff a lot more cause I was just like "oh, I don't, I don't really want to have a long conversation right now about what these 12 herbs are and why I'm pouring these things into a cup and blah".

Narjis: No, I love that. Like that's what I feel, like when you can't even notice, the fact that you were a foreigner, I felt like that's when you truly feel like you're yourself and when you don't notice these things is, I feel it's like the best thing ever.

Marco: Until the moments when you realize it is a thing, right? Like she did think probably not based on my English that I was foreign. I've had another situation. This was not at work, but I had a home stay when I lived in Nova Scotia for a short time as part of a government program. And the homestay family had children. One of their children was about, he was nine years old at the time and he asked, it was so odd, he just came up to me in the kitchen one day and asked, "where were you born?" And I had no idea where the question came from. I forgot what we were even talking about before that. But he asked at some point, "where are you born?" And I said, just looking at him, holding my toast "I was born in China, but I grew up here in Canada." So he said, "oh, you're Chinese." I said, "I am Chinese and I'm Canadian" and he said, "well, you can't be Canadian. You're Chinese." And it just it's, you know, you don't notice, and you don't remember it as much until you get these moments where things like that happen. And you're like, oh other people have different ideas of who I am and who I'm not, it it's an interesting point, right? Because what makes for comfort and what makes for authenticity can be a number of things. Sometimes it's feeling like you're just the same. Sometimes it, it can be assimilation to put it in one word. Other times it can be maybe something a little bit more exuberant, right? Something that I can bring, something that I know is different, that I know is distinct, that I know these other people may not have as much experience or, or contact with, but that they feel comfortable letting me tell my story and bringing my difference and indulging in celebrating that with me. So, you know, I know most of my non-LGBTQ+ friends are not nearly as informed or interested about drag culture. That's okay. I think one of the more exciting and fun and colorful moments of life is when I can bring some of those interests of mine. And I recognize drag culture has different connotations and issues and possible problematics in the queer community. So, I'll put that there, but it is something that I'm quite interested in. And so, when I can bring that to different friend groups of mine and not just my queer. peers That's one of my signs of like, oh, I feel included, and I feel like I belong. Not because I feel the exact same as you, but because I know I bring something slightly different to the table and we can all share it together and we can all indulge and learn together.

Narjis: Absolutely. We actually had a drag show at Rotman! I really hope you know the story you shared with us helps people out there listening to be able to be themselves at work as well. Thank you so much for being here and I appreciate your time.

Marco: Oh, it's a big pleasure. It's a really important conversation. So, I'm glad you're pushing it along.

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