LGB Issues in the Workplace 101

We within the LGBT SIOP committee want to make a difference within the field of industrial-organizational psychology and within SIOP by increasing exposure to the experiences of sexual orientation and gender identity minorities within the realms of research and practice. We believe that one method by which this can occur is through making regular, novel contributions to the literature, by filling preexisting gaps may leave LGBT individuals overlooked. However, we realize that it is also important to educate researchers and practitioners who might not be familiar with the basic issues that LGBT people face.

Educating I-O psychologists on the issues facing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people is of the utmost importance to achieving equality and diversity in the workplace. The need for improved knowledge and understanding of the challenges that LGBT individuals face at work becomes ever more apparent as LGBT rights (or lack thereof) continue to play an ever-pivotal role within current U.S. politics. For instance, it was only with last year’s 5-to-4 ruling U.S. Supreme Court ruling that same-sex couples could get married with federal recognition (Obergefell v. Hodges, 2015), thus addressing a multiple decades-long fight for equitable benefits within the workplace (see Bell, Özbilgin, Beauregard, & Sürgevil, 2011; Raeburn, 2004).

In this first part of a two-part series, we will provide TIP readers with the knowledge necessary to have a general understanding of the issues facing lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people within the workplace. As transgender and genderqueer/nonbinary persons face unique issues and dilemmas from those faced by sexual orientation minorities (e.g., Clarke, Ellis, Peel, & Riggs, 2010), our next article will provide insight into their experiences. In this article, we first provide an understanding of what sexual orientation is and what it means to be a sexual orientation minority. We then explain common challenges LGB individuals face within the workplace, including an in-depth look into wage discrimination that LGB people uniquely face. Finally, we address the legal battles LGB people still grapple with within the United States and propose how we as industrial-organizational psychologists and members of SIOP can help.
Sexual Orientation and Sexual Orientation Minorities

Before delving into the discussion on common workplace issues and concerns for members of this community, we first need to be clear about what some of the terms mean. Identity groups derive from social identity theory and refer to the collectivities people use to categorize themselves and others (Konrad, 2003). Sexual identity is unique in that membership in this group can be concealed to various degrees, unlike members of other groups, which possess characteristics that cannot be hidden from others such as race, age, gender, and so forth (Chrobot-Mason, Button, & DiClementi, 2001). Sexual identity is an invisible social identity (Clair, Beatty, & Maclean, 2005), which could also describe characteristics like religion, national origin, illness, and social group membership.

According to the American Psychological Association (2008), sexual orientation refers to romantic, emotional, or sexual attraction to other people. Sexual orientation refers to “an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person’s sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions” (p. 1). This is often labeled based on the relationship between a person and the people they are attracted to and is defined by the gender identity of both people. For example, a woman who is primarily attracted to other women is a lesbian (L), a man primarily attracted to other men is gay (G), and a woman or man that is attracted to both women and men is bisexual (B).

In general, negative social attitudes toward LGB individuals are referred to as homophobia. The term heterosexism, which refers to the presence of discriminatory policies and hiring and promotion procedures (Lyons, Brenner, & Fassinger, 2005), is regarded as a more appropriate concept (Waldo, 1999). The distinction is important as heterosexism focuses on the normalizing and privileging of heterosexuality and calls attention to the prejudice faced by LGB people.

Invisible Identities and Workplace Discrimination for LGB Individuals

Between 25% and 66% of LGB employees are estimated to have experienced sexual orientation discrimination at work (Croteau, 1996). Ragins and Cornwell (2001) found within a sample of gay and lesbian professionals that one-third were verbally or physically harassed at work and 12% had left a previous job because of discrimination. In addition, 37% experienced discrimination merely because they were suspected to be gay or lesbian. However, these forms of discrimination can be subtle. A study by Hebl, Foster, Mannix, and Dovidio (2002) found that job applicants who were thought to be gay, although not subject to greater direct discrimination, were treated with greater indirect discrimination than their assumed heterosexual counterparts through the manager’s use of more verbally negative language, fewer total words, and by spending less time with candidates in general. Overall, the persistence of LGB
discrimination may be due to continued social stigma associated with being gay, resulting in fear, ostracism, disregard, or even disgust toward LGB individuals at work (Embrick, Walther, & Wickens, 2007).

LGB employees may be aware of the risk for discrimination and decide to remain closeted in order to avoid backlash. Croteau (1996) found fear of coming out was a major concern for LGB employees because the more “out” the employee, the more likely they were to experience discrimination at work. In the same vein, Ragins, Singh, and Cornwell (2007) found that fear of disclosure was positively related to psychological strain for LGB employees and negatively related to attitudes, work environment, and career outcomes. On the other hand, actual disclosure was unrelated to these variables. Thus, gay individuals are aware of the inherent risk in revealing their true identity, encouraging a constant state of identity “self-policing” at work, which may be stressful for LGB individuals to endure (Ragins, 2008).

The experience of invisibility and the impossibility of truly “being” at work may be both mentally and physically harmful for LGB individuals (McDermott, 2006). For example, Ellis and Riggle (1996) found that degree of openness at work was positively related to job satisfaction but negatively related to satisfaction with pay and objective measures of salary. In addition, even in progressive workplaces, LGB individuals may feel that they need to follow a particular script in order to “properly” portray their LGB identity (Williams, Giuffre, & Dellinger, 2009). Finally, even if individuals are out in the workplace and adhere to societal prescriptions for gay performance, they may need to work harder than their heterosexual counterparts in order to demonstrate their worth. For example, Miller, Forest, and Jurik (2003) found in a qualitative study of LGB police officers that many reported feeling the need to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to ensure they would be viewed as equal. Sexuality-based discrimination continues to have a negative effect on LGB employees, even in the face of progressive attempts to create fair and equal workplaces for LGB employees and even when employees are performing as well or better than their counterparts.

Problems With Compensation Within the LGB Community

The relationship between any demographic characteristics, including membership in LGB communities, and compensation gets complicated quickly due to definitional issues, correlated predictors, and the absence of experimental/quasi-experimental fixed effect research designs. Definitional issues become clear in deciding whether “compensation” is operationalized as average annual earnings or average hourly wages. For example, the widely reported “gender wage gap” shows average female annual earnings ranging from 78-82% of male earnings, yet this gap shrinks to 87% for average hourly wages. Note, these statistics vary geographically too – Davis (2012) found gender wage gaps varied from 66.7% in Wyoming to 90% in Washington, D.C. Variation in sample composition and “control” variables (e.g., job/career tenure) explained all but 5-7% of the
gender wage gap in a comprehensive Department of Labor report (CONSAD, 2009). One common conclusion is that overt gender discrimination only contributes 5-7% of the gender wage gap. Unfortunately, one could just as easily frame the results in terms of the incremental contribution variables like job tenure make after “controlling” for gender differences. If overt gender discrimination causes women to receive lower wages, career/job tenure, job access, and so on, a more appropriate interpretation is that gender discrimination caused a gender wage gap of at least 5-7% and at most ~20%.

Congress has annually failed to pass the Employment Non-Discrimination Act since it was first introduced in 1994, precluding sexual orientation minorities the protection that other groups receive from overt employment discrimination under the 1963 Equal Pay Act and 1964 Civil Rights Act. Regardless of whether the absence of federal legislation makes overt sexual orientation discrimination more likely than gender discrimination, similar causal ambiguity occurs when examining compensation effects. Sexual orientation earnings data were first systematically reported by Badgett (1995)—BLS and the Census Bureau do not currently track earnings for the LGB communities. With one notable exception, Klawitter’s (2015) meta-analysis of 31 studies in this literature since 1995 yielded insights comparable to those found for gender wage differences reported in the CONSAD report—generally speaking, LGB individuals earn less than their heterosexual counterparts. Lesbians remain an unexplained exception to this trend—although gay men earn 11% less, lesbians enjoy a 9% income advantage relative to heterosexual women.

Relatively little attention has been paid to parsing the relative contributions of causal candidates for these gaps, as most attention has focused on the 9% lesbian income advantage. The gay wage gap may simply be due to differential overt discrimination, as Herek (2000) found gay men were generally viewed less favorably than lesbian women. Unfortunately, the vast majority of studies examining “wage gaps” use random effects research designs that preclude strong insights into the relative importance of highly correlated causal antecedents. Grams and Schwab (1984) is one possible exception, where an experimental fixed effect research design showed minimal effects of job gender dominance in job evaluation decisions. Applied psychology has a long tradition of examining the effects of demographic variables on performance evaluations in lab settings (e.g., Hamner, Kim, Baird, & Bigoness, 1974). Insight into the relative contributions made by members of the LGB community combined with other information about personnel selection, performance appraisal, initial wage offers, and merit pay increases will occur when LGB status becomes an independent variable in replications and extensions of some of the more creative lab studies done by applied psychologists.

**Discussion**

LGB people face unique experiences within professional, organizational settings by the sheer fact that they possess a nonheterosexual identity. Evidence shows these
individuals face unique forms of discrimination in the workplace, both through formal and informal means. Despite this, steps can be made to reduce these issues, such as having employee nondiscrimination policies that include sexual orientation, educating employees regarding LGB diversity issues, and more.

Nonetheless, at the time of this column being written, there exists no federal law that prohibits employment discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation (Workplace Fairness, n.d.). Despite the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission ruling that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Baldwin v. Department of Transportation, 2015) should be considered sex discrimination, people can be legally discriminated against on the basis of their sexual orientation in 28 states (Workplace Fairness, n.d.).

Industrial-organizational psychologists, either as individuals or within the context of SIOP, can help address the problems that sexual orientation minorities face. By being educated on sexual orientation and LGB issues, we can explore opportunities for individual and organizational change that may uniquely impact these populations where once they were overlooked in the literature. Within professional settings, industrial-organizational psychologists can advocate on behalf of LGB people so that increasing numbers of employers might have LGB supportive workplace climates while also developing evidence-based guides on how best to do so. We as members of SIOP can work together through activism and advocacy to improve management policies, practices, and state and federal laws by educating ourselves on the existing LGB workplace research and by providing our expertise on these issues as they pertain to discrimination, inclusivity, and more.

References


Baldwin v. Department of Transportation, EEOC Appeal No. 120133080 (July 15, 2015)


Full registrants of the conference may attend any of the events below for no additional charge, except for where noted. Guests may attend general conference receptions with an additional fee. For more info, please visit www.siop.org/conference.

**Wednesday, April 13, 2016**

7:15am – 10:30am Preconference Workshop and Consortia Registration Open (HA)
8:00am – 5:00pm Consortia General and Breakout Sessions (Doctoral*, Masters*, & Junior Faculty) $ (HA)
8:30am – 7:30pm Preconference Workshops and Reception $ (HA)
12:00pm – 4:00pm Exhibitor Set-Up (CC)
12:00pm – 8:00pm General Conference Registration Open (CC)
3:00pm – 5:00pm Placement Center Open $ (HA)
5:00pm – 6:00pm Newcomer Reception (HA)
6:00pm – 8:00pm Welcome Reception, presented by CEB (HA)
8:00pm – 10:00pm SIOP Foundation Awards Presentation and Dessert Reception, presented by CEB * (HA)

**Thursday, April 14, 2016**

7:00am – 8:30am Fellows Breakfast* (HA)
7:30am – 8:30am Continental Breakfast, presented by Qualtrics (HA)
7:30am – 6:00pm Registration Open (CC)
8:00am – 3:00pm Placement Center Open $ (HA)
**8:30am – 10:00am Opening Plenary Session (HA)**
10:00am – 10:30am Coffee Break (CC)
10:00am – 12:30pm Placement Center Open Houses $ (HA)
10:00am – 5:30pm Exhibit Hall Open (CC)
**10:30am – 6:00pm Continuous, Concurrent Conference Sessions (CC)**
10:30am – 6:00pm Theme Track (CC)
11:30am – 1:00pm Concession lunches available for purchase (CC)
3:00pm – 3:30pm Coffee Break (CC)
6:00pm – 7:00pm Committee on Ethnic Minority Affairs Social Hour (HA)
6:00pm – 7:00pm International Reception (HA)
6:00pm – 8:00pm Networking Reception & Top Poster Display, presented by Pearson VUE (HA)

**Friday, April 15, 2016**

7:30am – 8:30am Continental Breakfast, presented by Qualtrics (HA)
8:00am – 5:00pm Registration Open (CC)
8:00am – 5:30pm Placement Center Open $ (HA)
8:00am – 6:00pm Continuous, Concurrent Conference Sessions (CC)
8:00am – 6:00pm Friday Seminars $ (CC)
8:30am – 5:30pm Exhibit Hall Open (CC)
10:00am – 10:30am Coffee Break (CC)
11:30am – 1:00pm Concession lunches available for purchase (CC)
3:00pm – 3:30pm Coffee Break (CC)
5:00pm – 6:30pm Speed Mentoring - Practitioner and Science Funding (HA)
5:30pm – 7:30pm Exhibitor Tear-Down (Note: Exhibit Hall is not open on Saturday) (CC)
6:00pm – 7:00pm Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Committee and Allies Social Hour (HA)

**Saturday, April 16, 2016**

7:00am Frank Landy 5K Fun Run, presented by EB Jacobs and SHAKER $ (begins/ends at HA)
7:30am – 8:30am Continental Breakfast, presented by Qualtrics (HA)
8:00am – 12:00pm Placement Center Open $ (HA)
8:00am – 3:00pm Registration Open (CC)
8:00am – 4:30pm Continuous, Concurrent Conference Sessions (CC)
10:00am – 10:30am Coffee Break, presented by IBM Kenexa (CC)
3:00pm – 3:30pm Coffee Break, presented by Engage2Excel, Inc. (CC)
**4:30pm – 5:30pm Closing Plenary Session, featuring Keynote Address by Laszlo Bock (HA)**
6:00pm – 8:00pm Closing Reception (HA)

**Sunday, April 17, 2016**

9:30am – 5:30pm Temecula Wine Tour $ (departs from/returns to HA)