



Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal

Between the corporation and the closet: ethically researching LGBTQ+ identities in the workplace
Jaigris Hodson, Samantha Jackson, Wendy Cukier, Mark Holmes,

Article information:

To cite this document:

Jaigris Hodson, Samantha Jackson, Wendy Cukier, Mark Holmes, "Between the corporation and the closet: ethically researching LGBTQ+ identities in the workplace", Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal, <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-04-2017-0093>

Permanent link to this document:

<https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-04-2017-0093>

Downloaded on: 24 March 2018, At: 08:02 (PT)

References: this document contains references to 0 other documents.

To copy this document: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 2 times since 2018*

**OXFORD
BROOKES**

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by emerald-srm:382580 []

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

Between the Corporation and the Closet: Ethically Researching LGBTQ+ Identities in the Workplace

Purpose – This paper engages the ecological model as a conceptual tool to examine the ethics of conducting research on LGBTQ+ individuals in the workplace. In particular, it focuses on outness and the act of outing in research.

Design/methodology/approach – Established methodologies for studying LGBTQ+ persons in the workplace are examined using a critical outness lens. The ecological model is used to identify a critical path forward for researchers working with LGBTQ+ participants and to improve LGBTQ+ workplace experiences more broadly.

Findings – The tension between the ethics of coming out of the closet and the ethics of outing someone for the greater good is problematized. It suggests that organizational and diversity scholars approach research methods with an understanding of the role played by the body and sexuality in LGBTQ+ workplace research.

Practical implications – Researchers should recognize that workers may have varying degrees of outness within their organization and/or across their private and public lives.

Originality/value – Research on LGBTQ+ persons in the workplace is limited, and research examining the ethics of relevant methods is scarcer still. This paper begins a discussion on how researchers can trouble current hegemonic approaches to LGBTQ+-centered research in organizations.

Keywords – LGBTQ+, Ecological Model, Outness, Ethics

Introduction: Sex at Work

Life for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and/or Two-Spirited (LGBTQ+¹) people is often uniquely defined by the conflicting pressures to be open and “out” yet also discrete about one’s romantic and sexual life, leading many individuals to remain behind closet doors. Frequently, the ‘closet’ is used as a metaphor for a person’s ability to hide their non-normative sexuality from others, and as such, often serves to empower sexual and gendered minority groups by providing a psychologically and emotionally safe space (Sedgwick, 1990). Nowhere is this tension between being “out” about one’s personal life yet discrete about one’s sexuality more keenly felt than in the workplace. LGBTQ+ individuals often experience a conflicting desire to be open about their personal lives in order to, for example, feel able to speak authentically about their lives, or to feel comfortable bringing their partner to work functions (Eliason et al., 2011; King and Biro, 2006). Yet, individuals also understand that being out may expose them to a range of dangerous consequences, including the risk of being fired from their jobs, bullying, lack of ability to travel, even, in some extreme cases, death (Human Rights Campaign, 2017). The often fraught decision about whether to out oneself at work can be especially difficult for LGBTQ+ community members who are out in their personal lives, but may not want to out themselves at work out of fear of becoming a poster child for LGBTQ+ issues in the workplace.

In studying workplace diversity with respect to the LGBTQ+ community in some countries around the world, and some US states, researchers are thus faced with a

¹ “LGBTQ+” is commonly used “as an umbrella term to encompass a broad spectrum of identities related to gender and attraction”, including but not limiting to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and/or two-spirited persons (Egale, 2017: 1).

profound ethical challenge. In navigating the complicated minefield of researching LGBTQ+ outness within organizations, researchers must cultivate an awareness of ethical research practice generally, and as it relates to building consciousness of the specific ethics related to sexuality and sexual identity, and the insider/outsider status related to LGBTQ+ individuals in their broader communities (Anonymous). However, with the many different and competing ethical frameworks to be aware of and draw from, research on the LGBTQ+ community becomes complicated. Methodologies most often rely on strategies such as self-reporting and then counting but though these approaches are most certainly ethical, they often fail to produce results that reflect the true diversity of the LGBTQ+ community. Furthermore, a researcher who is not themselves part of the community may face an ethical dilemma in asking, as an outsider, a member of a marginalized or threatened LGBTQ+ community to out themselves. Finally, as discussed in Bettinger (2010), labels in any community are highly problematic, as they inscribe a particular subjectivity over others thus constructing, and sometimes marginalizing individuals. Taking this into consideration, LGBTQ+ research which counts and in doing so, names or categorizes individuals even if using self-reported labels, may be inadvertently creating a subjectivity for research subjects that does not actually reflect the full rainbow of LGBTQ+ experiences or subjectivities. This in turn aids in the further marginalization of the community, and discounts experiences that fall outside of the easy-to-categorize; for example, the range of different trans, gender queer, or a-gender identities; those people who identify as lesbian or gay but have sexual encounters outside of their preferred gender; or, those who are pan or a-sexual and are not often included when researchers consider LGBTQ+ experience.

For this reason, this article seeks to begin a discussion on how we can trouble current hegemonic approaches focused on counting and labelling to LGBTQ+-centered research in organizations. It begins with an overview of current organizational research involving the LGBTQ+ community, and a discussion of how concern regarding ethical research has limited the scope and depth of available data about LGBTQ+ workers. Next, it provides an examination of the challenges of research ethics in broad terms. Following this, this paper proposes the ecological model as a conceptual tool to assist researchers in understanding the bleed between colors of the LGBTQ+ rainbow, and how individuals may choose to present and label themselves differently in different contexts. This understanding can help encourage researchers to move beyond counting instances of self-disclosure to adopting more holistic and creative methods to overcome the ethical dilemmas that arise when individuals are asked to report identities in the workplace. It concludes by examining the ecological model's role in informing a theory of change.

Research Methods Used to Examine the Experience of the LGBTQ+ Community in Organizations

This section provides an overview of current workplace studies involving LGBTQ+ individuals within North America and Europe in order to examine how previous research has approached the question of ethics relative to the unique needs of this population. This body of research provides a snapshot of how identifying as LGBTQ+ at work can impact LGBTQ+ individuals' careers, while also highlighting the ways that organizations can create productive relationships with their LGBTQ+ workforce (Belkin and McNichol, 2002; Brooks and Colvin, 2009; Brooks and Edwards, 2009; Kaplan, 2006; King, Reilly

and Hebl, 2008; Wright, 2010, Ozturk and Tatli, 2015; Wicks, 2017). This section will explore these methods and approaches in order to support the claim that current inquiries into LGBTQ+ experiences in the workplace are unable to provide a comprehensive picture due to the complex ethical framework implicit in the study of sexuality and gender, particularly as it applies to the work environment.

To Be (Out) or Not to Be: An ethical perspective.

While it is unethical to force any individual out of the closet, the ethics of “outness” in the LGBTQ+ community are complex, specifically because the act of coming out can be, in itself, an act of naming and labelling, creating a non-normative sexual or gendered subjectivity that necessitates a new performance of self (Foucault, 1979; Butler, 1990). In other words, when an LGBTQ+ person comes out in an environment like the workplace, they have made a choice to identify with a particular label, and they are then required to continue to out themselves multiple times for the rest of their lives, whenever they are placed in a situation with new people (Guittar and Rayburn, 2015).

When members of the LGBTQ+ community are out socially, but not out in the workplace, this liminal identification can create deep emotional and psychological challenges, both for the individuals in question and also for other members of the LGBTQ+ community. Possible consequences of being in-between the closet and the outside world include a possible fragmentation of self or subjectivity, an inadvertent reinforcing of negative stereotypes about the LGBTQ+ community and lack of positive role models for the younger LGBTQ+ workforce, and even burnout (Sandfort et. al.,

2006). Certainly, many experience negative consequences associated with being out at work, including discrimination but also perceived difficulty identifying when discrimination occurs, including when challenges can be linked to their LGBTQ+ identity (Gates, 2014; Wicks, 2017). However, as Colgan et al. (2008) have discovered, disclosing one's LGBTQ+ identity "could contribute to a sense of integrity and wholeness that could lessen the impact of institutional homophobia (p. 38). This presents a compelling ethical case for advancing LGBTQ+ outness and diversity in the workplace, since "seeing is the origin of knowing" (Scott, 1988). An empowered stand-up-and-be-counted type of outing of oneself could have implications outside of LGBTQ+ studies or LGBTQ+ workers (Köllen, 2016). For example, Rasmussen (2004) explains that in educational workplaces, teachers' self-outing can be used as a tool to disassemble taboos around what is pedagogically appropriate and acceptable.

With the strong community-based and personal reasons that favour coming out, the question remains, why is outing even an issue at all? Partly, this is because outing achieves just that – it takes a person from an insider member of a work community, or 'one of us', and positions them suddenly not only outside the closet, but outside the norm – as 'other'. This often abrupt transition from insider to outsider can have profound emotional, social, psychological, and professional consequences for LGBTQ+ individuals, and must be considered by those undertaking research. Furthermore, the language around coming out, and particularly the reliance on naming or labels (Bettinger, 2010) may be problematic for many people on the sexuality or gender identity spectrum because it may not encompass their actual lived experience. Instead, identities need to be

considered in an intersectional way, with LGBTQ+ identification being only part of a person's experience, and not a defining feature.

The Unique Challenges Faced By LGBTQ+ Individuals in the Workplace

Individuals perceive numerous reasons to remain in 'the closet'. Foremost are concerns relating to safety, with individuals citing an absence of protection laws or lax workplace governance towards anti-discrimination and/or harassment that cause individuals to question their ability to come out. For example, 29 US states are still silent regarding workplace discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals, and 28 states do not provide protection against workplace discrimination on gender identity (Movement Advancement Project, 2017). Even in countries with enforced anti-discrimination laws, individuals may not want to come out for a variety of reasons, including not wanting to become a political figurehead for the cause of diversity in the workplace, out of concern that they may be recognized for their sexual orientation rather than their accomplishments, or fear of mistreatment from homophobic managers or employees (Fassinger *et al.*, 2010). For members of the trans or gender queer community, the challenges faced at work become even more complex. Transgender individuals not only have less control over when they can come out to colleagues, but face potential discrimination over health care, bathroom use, and dress code, each of which can become more of an issue throughout a transition period that may last a long time (Ozturk and Talti, 2015). In both the case of LGB and T individuals, a lack of organization or community support is a huge barrier to the ability to bring one's whole self to work, but this issue is not as simple as claiming an identity on the LGBTQ+ spectrum for one's own.

Any diversity researcher must recognize that LGBTQ+ identification is only one piece of the complex identity puzzle. As such, in singling out sexual identity, researchers risk inadvertently denying other identifications which LGBTQ+ individuals feel are important to their experience of the workplace, such as identification with other under-represented groups, as an expert in their field, a mother, or even just ‘one of the gang’ (de Lauretis, 1987; Martin, 1991; Kainer, 2016). True equality cannot be reached until we have a better understanding of the nature of sexually diverse groups in the workplace; however, researchers need to meet the LGBTQ+ community on their own terms and find a way to work towards an ethical research solution that both honors individual choice and the needs of the community at large.

Methodological challenges of LBGTQ research

As one’s social acceptance in an organization is often tied to career aspirations and success, studies involving under-represented populations in socially vulnerable positions can be uniquely challenging from the perspective of ethics. This is especially true for LGBTQ+ individuals who perceive non-heteronormative sexualities or gender identities as contentious within their organization, such that speaking about their sexuality may result in limited opportunities for promotion, feelings of social rejection, and in extreme cases, can cost them their job - a situation that still exists in many US states and in many countries around the world (Warbelow and Diaz, 2017).

Unlike many other under-represented populations, LGBTQ+ individuals are perceived as able to keep their minority status invisible, and to remain closeted if they so choose (Colgan et. al., 2008), except in the case of trans- or gender-queer individuals who may be forced to come out during their transition (Ozurk and Tatli, 2016) or may be

inadvertently outed by references to previous names or personal identifiers (Marvell et al., 2017). For this reason, researchers often seek to adopt strategies that allow them to draw from an LGBTQ+ population at work while trying to avoid unintentionally outing individuals to colleagues and superiors. For example, Guittar and Rayburn (2016) interviewed 30 individuals about their experience coming out in various contexts throughout their lives. Connell (2010) conducted in-depth interviews with 19 transgender persons about their experiences of gender in the workplace. The author chose the in-depth interview approach rather than an ethnographic account of the transgendered people at work because she experienced “ethical concerns about drawing unwanted attention to transgendered employees by conducting on-the-job observations” (p. 36). Similarly avoiding the problem of outing those who do not wish to be outed, Bowring and Brewis (2009) examined the work experiences of 16 lesbian and gay Canadian workers employed in public and private organizations in Ottawa, Vancouver, and Montreal – all volunteers from major cities. Snowball sampling was used in their study to protect the safety of the participants. While this technique is ethically sound, it is methodologically problematic as it does not reflect a diverse or even a random sample. Hence, it is difficult to make claims from this research about trends occurring in the broader LGBTQ+ population.

Baillie (2010) advocates a methodology centered on self-reporting by LGBT employees. This approach can be beneficial to organizations²; however, it relies on

² The business case for diversity is routinely applied to LGBTQ+ communities, espousing the benefits to organizations’ bottom line to creating inclusive workplaces where employees bring their ‘whole selves’ to work (e.g., Özbilgin and Tatli, 2011); this approach has been heavily critiqued (e.g., Ahonen et al., 2014).

employees feeling safe enough to opt-in to self-identifying at work. This method also does not address the idea that sexuality and work are two parts of life that should not come together. Furthermore, asking LGBTQ+ employees to self-report may be met with some resistance, as the notion that LGBTQ+ individuals are the only minority group in the workplace that must discuss their sex lives may be seen by some as inappropriate or blatantly unfair (Berlant and Warner, 1998).

Bettinger (2010) highlights the fact that many people in the LGBTQ+ community are justifiably suspicious of research, since research has in the past labelled their sexuality and/or gender identity as a sickness or something to be fixed. They recommend that extra care be taken with LGBTQ+ populations, and suggest that methods used when conducting research in this community must remain flexible rather than predetermined. Rejecting traditional research hierarchies must be followed by adopting methods that give voice to the community and taking action on any information gained in the research process; the authors remind readers that “[a]s is the case with other complex individual and social characteristics and attributes, incorporating a non-normative sexual identity is multi-determined and multifaceted thereby indicating a need for various layers of research and understanding” (2010 np).

Research Ethics and the LGBTQ+ Community

This section explores the question of research ethics to consider the ways researchers can most ethically consider the needs of both the LGBTQ+ individual and the wider community/workplaces of which they are a part. Drawing from ethical questions

In response, Rhodes (2017) argues that while critiques of the business case are warranted, they often fail to acknowledge its beneficial impact on LGBTQ+'s lived experiences. .

arising with Socrates, Williams (2006) suggests that ethics arise out of an obligation to moral behavior. In other words, ethics is Socrates' question, "how should one live?", where "should" is an important component of the question. Similarly, Starratt (2003) draws from a long line of philosophy on ethics, beginning with the Greeks. The author suggests "that ethical people share three 'foundational' qualities – autonomy, connectedness, and transcendence" (p. 229). Autonomy is, the ability to make decisions independently so that one cannot be swayed towards unethical behavior at the whims of another. Connectedness refers to an individual's responsibility in caring for others, and transcendence relates to the ability of a person to move beyond their own self-interest in order to take an ethical approach.

Embodied Ethics

When speaking of sex, sexuality and gender, ethics becomes more complex since an ethics of the body involves speaking for the body which is incapable of speaking for itself (Frank, 1995). In this case, the question of who can speak for the body and with what language becomes increasingly important. The discourses we use to describe the body also encode specific subjectivities onto that body (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 2003; Bettinger, 2010), and as such, the LGBTQ+ body is at the centre of a contested discursive space. Herein lies the ethical question: who is allowed to speak for the LGBTQ+ body? Can researchers with non-LGBTQ+ bodies ethically speak for those in LGBTQ+ bodies? Like ill bodies, there are times when researchers who do not experience the same embodied subjectivity as study participants not only are able and positioned to speak on their behalf, but must do so (Orsini & Smith, 2010). Thus, researchers must be granted

the tools that allow them to take on this role, when required, in order to improve the lives of people in the LGBTQ+ community, rather than making them more difficult (Bettinger, 2010). This challenge is compounded by the need to count, or categorize individuals as part of the research process. An act of naming, in cases like these, allows researchers to clearly identify a sample, and also places an onus on organizations to effect change (if, for example, there are a number of LGBTQ+ employees who can be counted as being in favour of a change or shift within organizational policy or governance). On the other hand, however, researchers must be cognizant that naming can also be a disciplinary act, working to reinforce essentialist ideals of gender and sexuality (Vidal-Ortiz, 2009; Bettinger, 2010) and, as such, must be employed cautiously.

The Problems of Essentializing Identities

Researchers who want to take an ethical approach to studies of the LGBTQ+ community are also compelled to consider the problem of an essentialist and universal standard of ethical behavior, like those advocated by Russell, Horn and Kosciw (2009) and others. If gender and sexuality, and even organizations themselves can be considered assemblages of subjectivities or assemblages of bodies (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980; Pullen, 2006; Schilt, 2006), then a post-modern approach to understanding ethics must be employed. Any ethics rooted in a universal moral ideal, a legislation of a certain (usually White and male) mode of thought or speech, an essentialist notion of gender, sexuality or the LGBTQ+ experience, or the idea of a neutral or normal human being or human behavior, does not hold up when considering subsets of people who exhibit tremendous internal diversity.

Current research ethics is based mostly on categorizing populations as stable groups, rather than fluid assemblages. This is helpful in ensuring the safety of certain “high risk” groups such as children when they are the subjects of academic study. It has also traditionally worked in ensuring the quality and safety of research performed on groups that are traditionally easy to categorize. For example, the study of gender in the workplace with respect to cis-gendered (gender identity corresponding to the gender assigned at birth) men and women relating to such issues as pay equity and the glass ceiling is relatively straightforward, and often just a matter of counting gendered bodies (e.g., Anonymous). Similarly, studies of visible minorities in the workplace involve a type of identification that is not, in and of itself, necessarily constructed as being outside the scope of the workplace. These types of research, and the ethical considerations that go along with them, do not work as well with invisible minorities or groups with a more fluid identification. While it may be assumed that this issue would be resolved by allowing LGBTQ+ individuals to self-report, researchers still need to categorize any fluidity or lack of clarity in the self-identifying remarks of research participants, such as, for example, if the researcher were to use transgender as a catch-all for non-normative gender, when a research participant would be more comfortable with a label such as a-gender, genderqueer, or non-binary. This amounts to imposing a label (Bettinger, 2010) on participants that may not address their original intent and as such must be avoided.

Understanding fluidity as a concept immanent in LGBTQ+ identity and thus in LGBTQ+ research allows researchers to understand that the presentation of sexualities varies depending on social context, and allows for an intersectional exploration of different ways of being LGBTQ+. As such, this paper suggests that the individual’s

performance of outness is largely a function of interplaying factors, which can be conceived by researchers through the ecological model's three principal spheres: Individual/Micro); Organizational and Sectoral (Meso); and Societal (Macro) (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Ecological Model
(Source: Anonymous)

Importantly, while the role of context in influencing levels of outness may be evident, or even obvious within LGBTQ+ theory and related discourses (Halperin, 2003; Berlant & Warner, 1998), this is not necessarily the case for researchers outside the LGBTQ+ community, or those who explore organizational research ethics more generally. Originally proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1994) and engaged later by others (e.g. McLeroy et al., 1988; Thurston & Vissandje, 2005), the ecological model complicates linear understandings of outness by illuminating the array of factors that affect LGBTQ+ identity. Why is this important? Because while within the LGBTQ+ community it may be relatively common knowledge that outness is context-specific and variable (Wittig, 1985; Pullen, 2006), this kind of embodied knowing of the LGBTQ+ experience is not so clear to researchers who do not identify as LGBTQ+ (Bettiger, 2010). Therefore, one way that all researchers can navigate the ethical minefield described at the beginning of this paper is by way of a thorough understanding of the intersecting, non-linear ecology of clear identification, and all the factors that can influence the lived experience of LGBTQ+ individuals, which often intersect with one

another, for example, when family pressure bleeds into workplace stress associated with gender or sexuality (Muñoz-Laboy et al., 2015).

The Ecological Model: Situating Outness in LGBTQ+ Research

Recognizing that ‘outness’ is highly contextual and exists along a spectrum, the ecological model is engaged here to unpack factors at each the micro, meso, and macro level that shape one’s ability or choice to be ‘out’ in a given context. It is also engaged as a tool to help researchers understand the complexities around LGBTQ+ identities in the workplace: that identities exist along a vast spectrum; that they may shift depending on context or social setting; and, understanding ‘outness’ requires attention paid to greater contextual factors. By complicating ‘outness’ and preparing researchers to approach their work with an eye to individual needs and a greater empathy towards the boundaries of research participants, this model begins to address the ethical concerns associated with researching LGBTQ+ workplace identities. We argue that this more ethically-tuned approach can encourage a more critical perspective amongst LGBTQ+ researchers including the embedding of LGBTQ+ activist knowledge (Grundy & Smith, 2007) and increased cognizance of researchers’ role in narrating identity and experiences, regardless of epistemological or ontological positioning (e.g., Hatch, 1996; Karataş-Özkan & Murphy, 2010).

Individual/Micro Level

The ecological model presents the individual at the centre of ascending societal levels. First is the individual/micro level of analysis. This level is comprised of features

likely to influence one's potential to succeed at work, such as educational attainment, social and familial background, and relationships with others. As mentioned, it is critical to observe that LGBTQ+ persons may share certain aspects of their identity with some people at the individual level, but not others (for example, a lesbian who occasionally sleeps with men may share this fact only with close family or friends, but not discuss this fact at work). This is most easily seen with respect to choices to come out to others. For example, one may be out with friends, but not with colleagues (Hunter, 2007), or out with coworkers, but not supervisors. Strong individual relationships or individual champions of inclusion may encourage LGBTQ+ individuals to be 'out' with identified allies at work (Brooks and Edwards, 2009; Bowring and Brewis, 2009). However, individual-level support or disclosure does not necessarily translate to universal 'outness' in the workplace (e.g., Colgan et al., 2008).

Organizational/Meso Level

The subsequent organizational/meso level of analysis in the context of the workplace consists of practices that directly affect the individual, but do not "involve the developing person as an active participant" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). This includes workplace culture, managers, and policies governing everything from employment to workplace anti-harassment policies. Organizational policies play a critical role in tempering workplace culture towards accommodation as policies framed in inclusivity or anti-discrimination may influence colleagues' supportive attitudes, demonstrating "the power of institutionally supported public relationships" (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009, p. 449). Workplace policies to support LGBTQ+ persons are linked to positive perceptions of the job and employer (Law et al., 2011; Trau, 2015) as well as lower levels of

perceived discrimination (Hebl et al., 2016; Ruggs et al., 2015). Research also suggests the existence of policy to support LGBTQ+ persons can be perceived positively by all workers, as it signals inclusion and supportive management (Pichler et al., 2017). However, the existence of organizational policies focusing on the inclusion of ‘sexual minorities’ often focus on LGB identities but have few targeted strategies towards incorporating transgender employees (Drydakakis, 2017). Interviews with transgender employees in the UK suggests internal support networks that specifically focus on the ‘T’ in LGBTQ+ can positively ‘set the tone’ for inclusion (Marvell et al., 2017).

Often, written and unwritten rules within organizations put constraints on both gender and sexuality, and act to discursively construct the bodies of people who inhabit those organizations. Theorists have argued that as people search for recognition from others, they begin to adjust their behavior, often without recognizing they are doing so, in order to conform to the norms associated with the desired recognition (Butler, 2004; Pullen and Knights, 2007). For example, research suggests that transgender people undergoing transitions in the workplace are often subjected to an even more rigid gender binary than their cis-gendered colleagues (Schilt, 2006; Schilt & Connell, 2007). Demonstrating what the author calls the “insider/outsider” perspective, Schilt (2006, p. 426) suggests that female-to-male persons are uniquely positioned to critically compare female and male experiences in the workplace. Not surprisingly, participants felt they received more lenient workplace treatment as a man when performing gendered “male” work, leading many to adopt an increasingly feminist stance post-transition. This may be a reflection of organizations’ unspoken and spoken rules regarding gender and sexuality (Pullen & Knights, 2007; Schilt & Connell 2007), which are often profoundly

conservative in nature (Parker, 2002). The norms of the workplace in fact, can even discipline the bodies in a Foucauldian sense; individuals attempting to trouble rigid binaries of gender and sexuality can be disciplined by being categorized within the gender binary and being required to conform to the generally accepted practices of that identity (Vidal-Ortiz, 2009). For example, the popular social network, Facebook's, insistence on a real name policy, in which a person's name on Facebook must correspond with the name on their driver's license or birth certificate has often been a major problem for many trans or genderqueer individuals (Holpuch, 2015). Similarly, if researchers when collecting demographic data only allow specific options for self-identification (LGB or T) and/or do not recognize that people can self-identify differently in different contexts, they may be requiring their research participants to place themselves in a category that is inaccurate at best, and widely inappropriate at worst. This compels all researchers interested in the field of organizational studies to reflect on how our research practices both create and reinforce often limited norms around gender and sexuality.

Sectoral/Meso Level

Analysis at the sectoral level illustrates barriers, interventions, and strategies that exist between and within sectors, and subsequently influence one's perceived ability to perform one's intersectional LGBTQ+ identity in the workplace or for researchers in an LGBTQ+ research scenario (Anonymous). Sectoral actors, such as professional organizations, regulatory agencies, and sectoral bodies that set the tone for that, can either encourage or discourage organizational inclusivity. Importantly, sectoral culture towards diversity varies substantially; in Canada, there exist significant differences between sub-

sectors with federally regulated inclusion and equity strategies, such as finance or the public sector and those without such strategies, such as manufacturing (Anonymous).

Sectoral level organizations can create LGBTQ+-inclusive policies, research practices, support networks, or affinity groups, and set the tone for subsequent organizations. For example, the Law Society of Upper Canada (LSUC) and the Ontario Bar Association has created a Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Section, which has published sexual diversity and inclusivity policy recommendations for Ontario law firms (LSUC, 2004), while also organizing an LSUC presence at LGBTQ+-inclusive events such as Pride Week.

With respect to outness, the sectoral level of the ecological model requires that researchers appreciate the fact that some sectors make disclosure of sexual or gender identity differences easier than others. Appreciating the cascading effects of sectoral policies on workplace cultures assists researchers in understanding the varying degrees of LGBTQ+ identification that may be observed not just within organizations, but also between sectors. Noting differences between and within sectors assists researchers in understanding “the ideological and/or discursive context(s) in which organizations operate” (Anonymous), and thus, the impact sectoral barriers, tone, and environment have on influencing workplace outness.

Societal/Macro Level

At the outermost layer is the societal/macro level of analysis, which encapsulates the ecological model to account for the broader cultural, societal, and governmental-ideological elements of society. Components at the societal/macro level include legal

protection offered through human rights legislation, cultural permissiveness towards same-sex marriage, and the representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in the media.

Critical to any consideration of research or organizational ethics is an understanding of the impact of societal forces, such as legislation, on preceding environmental levels; however, an understanding of the reverse is equally important. Individuals can affect positive change in subsequent societal levels of analysis” by creating a more welcoming society (Andersen & Fetner, 2008; Wright, 2011). Intangible forces such as stigma can have inertial effects, whereby stigma consciousness, or the awareness that stigma exists and discrimination flows from it, can impact LGB employees’ decision to be ‘out’ (Gates, 2014). However, while the LGBTQ+ community may benefit from individuals “standing up and being counted”, this can put individual people in identity boxes that do not represent them or misrepresent them. An understanding of the Societal or Macro level of the ecological model reminds researchers that “standing up and being counted” is not simply an individual decision, but rather exists within a social framework that either supports or undermines LGBTQ+ safety and security.

Research into LGBTQ+ inclusivity can operate to effect change at the organizational, sectoral, or societal levels. The ecological model can assist here by reminding researchers that there are many different layers at which the question of inclusivity can be tackled – even with respect to workplace environments. It also illustrates the different spheres in which any given individual may or may not feel comfortable outing themselves. As such, it provides a more realistic framework from which researchers from both within and outside the LGBTQ+ community can understand

LGBTQ+ experience, prompting a more compassionate approach to the question of workplace diversity.

As a ‘way forward’, the ecological model can also inform a theory of change for interventions seeking to improve the workplace experience of LGBTQ+ people.

Anonymous have shown how the ecological model works as a framework for research and evidence-based action with respect to women and visible minorities in leadership positions, and women in information and communications technologies. In this vein, the ecological model has also been engaged by health and social policy researchers to guide formative policy development and summative assessments (Newes-Adeyi et al., 2000).

As a framework for illustrating the nexus between theory and practice when creating social change (Anonymous) and how content shapes outness at each level, the model identifies areas requiring targeted intervention as well as optimal intervention entry points – for example, to call for change in organizational policies to improve LGBTQ+ members’ workplace experiences (e.g., Anonymous; Clark & McLeroy, 1995; Newes-Adeyi et al., 2000) but also for action in state or central government policy and in individual behaviour in order to effect truly transformational, systemic change. Mapping factors to these three levels works to break a nebulous issue (how to meaningfully contextualize ‘outness’) into its constituent elements, enabling targeted, multi-pronged approaches to overcoming identified barriers *to* outness amongst those who wish to disclose. This decoupling of factors affecting LGBTQ+ workplace experiences thus becomes a means of enabling change by supporting targeted mechanisms and strategies for factors at each level, allowing a more holistic approach to supporting disclosure

amongst those who wish to be ‘out’. In this sense, it can help to move forward one of Bettinger’s key recommendations for ethical LGBTQ+ research that is to conduct research that results in positive action (2010).

LGBTQ+ researchers can also translate lessons from the ecological model into their work by engaging the model as a tool to shape research methods and design, including using the model as a framework to map the research site and organizational context of participants. In practical terms, being mindful of the LGBTQ+ outness continuum and factors that might shape outness at each level means adopting research tools (e.g., anonymization and confidentiality in undertaking and presenting research) and techniques (e.g., tailoring research questions to probe for participants’ experiences with ‘outness’) that recognize the considerable grey areas between different spheres of LGBTQ+ life and appreciation for the behaviour-environment interaction. It also recognizes how self-reported naming and categorization can be subject to change according to the various influences at different levels of society, community, workplace, and family life. While it does not provide a simple answer or road map for the practice of research within and outside of the workplace, it is intended to provide a conceptual framework that can assist researchers in maintaining an awareness of context as well as the multiple and often intersecting identities that make up the performance of LGBTQ+ subjectivity.

Conclusion: Research Ethics Grounded in Ecological Understanding

How do researchers ensure ethical questions are explored within organizations and within research practices with respect to the LGBTQ+ community? Sims (1991)

suggests that ethics in organizations (and it follows, ethics in research) should be institutionalized. This may be one way to ensure that LGBTQ+ employees are safe and secure in coming out, however, it does not take into account the fluid and permeable boundaries of sexuality and sexual identity that make up the LGBTQ+ community and that are encompassed through an ecological understanding of the LGBTQ+ experience. Since institutionalized norms and the binaries that tend to develop from them serve to reflect neither the LGBTQ+ experience (Pullen & Linstead, 2006), nor the complexities of research ethics or even the research experience (Pullen, 2006), this paper argues that researchers must engage in a reflexive, context-aware and non-institutionalized ethics (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980; Bauman, 2003; Taylor, 2009) particularly when exploring the question of outness.

Rather than proposing a set of fixed ethical guidelines to frame LGBTQ+ research, the authors of this paper suggest the ecological model be used to understand the multiple forces affecting one's ability to achieve one-on-one outness at all levels, and the subsequent ethical dilemmas and potentially injurious effects of asking for workplace outness. In examining current approaches to LGBTQ+ identity research to identify and trouble the impacts of (un)ethical methodological considerations, this article has initiated a disruption of hegemonic approaches to LGBTQ+ research in organizations. The ecological model is engaged to both identify factors affecting 'outness' at each the micro, meso, and macro levels, and to illustrate the valences of identities and degrees of outness that exist at these levels and in their interstices. We call for researchers to recognize the nuanced, highly individualized experience of being 'out', and how this experience may change across time and space. To produce ethically sound and net positive research,

researchers must critically examine their role as potential vectors in someone's 'coming out' process while also recognizing the benefit LGBTQ+-centered research can have for the community. The researcher may then conceive of the ecological model as a tool to understand the beneficial and deleterious effects of counting LGBTQ+ bodies, for each the individual, the research, and the LGBTQ+ community.

Just as researchers are encouraged to recognize the importance of discourse fluidity (i.e. rejecting essentialist categories), it is also important to conceive of LGBTQ+ ethics as equally fluid and non-categorical. Engaging the ecological model as a tool to understand the role context and environment play in determining disclosure is an effort to shed a one-size-fits all approach, introducing in its stead a framework that accommodates the particularities of the individuals and workplaces to which it is applied. Ultimately, asking researchers to situate outness as relative and discretionary will ensure ethical queries are broached. In considering the outness factors prior to commencing a study, researchers minimize the likelihood of inadvertently pushing someone "out" in a sphere, such as work, where they may not otherwise be comfortable doing so. This balancing act is underscored by cognizance of difference and relativity, by acknowledging the nested environmental factors that affect one's decision and ability to be "out" at work, and critically, understanding the rippling effects research on LGBTQ+ bodies may have.

References

Anonymous

- Ahonen, P., Tienari, J., Meriläinen, S. and Pullen, A. (2014), “Hidden contexts and invisible power relations: A Foucauldian reading of diversity research”, *Human Relations*, Vol. 67 No. 3, pp. 263–86.
- Andersen, R. and Fetner, T. (2008), “Economic inequality and intolerance: Attitudes toward homosexuality in 35 democracies”, *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 53 No. 4, pp. 942-958.
- Baillie, P. (2010), “How self-reporting for LGBT employees can benefit companies: The metrics at the end of the Rainbow”, *The Diversity Factor*, Vol. 18 No. 4, pp. 1-7.
- Bauman, Z. (2003), *Liquid love: On the frailty of human bonds*, Polity, Cambridge, UK.
- Belkin, A. and McNichol, J. (2002), “Pink and blue: Outcomes associated with the integration of open gay and lesbian personnel in the San Diego police department”, *Police Quarterly*, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 63-95.
- Berlant, L. and Warner, M. (1998), “Sex in public”, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 24 No. 2, pp. 547-566.
- Bettinger, T. V. (2010), “Ethical and methodological complexities in research involving sexual minorities.” *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, Vol. 24 No.1, pp. 43-58.
- Bowring, M. A., and Brewis, J. (2009), “Truth and consequences: Managing lesbian and gay identity in the Canadian workplace”, *Equal Opportunities International*, Vol. 28 N. 5, pp. 361- 377.

- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994), "Ecological models for human development", Postlethwaite, T. N. & Husen, T (Eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Education* (Vol. 3, 2nd ed), Elsevier, Oxford, U.K., reprinted in M. Gauvin & M. Cole (Eds.), *Readings on the development of children* (2nd ed.. p. 37-43), Freeman, New York, NY.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977), "Toward an experimental ecology of human development", *American Psychologist*, Vol. 32 No. 7, pp. 513-531.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979), *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Brooks, A.K. and Edwards, K. (2009), "Allies in the workplace: including LGBT in HRD", *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 136-149.
- Butler, J. (1990), *Gender trouble*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Butler, J. (2004), *Undoing Gender*, Routledge, Oxford.
- Clark, N. M., & McLeroy, K. R. (1995), "Creating capacity: establishing a health education research agenda." *Health education quarterly*, Vol. 22 No. 3, pp. 270-272.
- Colgan, F., Creegan, C., McKearner, A. and Wright, T. (2008), "Lesbian workers: Personal strategies amid changing organisational responses to 'sexual minorities' in UK workplaces", *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 31-45.
- Connell, C. (2010), "Doing, undoing, or redoing gender: Learning from the workplace experiences of transpeople", *Gender and Society*, Vol. 24 No. 1, pp. 31-55.
- de Lauretis, T. (ed.), (1987), *Technologies of gender: Essays on theory, film, and fiction*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1980), *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. (Brian Massumi, trans.), Minuit, Paris.

- Drydak, N. (2017), "Trans employees, transitioning, and job satisfaction", *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 98 pp. 1-16.
- Egale (2017), "Glossary of terms". *Egale Canada Human Rights Trust*. Retrieved from <https://egale.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Egales-Glossary-of-Terms.pdf>
- Eliason, M.J., DeJoseph, J., Dibble, S., Deevey, S. & Chinn, P. (2011), "Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning nurses' experiences in the workplace", *Journal of Professional Nursing*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 237-244.
- Fassinger, R.E., Shullman, S.L. and Stevenson, M.R. (2010), "Toward an affirmative lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender leadership paradigm", *American Psychologist*, Vol. 65 No. 3, pp. 201-215.
- Foucault, M. (1979), "Authorship: What is an author?." *Screen*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 13-34.
- Foucault, M. (2003), *Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France*, Picador, New York, NY.
- Frank, A.W. (1995), *The wounded storyteller: Body, illness and ethics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Gates, T. G. (2014). "Assessing the relationship between outness at work and stigma consciousness among LGB workers in the Midwest and the resulting implications for counselors", *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 27 No. 3, pp. 264-276.
- Grundy, J., & Smith, M. (2007), "Activist knowledges in queer politics." *Economy and Society*, Vol. 36 No. 2, pp. 294-317.
- Halperin, D. (2003), "The normalization of queer theory", *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol. 45 No. 2-4, pp. 339-343.

- Hatch, M. J. (1996), "The role of the researcher: An analysis of narrative position in organization theory". *Journal of Management Inquiry*, Vol. 5 No. 4, pp. 359-374.
- Hebl, M., Barron, L., Barron, L., Cox, C. B., and Corrington, A. R. (2016), "The efficacy of sexual orientation anti-discrimination legislation". *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, Vol. 35 No. 7/8, pp. 449-466.
- Human Rights Campaign (2017), "Rating Workplaces on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Equality", *Corporate Equality Index*.
- Hunter, S. (2007), *Coming out and disclosures: LGBT persons across the life span*, Haworth, Binghamton, New York.
- Kainer, J. (2016), "Intersectionality at Work: Young Women Organizers' Participation in Labour Youth Programs in Canada", *Resources for Feminist Research*, Vol. 34 No. 3/4, pp. 102-132, 162.
- Kaplan, D. M. (2006), "Can diversity training discriminate? Backlash to lesbian, gay, and bisexual diversity initiatives", *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, Vol 18 No. 1, pp. 61-72.
- Karataş-Özkan, M., & Murphy, W. D. (2010), "Critical theorist, postmodernist and social constructionist paradigms in organizational analysis: A paradigmatic review of organizational learning literature." *International Journal of Management Reviews*, Vol. 12 No. 4, pp. 453-465.

- King, K. and Biro, S. (2006), "A transformative learning perspective of continuing sexual identity development in the workplace", *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, Vol. 112, pp. 17-27.
- King, E. B., Reilly, C., and Hebl, M. R. (2008), "The best and worst of times: Dual perspectives of coming out in the workplace", *Group and Organization Management*, Vol. 33 No. 5, pp. 566–601.
- Köllen, T. (Ed.). (2016), "Sexual orientation and transgender issues in organizations Global perspectives on LGBT workforce diversity", Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
- Law, C. L., Martinez, L. R., Ruggs, E. N., Hebl, M. R., & Akers, E. (2011), "Transparency in the workplace: How the experiences of transsexual employees can be improved", *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 79 No. 3, pp. 710-723.
- Law Society of Upper Canada (2004), "Sexual orientation and gender identity: Creating an inclusive work environment: a model policy for law firms and other organizations", Report, Toronto, Canada, available at: <http://rc.lsuc.on.ca/pdf/equity/sexualOrientationPolicy.pdf> (Accessed May 30, 2013).
- Martin, H. P. (1991), "The coming-out process for homosexuals", *Hospital Community Psychiatry*, Vol. 42 No. 2, pp. 158-162.
- Marvell, R., Broughton, A., Breese, E. & Tyler, E. (2017), "Supporting trans employees in the workplace", *Research Paper: The Institute for Employment Studies, Ref: 04/2017*.

- McLeroy, K.R., Bibeau, D., Steckler, A. and Glanz, K. (1988), “An ecological perspective on health promotion programs”, *Health Education and Behavior*, Vol. 15 No. 4, pp. 351-377.
- Movement Advancement Project (2017), “Non-discrimination laws: Employment”. Retrieved from http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/non_discrimination_laws
- Muñoz-Laboy, M., Ripkin, A., Garcia, J., Severson, N. (2015), “Family and Work Influences on Stress, Anxiety and Depression Among Bisexual Latino Men in the New York City Metropolitan Area”, *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, Vol. 17 No. 6.
- Newes-Adeyi, G., Helitzer, D., Caulfield, L.E., Bronner, Y. (2000), “Theory and practice: Applying the ecological model to formative research for a WIC training program in New York State”, *Health Education Research*, Vol. 15 No. 3, pp. 283-291.
- Orsini, M., and Smith, M. (2010), “Social movements, knowledge and public policy: the case of autism activism in Canada and the US”. *Critical Policy Studies*, Vol. 4 No. 1 pp. 38-57.
- Özbilgin, M., and Tatli, A. (2011) “Mapping out the field of equality and diversity: Rise of individualism and voluntarism”, *Human Relations*, Vol. 64 No. 9, pp. 1229–53.
- Ozturk, M. B. and Tatli, A. (2015), “Gender identity inclusion in the workplace: broadening diversity management research and practice through the case of transgender employees in the UK”, *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 27 No. 8, pp. 1-22.
- Parker, M. (2002), “Queering management and organization”, *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 9 No. 2, pp. 146-166.

- Pichler, S., Ruggs, E., Ruggs, E., Trau, R., & Trau, R. (2017), "Worker outcomes of LGBT-supportive policies: a cross-level model", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, Vol. 36 No. 1, pp. 17-32.
- Pullen, A. (2006), "Gendering the research self: Social practice and corporeal multiplicity in the writing of organizational research", *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 13 No. 3, pp. 277-298.
- Pullen, A. and Linstead, S. (2006), "Gender as multiplicity: Desire, displacement, difference and dispersion", *Human Relations*, Vol. 59 No. 6, pp. 1287-1310.
- Pullen, A. & Knights, D. (2007), "Editorial: Undoing gender: Organizing and disorganizing performance", *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 14 No. 60, pp. 505-511.
- Rasmussen, M.L., (2004). "The Problem of Coming Out", *Theory into practice*, 43(2), pp.144-150.
- Rhodes, C. (2017), "Ethical Praxis and the Business Case for LGBT Diversity: Political Insights from Judith Butler and Emmanuel Levinas", *Gender Work and Organization*, Vol. 24 No. 5, pp. 553-546.
- Ruggs, E. N., Martinez, L. R., Hebl, M. R., and Law, C. L. (2015), "Workplace "trans" actions: How organizations, coworkers, and individual openness influence perceived gender identity discrimination". *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, Vol. 2 No. 4 pp. 404-412.
- Russell, S. T., Horn, S. and Kosciw, J. G. (2009), "Special Issue Introduction: New Research on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth: Studying Lives in Context", *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Vol. 38 No. 7, pp. 863-866.

- Sandfort, T. G. M., Bos, H. and Vet, R. (2006), "Lesbians and gay men at work: Consequences of being out", Omoto A. M. and Kurtzman, H. S. (Eds.), *Sexual orientation and mental health: Examining identity and development in lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. Contemporary perspectives on lesbian, gay, and bisexual psychology*, American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C., pp. 225-244.
- Schilt, K. (2006), "Just one of the guys? How transmen make gender visible at work", *Gender and Society*, Vol. 20 No. 4, pp. 465-490.
- Schilt, K. & Westbrook, L. (2009), "Doing gender, doing heteronormativity: "Gender normals", transgender people, and the social maintenance of heterosexuality", *Gender and Society*, Vol. 23 No. 4, pp. 440-464.
- Schilt, K. & Connell, C. (2007), "Do workplace gender transitions make gender trouble?", *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 14 No. 6, pp. 596-618.
- Scott, J. W. (1988), *Gender and the Politics of History*, Columbia University Press, New York, NY.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1990), *Epistemology of the closet*, University of California Press.
- Sims, R. (1991), "The institutionalization of organizational ethics", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 10 No. 7, pp. 493-506.
- Starratt, R. J. (2003), *Centering educational administration: Cultivating meaning, community, responsibility*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ.
- Taylor, A. (2009), "Queering the organization. In: Shared Meaning", available at: <http://sharedmeaning.com/cms/what-we-think/queering-the-organization> (accessed 9 July 2012).

- Thurston, W. and Vissandjee, B. (2005), “An ecological model for understanding culture as a determinant of health”, *Critical Public Health*, Vol 15 No. 3, pp. 229-242.
- Trau, R. N. (2015), “The impact of discriminatory climate perceptions on the composition of intraorganizational developmental networks, psychosocial support, and job and career attitudes of employees with an invisible stigma”. *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 54 No. 2, pp. 345-366.
- Vidal-Ortiz, S. (2009), “The figure of the transwoman of color through the lens of “doing gender””, *Gender and Society*, Vol. 23 No. 1, pp. 99-103.
- Warbelow, S. and Diaz, B. (2017), “State Equality Index”, *Human Rights Campaign Foundation*, Washington, DC.
- Wicks, D. (2017). “The consequence of outness: Gay men’s workplace experiences”, *Management Decision*. doi: 10.1108/MD-12-2016-0900
- Williams, B. A. O. (2006), *Ethics and the limits of philosophy*, Routledge, Abingdon.
- Wittig, M. (1985), “One is not born a woman”, available at: <http://ecmd.nju.edu.cn/UploadFile/17/8012/bornwoman.doc> (accessed 12 July 2012).
- Wright, C. (2011), *Like me: Confessions of a heartland country singer*, Hal Leonard Books, Milwaukee, WI.
- Wright, T. E. (2010), “LGBT educators’ perceptions of school climate”, *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 91 No. 8, pp. 49-53.

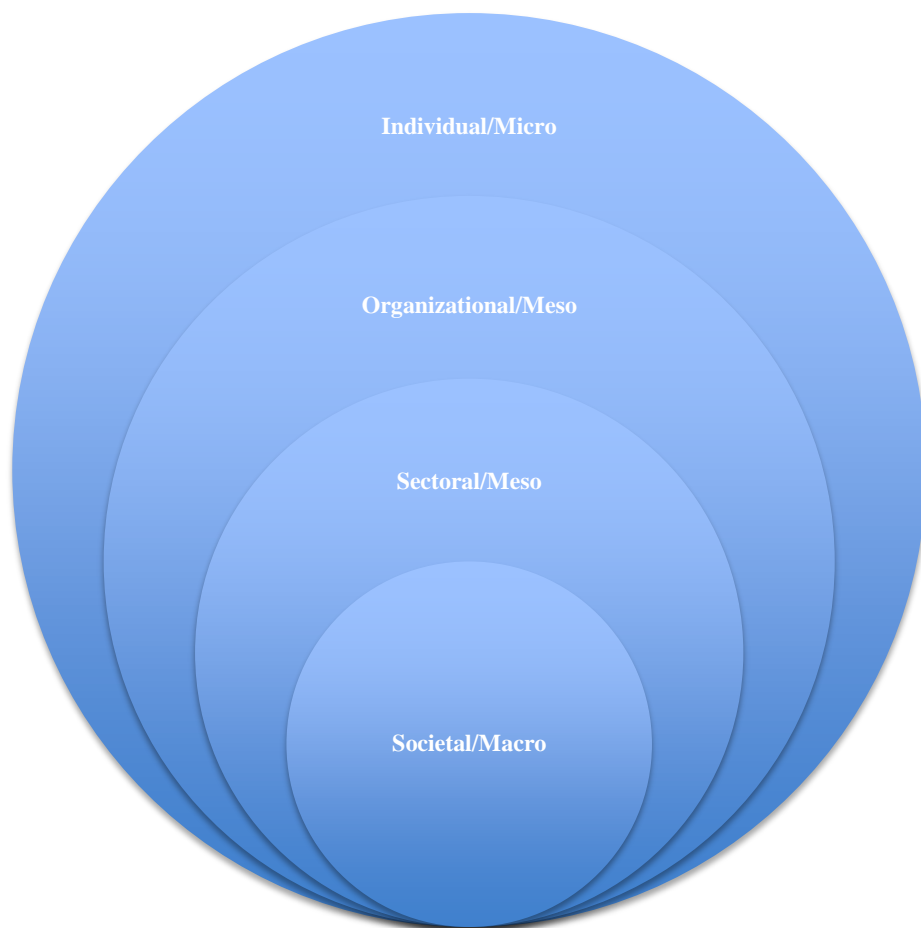


Figure 1: The Eco
(Source: Anonymo