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LGBTIQ+ workplace inclusion: A global issue requiring a transdisciplinary and intersectional approach

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Scholarly interest in the workplace experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ+) employees has increased over the past decades (Velez, Adames, Lei, & Kerman, 2021; Byington, Tamm, & Trau, 2021). The research demonstrates the particular challenges that LGBTIQ+ individuals face, both in terms of access to work (e.g. gaining employment) and in terms of employees' opportunities to work to their full potential and to progress in their careers (Badgett, Lau, Sears, & Ho, 2007; Fric, 2017; McFadden, 2015; Velez et al., 2021). Likewise, organisational practitioners have become increasingly interested in concrete recommendations for establishing work environments where employees feel that they belong and can be themselves regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). Hence, evidence-based insight is needed into how to create an LGBTIQ+ inclusive workplace. The research on LGBTIQ+ workplace inclusion is scattered, however, hampering the meaningful utilisation of insights in practice. Practitioners, on the other hand, often rely on copying the efforts of other organisations (so-called best practices), which are not always evidence-based (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Ellemers, Şahin, Jansen, & Van der Toorn, 2018). Meaningful exchange between scholarship and practice is needed. For this reason, in May 2021, we organised the LGBTIQ+ workplace inclusion conference at Leiden University.¹

The conference celebrated the nearly five years of collaboration between the university and the Workplace Pride Foundation towards creating inclusive workplaces the world over.² We believe there is power in this

collaboration because we need both the evidence-based insights provided by scholars and researchers and the practical and first-hand experiences of policymakers, practitioners, employers, and employees as agents of change. And not just in those parts of the world where same-sex relations are criminalised. Even in countries such as the Netherlands, where the law protects LGBTIQ+ individuals from discrimination, LGBTIQ+ equality is nowhere near sufficient (e.g. Andriessen et al., 2020). Inequalities are also apparent in the workplace – a context where people on average spend a third of their lives. For example, compared to their cis-hetero colleagues, LGBTIQ+ employees have been found to experience more discrimination, unwanted sexual attention, intimidation, and bullying at work, to be less satisfied with their work, and to report more burnout problems (Moya & Moya-Garófano, 2020; Van Beusekom & Kuyper, 2018). Recent research by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Human Rights (2020), furthermore showed that no less than 26 per cent of LGBTIQ+ people living in Europe hide their identities at work.

The research presented during the conference demonstrated the particular challenges that LGBTIQ+ individuals encounter in labour markets and workplaces the world over, the psychological processes that are at play, and the importance of multi-level engagement of various actors (for example at the legal, organisational, and social level) in advancing LGBTIQ+ workplace inclusion. In her keynote speech, as a complement to human rights arguments, Lee Badgett presented the economic case for LGBTIQ+-positive policies and demonstrated how workplace inclusion is essential to the recruitment, retention, and productivity of LGBTIQ+ workers (Badgett, 2021). From a legal perspective, Kees Waaldijk demonstrated the strong global trend of countries explicitly prohibiting employment discrimination based on sexual orientation and argued that such explicit legal prohibition can play a useful role in increasing LGB inclusion (see also Waaldijk, this issue). In her presentation, Jelsyna Chacko furthered this legal argument but also highlighted the complexity of law as a tool of change. Using the example of the Transgender Persons Act, which India passed in 2019, Chacko showed the potential double-edged sword that legislation can be, in particular where seemingly progressive legislation is built on badly formulated regressive provisions that then attract massive backlash. As an example of the psychological research presented, Helen Vergoossen shared study findings on the importance of gender inclusive language use in organisations, while Teri Kirby and Manuela Barreto explored the impact of identity-conscious versus identity-blind diversity messaging in the workplace. In both, language stood out as both a workplace-attitudes

barometer, as well as an effective intervention method of creating safer, more inclusive workplaces for LGBTIQ+ employees. In the field of public health, Amy Bishop presented recent findings on the impact of Covid-19 on LGBTIQ+ populations globally, bringing to the fore the increased vulnerability of LGBTIQ+ individuals who survive in cash-based, informal economies in a pandemic, having been hit hardest by job loss, food insecurity, and a spike in experiences of violence (Bishop, 2020). In summary, the presentations both described inequalities, explained their origins and mechanisms, and provided promising avenues for intervention.

Human Resources (HR) managers, Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) professionals, policymakers, and activists cannot only learn from the impressive and important past and ongoing research in this multi-disciplinary field of study. They also have a distinct role to play in informing researchers of the realities that they face in attempting to facilitate LGBTIQ+ workplace inclusion and of their needs for knowledge. These realities are going to vary substantially depending on practitioners' specific focus and context. For example, depending on whether issues pertain to sexual orientation or gender identity, or depending on whether they concern the formal or informal labour market and the country they are located in. Hence, as Yvonne Muthoni Nyawira so aptly argued in her keynote speech, it is necessary to put local researchers and stakeholders in the driving seat to identify the relevant gaps and to develop appropriate interventions that take the cultural context into account. To counter anti-LGBTIQ+ rhetoric and move the needle in favour of LGBTIQ+ rights equality, researchers need to build, nurture, and sustain relationships with local initiatives for LGBTIQ+ workplace inclusion, and with strategic partners, donors, the private sector, and the LGBTIQ+ community itself. Only through transdisciplinary³ collaboration between all stakeholders can true advances be made.

Two areas in which this aforementioned transdisciplinary, global collaboration is warranted are employee data collection, and intersectionality as a crucial lens through which to view and tackle LGBTIQ+ workplace inclusion. These topics took centre stage at the conference in two panel sessions in which researchers and practitioners exchanged their expertise. We will discuss both in more detail below.

Employee data collection on SOGIESC

In order to set concrete goals for improving the workplace inclusion of LGBTIQ+ employees, it is imperative to know where things currently

stand, both in terms of LGBTIQ+ inclusive policy and law and in terms of (prospective) employees' circumstances and experiences (Ijjasz-Vasquez & Cortez, 2017; Van der Toorn, Veldhuizen, & Kulk, 2021). Within organisations, it would, for example, be helpful to know whether there are structural inequalities between those who do and those who do not identify as LGBTIQ+: are there group-based differences in tangible rewards such as pay, mentoring opportunities, and chances for promotion, and do all employees feel sufficiently and equally included in the organisation? Crucial to answering these questions is gaining knowledge of employees' SOGIESC. This can be done in a quantitative fashion, by registering this information in employees' personnel files or by collecting (anonymous) survey data amongst employees, or in a qualitative fashion, by organising discussion panels or focus groups.⁴ Collecting such information also creates unique challenges, however, as it requires employees to 'out' themselves. Importantly, sharing this information is a more precarious issue for sexual and gender minorities than it is for members of majority groups, and can be outright dangerous in contexts where same-sex relations are criminalised by law or socially condemned on a large scale. Thus, a critical question that faces researchers and practitioners alike is whether and how to collect SOGIESC data amongst employees. A clear tension exists between the push for inclusion by being able to map diversity and identify potential group-based inequalities, and employees' need for privacy (especially amongst those for whom there may be safety concerns or a general discomfort around divulging this information). One of the conference panels focused on this field of tension, aiming to explore the ways in which this complex dynamic can be navigated.⁵ While panel members tended to agree that data collection is important for assessing the needs of specific employee groups and to determining policy effectiveness, they also clearly saw the need to balance the opportunities of data collection for enhancing inclusion with the need to protect employees' privacy and safety. Panel members observed a general apprehension amongst practitioners to collect sensitive employee data. This observation is in line with recent research conducted amongst organisations that signed the Dutch Diversity Charter. The research indicated that, while 37 per cent of these organisations explicitly focus their policy on LGBTIQ+ employees,⁶ only 8 per cent of them register employees' sexual and gender identification and an even smaller percentage actually monitors progress on these dimensions in terms of the influx, promotion, and retention of employees (Galesloot, Buimer, & Klaver, 2021).

Panel members held differing opinions as to whether the risks of data collection outweigh its benefits, which seemed to depend on their level of

confidence in data confidentiality. The workplace is not a vacuum and, especially in contexts where same-sex activity and gender-nonconformity is criminalised, public exposure outside of the company may lead to familial and social exclusion or even death. These risks may to some extent be mitigated by taking the necessary precautions, such as making sure that the information is provided voluntarily, that data is either collected anonymously or is treated as confidential (e.g. not accessible by direct line managers), that data is properly and securely processed and stored, and that individuals involved are clearly informed of the purpose, risks, benefits, handling, and storage of data.

In summary, a universal approach to data collection may be impossible, as it depends on context and intention. In any case, decisions as to whether to collect SOGIESC data require awareness of the vast diversity of contexts in which LGBTIQ+ people live and work and data collection practices require a constant reassessment of the environment and of the potential pitfalls and challenges. Researchers and practitioners need to critically examine who collects the data and for what exact purpose, and continually update the used terminology and language. In addition, the unnecessary registration of SOGIESC data should be countered, not only to reduce the possible misuse of the data but also to mitigate the harmful consequences of creating clearly demarcated categories of the vast diversity in sexuality, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics. To this end, again, collaboration with members of the LGBTIQ+ community and other local stakeholders is crucial.

Centering intersectionality in LGBTIQ+ workplace inclusion

The traditional approach to LGBTIQ+ workplace inclusion focuses solely on SOGIESC (Cech & Waidzunas, 2021). However, emerging research and discourse has raised critical questions and highlighted the complexities around the efficacy of this approach. Primary amongst these is the single-category focus of most social equality studies and, by extension, diversity and inclusion praxis (Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012). This refers to an analysis of, and emphasis on, a specific identity at a time, for example, race or sexual orientation, instead of looking at how, for example, race *and* sexual orientation may interact at the same time, and what diversity and inclusion actually entails in such contexts. By focusing on these single-identity categories of difference, diversity practices tend to overlook the heterogeneity – for example, that a Black gay man's experiences are markedly different from that of his white gay counterpart – within these categories (Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012).

Intersectionality, which challenges this perspective, has gained traction in workplace inclusion discourse and is increasingly a significant consideration in mapping the experiences of individuals as they navigate the workplace (Brown & Moloney, 2019; Rosette, De Leon, Koval, & Harrison, 2018; Thomas et al., 2021). Intersectionality refers to the synergistic interaction between the various identities an individual holds, which may result in compounded oppression (Crenshaw, 2011). These identities or ‘categories of being’ operate, per Collins (2015), ‘not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities’. With regard to LGBTIQ+ workplace inclusion specifically, intersectionality plays an interesting and salient role in understanding both the advantages and shortcomings of related policy, practice, and workplace culture (Salter, Sawyer, & Gebhardt, 2020). Essentially, an intersectional analysis in workplace research allows us to highlight and address the often-difficult lived realities of sexual and gender minorities in the workplace, by understanding the nuanced, multi-layered experiences of LGBTIQ+ individuals that are shaped by more than just their SOGIESC.

However, while research on intersectionality might have flourished, studies on intersectionality in relation to the workplace have lagged behind (Velez et al., 2021). Further, as noted by Dennissen, literature on the incorporation of intersectionality in diversity practices and management remains relatively sparse (Dennissen, Benschop, & Van den Brink, 2020). Nevertheless, intersectionality is considered intrinsic to diversity practices of organisations, and is argued to be ‘imperative for facilitating change and understanding real inclusion in organizations and practices’ (Thomas et al., 2021, p. 3).

Diversity Networks, or Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), are an important and practical site of this discourse (Dennissen, Benschop, & Van den Brink, 2019). ERGs are employee networks within the workplace that are geared towards a specific social identity, to enhance and to help employees navigate the workplace. The panel discussion on intersectionality in the workplace explored some of the tensions that these single-category ERGs face, and LGBTIQ+ networks in particular.⁷ As panel members noted, on the one hand, these single-category ERGs, and LGBTIQ+ networks in particular, are important because they offer a safe space where individuals can both share their struggles and support each other in the workplace (see also Meral & Van der Toorn, 2021). But, on the other hand, individuals with multiple disadvantaged identities, for example, Black disabled queer women, feel excluded in these ERGs because their experiences are vastly different from, for example, white gay men, and an LGBTIQ+ ERG would

not reflect the diversity of these experiences or cater to their varied needs (Dennissen et al., 2019). While recognising these shortcomings is key, from an organisational management perspective, it is difficult to realise a different diversity framework because diversity categories are considered inherently discrete and all resulting interventions follow from this perspective. Shifting this perspective to account for the multi-dimensionality of individuals is thus a necessary starting point to begin to address these disparities (Dennissen et al., 2020).

Another important aspect brought up in the panel discussion was the utility of ERGs beyond representation, acceptance, and recognition. While these are incredibly important, it is also increasingly clear that socio-economic rights and the ability to reach one's potential and grow career-wise are crucial elements that ERGs have the potential to facilitate and enhance but do not necessarily do so, currently. This perspective calls into question the meaning of equality and pushes for an interpretation that goes beyond representation. In this case, equality means equality of opportunities and results (substantive equality) as opposed to procedural fairness or equality of treatment (formal equality; see further: Fredman, 2005). Correspondingly, the common denominator amongst panel members' perspectives was a call for the expansion of organisations' definitions of equality and equity in the workplace.

For this argument to be strengthened, however, it is imperative that more research is done and data is collected on the socio-economic positionality of disadvantaged groups in the workplace, as well as other metrics of equality. This approach embodies intersectionality, recognising the diversity in experiences even between individuals who share a marginalised identity such as being LGBTIQ+, and especially those who are hyper-marginalised within that group.⁸

Bringing LGBTIQ+ employee stories to the surface

There is an apparent tension between our call for data collection in the workplace and our call for centring intersectionality. After all, employees with intersecting marginalised identities tend to be fewer in number and are likely underrepresented in the strategies and channels that organisations have at their disposal for mapping the needs and experiences of employees (e.g., employee satisfaction surveys and LGBTIQ+ employee resource groups). But, this is where the joint effort of researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds will prove valuable. What is important is that the stories

of LGBTIQ+ employees are brought to the surface, be it in a single case study, a literary text, a semi-structured interview, or a large-scale survey. Although the different methodologies yield different types of data and evidence, both quantitative and qualitative research has the potential to meaningfully inform practice. More research is needed to determine how the ‘data’ that is collected through these means can be harvested in such a way that it is used towards making improvements without putting the individuals involved at risk.

Conclusion

While practitioners, managers, employees, and other stakeholders will continue to grapple with the complexities of realising LGBTIQ+ workplace inclusion, the place of academics and researchers is unequivocally to enrich our understanding of people’s identities and lived experiences, expand conversations at every level, and to provide the data to back inclusive laws, policies, and practices. This can only be done through continued dialogue with actors on the ground, using a transdisciplinary and intersectional approach.

Notes

1. For an overview of speakers, moderators, and panel members, the full conference programme can be downloaded here: <https://workplacepride.org/event/lgbtqi-workplace-inclusion-2021-conference-hosted-by-leiden-university>
2. The Workplace Pride Foundation is an international platform for LGBTIQ+ workplace inclusion with head offices in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. In 2017, Workplace Pride partnered with Leiden University in establishing an endowed chair of LGBT+ Workplace Inclusion, which is held by the first author.
3. Transdisciplinary research refers to ‘research that integrates knowledge across academic disciplines and with non-academic stakeholders to address societal challenges’. See: <https://www.uu.nl/en/research/transdisciplinary-field-guide/get-started/what-is-transdisciplinary-research>
4. The panel discussion tended to focus on quantitative data collection methods but similar issues pertain to qualitative methods, especially if the information communicated is recorded in some way.
5. The panel session was moderated by Michiel Kolman (Workplace Pride Foundation and Elsevier) and included Alex Müller (The University Medical Center Göttingen), Terence Guiamo (Just Eat Takeaway), Robert Ensor

- (Transgender Netwerk Nederland), and Marijn Pijnenburg (IBM) as panel members.
6. Twenty-six per cent of organisations formulated the goal to increase the influx of LGBTIQ+ employees, and four per cent of organisations had this goal with regard to the promotion or retention of employees.
 7. The panel session was moderated by Waruguru Gaitho (Leiden University) and included Winston van Niel (Parea Nederland), Layla Chabhar (Colored Collective), Marjolein Dennissen (Radboud University), and Derek Victor Handley (Samplix ApS) as panel members.
 8. While this article discusses LGBTIQ+ identity as a category of being, it is important to note that distinct differences exist between the various groups represented by the different letters of the acronym. As such, LGBTIQ+ identity may be more accurately referred to as a domain and not a single category, as lumping the group risks ignoring the unique experiences and challenges that each group faces, both externally and within the LGBTIQ+ community. These challenges include but are not limited to biphobia, asexual erasure, transphobia, and gatekeeping within the LGBTIQ+ community. See, for example, Welzer-Lang (2008) and <https://sovlpvnk.com/2020/10/20/ace-rep-3-lgbtq-gatekeeping-bisexual-and-asexual-erasure>

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