

Stereotypes, stigma and support

Positive and negative experiences of gender diversity in the workplace

Stigma and discrimination in the workplace can take place against several different disadvantaged social groups. Predominantly it is found against women and racial groups. However, it can also take place against age, religion, disability and sexuality. One social group which has been little studied is Gender Diverse Individuals (GDIs). GDIs are individuals whose identity does not match their biological and binary gender. There is a spectrum of gender between the traditional binary male and female. GDIs identify along the continuum. They include trans men, trans women, those identifying as non-binary and those identifying as agender. A central characteristic to GDIs is fluidity and flexibility – gender identity is ongoing, it may be varied and changing on a daily basis; it is something the individual works on every day. They are continually doing and undoing gender.

GDIs are often excluded from the labor market and have a higher unemployment rate than cisgender individuals. In job interviews, cisgender applicants receive more positive evaluations than GDIs. In the workplace, the cultural norm of binary gender is heavily prevalent. This means that GDIs often have to hide their true identities in order to “fit in”. They feel silenced and without a “voice”. This causes much emotional labor and distress in hiding their true selves, leading to individuals becoming depressed or withdrawn, and leaving their jobs. They are not able to fully participate in the workplace.

Discrimination in the workplace

Bodily visibility is a key factor in discrimination against GDIs. Cisnormativity remains dominant in the majority of workplaces. Employers believe customers have a certain expectation, judgement and image of the company, and this must be reflected in any staff they come into contact with. Customers expect cisnormativity, not a gender continuum. To avoid damaging the company’s reputation, and losing money, GDIs are often employed in “behind the scenes” roles; roles which are not customer-facing.

GDIs are hyperaware of their outward expression and appearance and how others perceive them. To hide their true identities, GDIs often work hard to reduce outward appearances of dressing up and often dress gender-neutrally. They have increased performance in the workplace in order to prove themselves and often work in gender-stereotypical fields.

GDIs feel under pressure to “pass” or “fit in”. They must regulate and repress their gender identities to fit in with the workplace expectation of binary norms, in order to be accepted. They must be seen to be doing gender “properly”. Deviating from cultural expectation (failing to pass) leads to the potential for discrimination and stigma. This is especially hard for non-binary or agender individuals. Having to pass as a specific gender is not just relevant to the workplace – GDIs must also pass in situations such as applying for a mortgage or a credit card. Job application forms lead the employer to expect cisgender applicants – they may then be surprised at in-person interviews if the applicant is gender

diverse. It is easier to qualify for such things by conforming to cisgender norms and using their “old” binary gender name and identity.

This means most GDIs feel dishonest and like actors. They are hiding their true selves by modifying, reducing and compromising their appearance and expression in order to fit in.

This causes emotional stress and distress. In addition, there is a moral battle where the GDI feels obliged to fit in with society but at a huge personal cost. They feel guilty and shamed.

The fear of stigma or discrimination, leading to potentially losing one's job, is huge. As such, GDIs often stay silent in the workplace. They put up with the discrimination and do not stand up for their rights. Discrimination often takes place between “normal” vs “stigmatised” individuals. GDIs are often the victim of derogatory comments, sexual harassment or even being “outed” in front of their colleagues, without having given permission. They tolerate and acquiesce to this harassment in order to maintain employment. Cisnormativity correlates with career success.

Support in the workplace

Despite a high prevalence of discrimination, there are positive experiences of GDIs in the workplace. Inclusive organizations have accepting and supportive managers. They have equal employment opportunity policies and processes. These are particularly effective if HR is actively involved – they involve GDIs in processes and ask for their input. This leads to true inclusivity and equality. Such organizations are progressive – they go above and beyond to ensure all social groups are included and accepted.

Having genuine support in the workplace, from a colleague, manager or HR, can lead to feelings of confidence and acceptance. GDIs feel included and respected. It can make them feel safe and protected from workplace bullies. Genuine support and commitment to diversity and inclusion leads to much more positive feelings and experiences than pseudo-support – where an organization “goes through the motions” of supporting Pride, having equal opportunity policies etc., but does not truly support them in practice. Discrimination persists in the workplace – what they say is not what they do.

Support can also come from the LGBTIQ+ community – Allies - in the workplace. Social Identity Theory says people try to fit in groups with others who are like themselves. GDIs can relate to Allies, and other socially disadvantaged groups, as they may have been through similar discriminatory experiences. Allies can give backup and can act as a mentor. They give understanding of issues such as using correct pronouns and can lead to GDIs feeling safe and protected. GDIs feel freer and more able to be their true selves, especially among members of the LGBTIQ+ community. A lack of support – or of genuine support – in the workplace can lead to discrimination, staying silent, and hiding their true selves.

It is important to note that there remains a cultural hierarchy of social groups and dominance – being gay or lesbian is “higher” than GDI. They are binary gender, and this is more accepted than gender fluidity. It is “easier” to be gay than to be gender diverse – gay individuals don't have to work to modify or hide their outward appearance.

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Implications for the workplace

Employees want to be heard at work, not feel silent and repressed. HR initiatives and equal employment policies, especially those used during the hiring process, can reduce discrimination and emotional distress. Support from managers, HR and colleagues such as Allies acting as champions for GDIs allow employees to feel safe, confident and committed. They can express their true selves and fully engage and participate at work. They have a voice. Workplaces currently have both negative and positive facets – cisnormativity and organisational silence in the face of discrimination persists, but there is potential for increasing awareness, understanding and acceptance leading to a truly progressive, equal, inclusive and accepting workplace.

Comment

The review is based on 'Employment discrimination against gender diverse individuals in Western Australia' by Bates *et al.* (2021) published in *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*.

Reference

Bates, T., Thomas, C.S. and Timming, A.R. (2021), "Employment discrimination against gender diverse individuals in Western Australia", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, Vol. 40 No. 3, pp. 273-289.

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