LGBTQ+ Sensemaking: The Mental Load of Identifying Workplace Allies

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Abstract

The sensemaking process is complex and mentally demanding, inviting sensemakers to establish and apply schema about individuals and groups. This study assesses the ways LGBTQ+ employees evaluate coworker's ally status through the application of schema and the further sensemaking that follows the schema creation. We conducted 35 interviews with LBGTQ+ employees to understand the ways these employees processed decisions and weigh the risks during the construction of ally-status schemas about coworkers. Findings indicate that LGBTQ+ employees assess colleagues' likelihood toward allyship, or not, through sensemaking in three domains: (1) Demographic, (2) Reference to Industry, and (3) Observed and Experienced Interactions. We conclude this study with practical recommendations addressing both the creation of plausible but inaccurate schemas, the larger burden of mental load, and a discussion about the importance of bridging the gap between sensemaking by marginalized populations and ally status perceptions.

Keywords

schema, sensemaking, LGBTQ+, allies

Introduction

Progress advocating for greater respect toward individuals identifying as members of the LGBTQ+ community has occurred in the past decades, yet work remains. Issues of harassment of LGBTQ+ youth in schools (Dragowski et al., 2016; Hatchel et al.,

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2017) and potent microaggressions remain evident in society (Nadal et al., 2016). LGBTQ+ employees face potential discomforts as they sometimes opt for invisibility (e.g., through disclosure avoidance and refusal to display pictures of loved ones at work) or experience hypervisibility due to increased scrutiny and gossip (Dixon & Dougherty, 2014). Historically, those identifying with non-normative sexualities needed to concern themselves with "passing" as a matter of professional survival. LGBTQ+ employees today experience a greater likelihood of receiving ally support.

Although these issues have been a problem for decades (Chan, 2017), scholars have begun to consider how the workplace can develop a more welcoming climate for diverse employees (Jiang et al., 2019). The challenge for many LGBTQ+ employees has shifted from hiding one's identity in the workplace to balancing the mental load of deciding when and with whom to share (Paas, Tuovinen, et al., 2003). Even though research has clearly begun outlining a multitude of challenges for LGBTQ+ community members, there is still work to be done on the social cognition practices occurring within the context of the workplace. This article examines the conclusions revealed during interviews with LGBTQ+ employees to learn about the sensemaking and schema that inform the process of determining coworker allyship. Specifically, we situate these social cognition processes within the context of LGBTQ+ employees in applying schemas that contribute to employee sensemaking about coworker allyship. Regarding sensemaking, we draw from Weick's (1995) sensemaking as the process that stems from an individual observing the workplace and drawing conclusions about the function and characteristics of the role and the people within that setting. This focus leads us to examine this research question: *How do LGBTQ+ employees engage in sensemaking processes to identify allies in the workplace?* We begin by reviewing relevant literature on schema, sensemaking, and allies.

Schema and Sensemaking

We study how some LGBTQ+ employees apply and develop schema to coworkers to determine ally status. Schemas are "cognitive structures used to make sense of the world" (Piaget & Cook, 1952). The creation of schema assists individuals in organizing their knowledge of the world and incorporating new information. The inferential properties of the schema of "ally" and "non-ally" provide powerful tools for decoding behaviors of coworker's that may illuminate coworker motivations and emotions. The concept of schemas is consistent with sensemaking (Weick, 1995) which, defined simply, is the process by which people assign meaning to their experience. Weick et al. (2005) succinctly describe the phenomenon as "a significant process of organizing, sensemaking unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances" (p. 409). Historically, sensemaking is rooted in scholars unpacking dissonance as a way of understanding every-day decision making needs (Gephart, 1992; Handel, 1982). Weick (1995) details seven principles of sensemaking: (1) grounded in identity construction, (2) retrospective, (3) enacted of sensible

environments, (4) social, (5) ongoing, (6) extracted from cues, and (7) plausible but inaccurate interpretations. In more detail, each principle lends to the overall picture of full sensemaking conclusions. First, sensemaking is grounded in identity construction, which presumes that identities are constructed from interactions and that the sense-maker is continually refining their identity with each new interaction. Employees come to the workplace with identity preferences, disclosing strategically based upon cues from others (e.g., "the boss asked me to stay late and I would rather not") and as a result, those presentations can be altered based on interactions with others (e.g., "I do want to be seen as a team player, so I guess I will stay").

Second, retrospective sensemaking pulls from Schutz's (1972) understanding of lived experience, with the keyword *lived* driving sensemaking into a reflection-based arena after the fact. Individuals can only process instances after those instances have happened as a means of understanding how that interaction aligns with the whole. Concerning the third principle, enactment of sensible environments, Weick (1995) suggests that "people produce part of the environment they face," (p. 30) and that people act and create materials that assist in developing constraints and opportunities. For example, an LGBTQ+ individual might be more willing to disclose orientation in an organization traditionally perceived as more tolerant, like theater, and that same person might hesitate to disclose in a banking industry. Unfortunately, this choice can yield more of the same—individuals whose sensemaking and subsequent choices result in further closeting.

Fourth, social elements of sensemaking exist because sensemaking is contingent on the interactions with others. Weick (1995) describes this inclusion as "a constant sub-strate that shapes interpretations and interpreting" (p. 39). We develop our own sense-making conclusions as we coordinate or witness shared meaning making (Fairhurst, 2010). Fifth, ongoing sensemaking plays a similar role in that there is no pinpointing a start and end to sensemaking, only that we are in a constant state of developing fur-ther understanding with each new instance, event, or communication. Ongoing sug-gests that "there are no absolute starting points, no self-evident, self-contained certainties on which we can build, because we always find ourselves in the middle of complex situations which we try to disentangle by making, then revising, provisional assumptions." (Weick, 1995, p. 43).

The sixth principle, concerning the property of extracted from cues, we pull from Weick's (1995) definition of "points of reference for linking ideas to broader networks of meaning and are simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring" (p. 50). The warning with extracted cues stems from the ways in which individuals are not uniform in what they notice, how they extract, and why and how they embellish what they extract. As a result, and in alignment with the seventh and last principle, sensemaking can also result in plau-sible yet inaccurate conclusions, where individuals draw conclusions that are reason-able to the clues noticed, but that are not correct. A boss can have a closed door meeting with three employees, who leave the office red faced, pack their desks, and get in the elevator. Some might make the plausible conclusion that they were fired, when in real-ity, perhaps they were just promoted to another floor. To tie sensemaking to schemas,

in short, schemas provide the fodder for individuals' abilities to make sense of their environments.

Lastly, scholars have come to understand the roles that others play in assisting with sensemaking, specifically in the form of sensegiving. Sensegiving is the opportunity for an individual (i.e., an ally) to assist in another person's sensemaking through direct messaging (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Direct message communication can allow for a reduction in ambiguity and more clarity between two individuals about a given topic. Sensegiving is a practice commonly adopted by organizations in the form of socialization for newcomers akin to orientations, training, and messaging about workplace culture and expectations (Kramer, 2010).

Existing scholarship more commonly focuses on how others make sense of LGBTQ+ individuals, whether in the work settings or in society in general (Compton, 2016). This study assumes a different approach wherein the LGBTQ+ participants' sensemaking is placed as the focal point of concern. This paper does not offer findings on how LGBTQ+ *should* think and construct; rather, we present the ways participants described what they *do* think and construct. We see this perspective as a significant contribution, shifting the focus *toward* LGBTQ+ sensemaking rather than reifying heteronormative constructs about LGBTQ+ individuals. We also recognize that any marginalized community risks safety when presenting their truth. This study empowers the LGBTQ+ community to directly contribute toward bridging the gap in outlining how allies may be able to better meet the needs of the LGBTQ+ community while reducing the cognitive schema construction gymnastics at play for so many.

Allies

Scholars have addressed various aspects of allyship and ally status (Eichler, 2010; Lim et al., 2019). LGBTQ+ allies, usually heterosexual, are those who "realize that equality and equity are goals that have not yet been achieved, and that she or he has a role in helping to make these goals realities" (Washington & Evans, 1991, p. 197). Many studies pertaining to allies of the LGBTQ+ population are from the perspective of a straight person and becoming an ally (Ryan et al., 2013). Occasionally, allyship is positioned as a guide for allyship in schools, for example, toward school psychologists (McCabe, 2014), college faculty (Vaccaro et al., 2019), and in the workplace (Brooks & Edwards, 2009). Research also shows the negative side of allyship, specifically power disparities favoring heterosexual allies (Mathers et al., 2018). This study assumes a different perspective in ally identification by examining the sensemaking process of the LGBTQ+ employee.

Understanding workplace LGBTQ+ experiences is important because the perception of an open climate plays an important role in increasing job satisfaction and reducing professional anxiety (Jiang et al., 2019). Researchers have repeatedly found that even open workplace environments can still pose dignity threats (Baker & Lucas, 2017) and present multitudes of mental load inequities (Grandey, 2000). Our dual focus of the ways in which schema are formed and sense is made of co-workers, combined with the understanding of how allies have been researched in the past motivated our study toward

answering the following research question: RQ: *How do LGBTQ+ employees engage in sensemaking to identify allies in the workplace?* Whereas many studies have focused on the self-disclosure part of coming out of the closet, this study examines the sensemaking that *precedes* disclosure as sense is made regarding the safety of such a disclosure. A caveat we offer before proceeding is that we often discuss allyship in this paper in dualistic terms of "ally" or not "ally." We do this for two reasons. First, participant discourse seemed to treat the terms dichotomously, although if asked, they would probably acknowledge that allyship is more of a spectrum than a dichotomy. Second, a driving concern of many participants was who was deemed "safe." Disclosure about identity frequently arose when discussing allyship, and the decision to disclose is somewhat binary in a high-stakes professional environment. Discussing allyship in the context of the work environment likely drove the dichotomous slant in participant discourse.

The following sections outline the method we used to address ally identification among LGBTQ+ employees, the results and interpretation of that exploration, and practical suggestions based on those findings.

Method

Data Collection

Qualitative interviewing allows participants to share rich descriptions of their lived experience with the interviewer, and so we felt this method of data collection was appropriate for diving into participant accounts with respect and privacy that focus groups might not provide (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Interviews were conducted in a private location via face-to-face interviews ($N=14$), via telephone ($N=18$) or via Skype/FaceTime ($N=3$). The interviews followed a 10-question protocol (see Appendix A) pertaining to career, presentation of identity, ally identification, and behaviors that participants were comfortable sharing as part of their work identities. Additional follow-up questions were asked for clarification (e.g., "Can you clarify?"; "Such as?" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Each participant consented in a manner consistent with IRB oversight. Interviews lasted an average of 40 min and all were audio recorded. Interview transcripts resulted in 424 single spaced pages.

Participants

Participants were recruited through all three authors' personal networks. After each interview, participants were encouraged to share our study information with individuals in their personal networks, which resulted in a snowball effect for participation. Participants represented an array of LGBTQ+ positionalities, sometimes self-identifying using multiple terms. Participants worked in a variety of industries, spanned multiple regions of the United States and represented diverse races. Demographic information was collected during the interview as part of the protocol (see Table 1). A full demographic outline with participant pseudonyms, professions, and self-identification is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Name	Race	Orientation*	Industry	Region
Cassidy	Caucasian	Bisexual	Therapist	FL
Charles	Caucasian	Gay	Education	OK
Denise	Black	Lesbian	Social Work	PA
Dennis	Black	Gay	Finance	NY
Denton	Caucasian	Transmale	Retail	NM
Devon	Caucasian	Gay	Hospitality	FL
Donna	Black Latina	Lesbian	Government	NY
Gail	Caucasian	Transfemale	Activist	FL
Gary	Caucasian	Gay	Banking	NY
Harper	Latina	Queer/Lesbian	Theatre	NY
Ivy	Caucasian	Bisexual	Teacher	MA
Jasper	Caucasian	Gay	Hospitality	AZ
Jeff	Black	Gay	Finance	NY
Jin	Asian	Queer	Hospitality	NY
Joan	Caucasian	Transfemale	Hospitality	NV
Kendra	Black	Lesbian	Hospitality	NY
Kevin	Black	Gay	Finance	NY
Lenora	Black	Lesbian	Retail	NY
Lindy	Latina	Lesbian	Theater	NY
Luke	Caucasian	Transmale	Education	FL
Martin	Black	Gay	Finance	NY
Meline	Black	Lesbian	Hospitality	NY
Mitchel	Black	Gay	Technology	NY
Rainbow	Biracial	Trans Queer	Theater	NY
Richard	Caucasian	Gay	Finance	NY
Sasha	Caucasian	Bisexual	Banking	FL
Saul	Black	Queer/Gay	Education	OK
Shantrise	Black	Queer/Lesbian	Social Work	NY
Stan	Caucasian	Gay	Finance	NY
Susan	Caucasian	Bisexual	Retail	FL
Tanya	Black	Bisexual	Finance	NY
Terrence	Caucasian	Gay	Library	OK
Tori	Caucasian	Bisexual/Queer	Activist	FL
Trent	Caucasian	Gay	Finance	NY
Wendy	Black	Lesbian	Retail	NY

*Orientation as designated by participants.

Data Analysis

Data analysis unfolded over three iterations. First, two coders operationalized criteria that would indicate behavior or presentations that would fall into either backstage behavior or frontstage behavior, based on the literature (Goffman, 1978). Frontstage

behaviors are apparent ". . . in the presence of other persons; some aspects of the activity are expressly accentuated and other aspects which might discredit the fostered impression are suppressed" (Goffman, 1978, p. 69). Goffman (1978) also indicated that "the backstage region is where the suppressed facts make an appearance. Backstage is defined as a place . . . where the impressions fostered by the performance are knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (p. 53). This focus of identifying front and backstage coding reduced the data from a full set of 424 single spaced pages to a set of 126 single spaced pages. Goffman (1978) goes on to explain through example that frontstage is where we put on a lively and enthusiastic show, and only in the backstage are we free to lapse into the safety of our real mood. In line with this understanding, we chose to focus the participants' sensemaking in the realm of backstage work, typified by moments in the data when they reveal direct private thoughts or interpretations they had from an interaction with an ally or non-ally.

Our research interest was in the backstage dimension of social interaction as well as the contrast between backstage cognitions and frontstage performance. The rationale stemmed from our desire to see how LGBTQ+ employees experienced their work environment. Their frontstage performance becomes evident to those with whom they interact. The backstage processing of the frontstage interactions are not always understood by coworkers. Our interest was in better understanding the LGBTQ+ work experience, so focus was directed to perceptions and sensemaking (backstage). Upon operationalizing the frontstage versus backstage data, both coders began by independently open coding a subset of interviews. Our operational definition of "backstage data" involved discourse about thoughts, evaluations, and conclusions which the participant described but did not share publicly during the interaction. We then met in person to begin focused coding to determine "the properties and dimensions of a category" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60). Our interest was in examining backstage assessments regarding allyship (Charmaz, 2006). We isolated the backstage data set, which reduced the data set to 53 single spaced pages. After all interviews were coded in accordance with the emerging themes, the coders met face to face to check each code for accurate interpretations according to the operational definitions. Discrepancies were negotiated against the established definitions until 100% of codes were agreed upon. Data not involving backstage ally assessments were reduced. The focused coding of the data (Charmaz, 2006) resulted in 76 focused codes. Once the focused codes were developed, we used a modified version of constant comparison, checking each code against each for additional, better, or negative explanations. We stopped once the data were exhausted. After identifying themes and practical suggestions, we engaged in member checking by "taking our findings back to the field and learning whether our participants recognized the themes as plausible and accurate" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 364). Member checking resulted in support and enthusiasm for both the findings and recommendations.

Results and Interpretation

The research question asks: *How do LGBTQ+ employees engage in sensemaking to identify allies in the workplace?* Results indicate three distinct categories that

LGBTQ+ employees used to assess coworker ally status: (1) Expression of Demographics, (2) Reference to Industry, and (3) Observed and Experienced Interactions. In the following paragraphs, we explain how participants categorized each criterion and discuss the nuance within emerging subcategories. The categories that emerged we treat as part of the schema that LGBTQ+ employees use to make sense of their co-workers and assess their ally status. We conclude the results and interpretation by presenting the ways participants described their sensemaking conclusions in determining coworker ally status and suggest practical behaviors that coworkers can implement to create a more positive climate.

Expression of Demographics

One of the most recurring criteria concerning LBGTQ+ employee identification of allies or non-allies pertained to how participants applied schemas about a coworkers' demographics when references to region/country, religion, politics, in/out group status, and race, age, and gender are discussed. We outline each:

Region. Region was referenced as a resource for identifying potential allies/non allies and for identifying "safe" parts of the country or world. Cassidy, bisexual, explained, "Or if somebody's from Alabama, I'm like, maybe they're not so liberal. If somebody's from northern California, I'm like, oh, they're probably pretty liberal." Other participants noted region as a marker for safety. Joan, a white trans female noted, "Moving from Detroit to Chicago was a huge, huge step because in Detroit, you wouldn't come out. A lot of people I knew, we all were in the closet well into our 20s because if you came out as gay, let alone being transgender or even a drag queen, you were getting lynched." Cassidy, Joan and other participants linked regions to likelihood of acceptance and perceived risk, and in doing so, are displaying elements of ongoing and retrospective sensemaking.

Region also manifested as international, with some participants noting that certain international work presented challenges. Mitchel, whose firm operates globally, noted: "We also have a strong presence in the Middle East. It's difficult to communicate [orientation] because they have their own rules as well." The discourse of the participants strongly linked physical geography with social geography. Once a region was associated with a participant, acceptance expectations followed.

Religion. Religion was also cited as part of the schema for assessing ally status. Participants noted attentiveness to nonverbal indicators of allyship, such as: "I'm very cautious of (signs), I guess women who are spiritual or that wear crosses and stuff like that" (Luke, trans male). Others described fear of negative ramifications. Tanya, a bisexual woman, cautioned: "No matter what a policy says, if you work with a bunch of people that have very strong religious beliefs or have very strong opinions or just are very sheltered as far as how diverse of a community they know of. You don't want to put yourself in a position of making your job harder for what may feel like no

reason." These two examples demonstrate the heightened sense of caution exercised toward highly religious coworkers that was recurrently noted among participants. These examples also point to enactment of cues, with the perception of religious beliefs and signs of the cross as the cues or artifacts driving the sensemaking conclusions.

Some participants' recalled bad experiences with religious individuals as tainting their views of religious people in general. Gail, a trans female activist, described an incident where she was waiting to speak at a public governmental forum. She described how prior to entering the forum, she had pleasant exchange with another woman who was at the event to protest:

> When I put on my name tag, she immediately went into a defensive posture. Her body language changed, and I could see her dialogue immediately changed. She said, "So are you here to push for the [formal name]?" And I said, "Yes, I happen to be a transgender woman, and I'm part of [organization name], and we're advocating for social justice for all people." And she said, "You know, God doesn't make mistakes." And she turned on her heel and she walked into the courtroom. And I thought, "the boundary was created, just by her knowing that I was transgender." Up until that point, not a clue. We were having a conversation like two people on the street, two human beings, and our ideological differences was what divided us. And what really divided us was my gender status. That demographic. And then someone coming from a faith-based community of love thy neighbor and treat others as you would want to be treated. Yet that boundary was there, that I was "other," that I was wrong, that I was in some way flawed, and God doesn't make mistakes. She was gonna fight me tooth and nail for my equal rights.

Gail's vivid description of her experiencing judgment based on religious beliefs echoed other participant comments. In this example from Gail, the created schemas stem from the social nature of the sensemaking experience, specifically that the response from the other woman assisted Gail in understanding the non-ally status. Past experiences made religious, particularly Christian, coworkers appear less likely to be allies.

Politics. Politics manifested as a common criterion for determining a coworker's ally status. Some participants described presuming non-ally status, and subsequent avoidance based on a coworker's political alignment: "The redneck stereotype I avoid, anyone that supports the NRA [National Rifle Association] I usually avoid." (Luke). Some participants cautioned against too much workplace self-disclosure because of the political geography. Terrance spoke of his hesitancy to even speak loudly at work because: "it's honestly a self-protection mechanism. I'm in one of the reddest states in the United States." These examples point to conservative political positions as a red flag, and link strongly to sensemaking from enacted cues.

Advocacy-oriented participants talked about the link between politics and their specific work roles. Gail described the closed mindedness she felt from the political stance of coworkers as, "When we're pushing upstream, against conservative lawmakers who certainly don't have an open mind and don't want to change their

position." Tori, who identifies as bisexual queer described her work as an activist: "When I'm at work I usually assume that legislators that are more liberal are going to be more of an ally even though that has proven to not always be true." This statement shows how learning about coworker's political leanings could prompt LGBTQ+ employees to mistakenly expect allyship, both drawing on enactment of cues during sensemaking and the nature of assumptions leading to occasional plausible but inaccurate conclusions.

In and out group. On occasion, participants expressed expectations for solidarity among members of the LGBTQ+ community. Saul, who self identifies as gay or queer, recounted his reasoning in viewing those within the LGBTQ+ community and those who are not:

> People, particularly if they're not LGBTQ, there's a lot of uncomfortability around being in that community. I think some of that's because of homo-negativity. It plays into people having a discomfort around it. Particularly, I would say straight men. Sometimes there's a discomfort of, "I'm going to be in a group of LGBTQ people, how do I act?" Sometimes we talk about that. You have to laugh about it, if you don't, you'll just be angry.

Other participants note similar feelings of allyship through the lens of in and out group membership. Luke (transmale) notes: "So to identify allies, usually most LGBT community members I assume are going to be an instant ally. Sometimes that's not the case but in most scenarios it is." Additional participants echoed this sentiment: "usually if people are allies to women, they are also gonna be allies to LGBTQ people." (Tori). Although noted as unreliable, perceived in-group members are expected to show greater support. Across the board, there were a number of demographic criteria that contributed to sensemaking by LGBTQ+ members of their colleagues. In many instances, participants also noted how their assumptions about one component of a demographic did not result in the allyship that they had originally assumed.

Other Demographics

Whereas religious references were more recurrent among the data, other demographics were mentioned with less frequency. Due to their less prominent role in the data, each will receive only brief attention.

Race. Interestingly, the matter of race showed up very rarely as a marker with which LGTBQ+ employees identified allies or non-allies. Instead, race presented as a criterion which led participants to amend their perceptions of a "given" ally—specifically the presumption that a racial minority would be an automatic ally. In the earlier example of an exchange occurring outside a courthouse between Gail, a trans female, and an African American woman, Gail noted her surprise at the woman's biases due to race, saying, "And I always found it interesting that here's a woman, an African-American woman, from the faith-based community. And you would think, all of those

factors, we would be allies." For Gail, her counterpart's membership in a marginalized group suggested the potential for greater understanding of the marginalization of others. Instead, this instance highlights the fallibility of this sensemaking because her understandings were challenged during the encounter. This challenge toppled assumptions about gender, racial minority status, and religious orientation.

Age. Participants noted times when perceived age contributed to schemas supporting ally status. Stan noted: "Younger people are more accepting, more liberal," and Tori noted: "I think I usually also expect that people who are younger are gonna be more of an ally to me." Stan and Tori's assertion paralleled those of other participants who perceived more allies among younger age groups, also drawing upon conclusions developed through ongoing sensemaking (i.e., the idea that as time goes on acceptable goes up as older generations leave the workplace).

Gender. Participants also spoke of the demographic of gender as a means of categorizing coworker's ally or non-ally status, usually in the context of safety and comfort. Almost every participant noted greater degrees of comfort with women. Luke noted: "I'm more cautious with men than women." Jeff, a gay male, noted: "Even most of the people who I work with, actually, most of them are women. I think that makes it easier for me as well. But I think that of the men that I work with, I never get the sense that there's any comfortableness." Participants clearly perceived a greater possibility of allyship among women, possibly speaking to the retrospective nature of sensemaking and the role that past encounters with women might have played for out participants.

Reference to Industry

The next criterion that emerged for LGBTQ+ members as they assessed coworker's ally status involved references to professional industry, which moves from more general demographics into more specialized distinctions within the workplace: (1) Workplace Type, and (2) Workplace Culture. The following paragraphs develop the contexts for each category.

Workplace type. Workplace type consisted of sensemaking impressions that participants made concerning the nature of the workplace. In some instances, participants discussed their "fit" within an organization or industry. Sasha, a bisexual female in banking noted: "especially in the financial industry it is typically older Caucasian leaders, and so I think there isn't a lot of understanding." Conversely, other participants described workplace types as accepting of diverse positionalities. Lindy, a lesbian in a NYC-based theater company described her choices about self-presentation as: "If I was working in a business that wasn't surrounded by the limelight or an idea of Broadway being something, I think I would definitely be a lot more under the table, if not even fully." Participants identified some industries as safer locations for LGBTQ+ identity enactment than others.

Workplace culture. Keyton (2011) defined workplace culture as, "set(s) of artifacts, values, and assumptions that emerge from the interactions of organizational members" (p. 1). In this study, we tracked the sensemaking that LGBTQ+ members engaged in based on interactions with organizational members in general. Culture differs from coworker communication in that a solidified culture looks to normative patterns in coworker behavior rather than isolated instances. In an instance where the data yielded a negative case example, Joan, a trans female described outcomes that defied the schemas she had developed about her white-collar coworkers versus the blue-collar construction workers present in her building.

> . . ..especially in my office where it's a mix of really funky interior designers mixed with very anal straight, clean cut straight guys, and the other side of the office, we have construction guys. The mullet, pickup truck driving, yeehaw kind of guys. Surprisingly, the construction guys have been the most supportive, and some of the really Nelly guys that you're thinking like, "Okay, he's kind of in the closet, and he's going to be great," turns out to be the one that started rumors about you.

In Joan's example, her experience does not vanquish existing ideas about different professions, however her experience of specific organizational members points to the fallibility of those schemas. This interpretation parallels other references to negative cases wherein the schema were applied, however the lived experience proved the limitations of the schema.

In other instances, participants noted that workplace assimilation necessitated engaging in a heightened level of emotional labor and mental load. Terrance mentioned: "I got the idea that there were other gay people in my workspace when I first started at the library, but it was still this stressful time of, 'okay, who do I think might not be okay with this? Who do I think is completely and totally okay with the fact that I'm gay?'" Transitioning to a new organization demanded additional effort in determining ally status, especially through the lens of decisions grounded in identity construction and having to choose how and when to present.

Observed and Experienced Interactions

We have thus far identified how LGBTQ+ participants use categories such as race, religion and gender to make sense of coworkers' ally status based on schema ranging from broad demographic and workplace industry perceptions, to specific indicators, such as personal preference. This last category articulates specific interactions, often verbally communicated, that unambiguously indicated ally or non-ally status. The behaviors referenced in this category were construed as a form of sensegiving about ally status from coworkers, although we doubt that the coworkers were intending or even aware of their messaging. Messages with communicated intent were explicitly stated or overheard, resulting in sensemaking that was extracted from cues—specifically verbal cues from colleagues. Specific statements of non-allyship manifested for participants in casual conversations such as one offered by Tanya:

> I had a conversation with somebody who I until this moment, really liked and respected. I still do but with this unfortunate caveat, where it turned into a conversation about how his son really liked to cook, and that made him uncomfortable. It ended with him saying, "Well at least my son isn't trans." There was nothing in me that knew how to address that. That was that moment of "Oh, you are not one of my people, this is really sad."

When talking about topics germane to the LGBTQ+ community, a comment against one segment of the community made the interactant assume their coworker was a non-ally.

Other causal conversational cues about allyship involved overhearing workplace chatter. "Just hearing those conversations made me realize that people maybe aren't as educated or as accepting." (Sasha, bisexual), and "Yeah if people are saying bigoted things, I have a feeling that they're not an ally." (Shantrise, identifies as lesbian and queer). Charles, a gay male teaching in Oklahoma made sense of colleagues based on other teachers treatment of students. He said: "We have students who are trans, pansexual . . . bi, gay, straight. We run the gamut. The way [teachers] treat the students who are not gender conforming really says whether or not they would be an ally." Like verbally communicated disregard for a segment of the LGBTQ+ community during interaction, occasions of observed bigotry or discriminatory tendencies triggered conclusions about allyship.

Some participants shared specific behaviors having nothing to do with sexuality as providing clues for supportiveness. For example, one participant noted openness to correction as a factor that indicated allyship or not. Rainbow, an individual who identifies as trans queer, noted "The more open a person is to being told that they're wrong, the more likely they are to be an ally, I find." Rainbow's example highlights ways in which a person's qualities are seen as being compatible with allyship. Another type of perceived message from coworkers involved socializing outside of work. Dennis, a gay male in risk services remembered an instance where his boss verbally supported a lesbian coworker: "I actually think my boss is an ally. He invited the woman and her wife over to his home for a barbecue. He said, "Why don't you bring your wife?"" Several participants recognized the significance of this interaction outside work. Whereas the interaction within the workplace may be required, the decision to interact outside of work can function to signal allyship.

Discussion

This study addresses the research question: *How do LGBTQ+ employees engage in sensemaking to identify allies in the workplace?* We have answered this question by identifying three distinct criteria that LGBTQ+ employees use to assess coworker ally status, starting broadly and moving down to specific interactions: (1) Expression of Demographics, (2) Reference to Industry, and (3) Observed and Experienced Interactions. This discussion unpacks two main findings pertaining to the construction of ally identification schema by LGBTQ+ employees: (1) schema construction by LGBTQ+ members is a powerful component of sensemaking, but sometimes result in

flawed assessments of others, and (2) Allies can develop deliberate and visible ways of lifting the mental load burden from LGBTQ+ employees.

To be clear, schema construction occurs for all people, not just LGBTQ+ individuals, and commonly, the reliance on schemas stemming from sensemaking is a powerful coping mechanism employed to quickly assess an individual's safety and security. In the same way that we might misconstrue an individual's crossed arms to annoyance, or a shy person's silence as aloofness, we must acknowledge that schema building does not always yield correct interpretations. Our study addresses the idea that schema construction by some LGBTQ+ members involves a powerful sensemaking outcome that can result in the problematic sensemaking principle of plausible but inaccurate conclusions.

Our study also focuses on the additional pressure that plausible but inaccurate conclusions can place on the mental health of the LGBTQ+ employees. Working with imperfect schema for important decisions adds pressure to the mental load that LGBTQ+ employees face because these kinds of disclosures are so high stakes. Participants reported that reinforcement of schemas aligning with assumed allyship such as positive ally behaviors (i.e., advocacy) or explicit statements of support prompted them to conclude that the person engaging in those behaviors and making those statements was an ally. Conversely, participants determined non-ally status pursuant to interactions indicating unequivocal intolerance, prejudice, malice, or hate. Conclusions based on explicit and direct statements or behaviors invite less variance in interpretation: if an individual makes a derogatory comment, they are probably not an ally. If they show support through immediate advocate action, they are probably an ally.

The more interesting moments of sensemaking, and the more powerful contribution to this study are in less explicit times when participants could not readily rely on schemas. Plausible but inaccurate interpretations are understandable when the nature of cognitions and schema building is unpacked. Schema building as a sensemaking process is time-saving. Paas, Renkl, et al. (2003) conclude that "knowledge organized in schemas allows learners to categorize multiple interacting elements of information as a single element, thus reducing the burden on working memory" (p. 2). Paas, Renkl, et al (2003) suggest that this schema shortcut development occurs as a means of automating new memory development, allowing learners to bypass the opportunity to make new memories in favor of placing interpretations in past conclusions. Patterns in the data supported this finding. When participants were marginalized in the past by a person exhibiting specific demographic traits, they would apply similar cognitions to coworkers with the same demographic traits (e.g., region, religion, etc.).

The sensemaking process occasionally produces inaccurate schemas. This glitch in schema construction yields plausible but potentially inaccurate conclusions and connects to a greater sensemaking process. For example, a member of the LGBTQ+ community may be wary of coworkers from the south due to previous experiences that support the schema that people from the south tend to be religious, conservative, or intolerant. While there are certainly plausible, and sadly, accurate accounts of such

intolerance from some southerners, this example illustrates how sweeping stereo-typical inferences about a general population may lead to stereotyping. In fact, researchers warn against the damaging nature of sweeping inferences, concluding that "stereotype-relevant information tends to become more stereotypical, thus confirming the stereotypes held by recipients of communication" (Lyons & Kashima, 2003, p. 989). Our data also support the danger of making mistakes during occasions where the participants reported finding a surprising ally who did not fit the schema. In short, schemas are tricky. They tend to produce and reproduce the same mental patterns, and occasionally, the mental patterns that are produced and reproduced can enhance stereotypes.

To be clear, we in no way place blame at the feet of the LGBTQ+ community. In fact, we recognize that the LGBTQ+ members are doing an enormous amount of internal mental load assessing the safety of coworkers in their organizations (Grandey, 2000). We also recognize that allies can better assist in lifting that burden, returning to the idea that an ally recognizes that "although equality and equity are goals that have not yet been achieved . . . she or he has a role in helping to make these goals realities" (Washington & Evans, 1991, p. 197). One direct method of allyship involves developing deliberate and visible ways of lifting the mental load burden from LGBTQ+ employees through the allies' own public self-presentation. Public self-presentation connects directly to Goffman's (1978) conclusion that we all engage in constructing public-facing ways of desiring to be seen. Deliberate self-presentation can be accomplished through appearance and manner (Goffman, 1978). An ally can engage in creating public-facing behaviors and artifacts that clearly communicate ally status, thus alleviating the burden from the LGBTQ+ coworker.

Practical Recommendations

This study provided the opportunity to shed light on ally and non-ally status from the perspective of LGBTQ+ employees. We provide recommendations for allies and potential allies below, as well as recommendations for the LGBTQ+ workforce.

1. Allies can acknowledge and legitimize the mental load burden for LGBTQ+ coworkers: Scholars have acknowledged the importance of offering social support to employees whose roles necessitate heavy emotional regulation and an intense mental load (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Bhave & Glomb, 2016; Hartley, 2018). This study demonstrates how LGBTQ+ employees engage in intense amounts of schema management through sensemaking which in turn, increases their mental load burdens. Allies can acknowledge the additional sensemaking dilemmas and self-disclosure choices for LGBTQ+ employees and lift that burden by sensegiving through verbal communication strategies. One example from the data dealt with international work travel concerns and the hostile environment that LGBTQ+ employees may face. Allies, who are not facing the same international stressors, can be aware of the need to be vigilant about protecting the privacy of their LGBTQ+ colleagues abroad.

Someone who is "out" in the United States may not be "out" in the Bahamas due to safety concerns.

2. Allies can commit to sensegiving messages to alleviate the burden on LGBTQ+ employees: Organizational research demonstrates more successful outcomes when an individual intentionally crafts direct and deliberate messages (Fairhurst, 2010). In short, the sensegiver is easing the burden of the mental load by providing meaning and taking the guesswork out of the cognitive process (Minei, 2015). Allies can sensegive verbally by communicating messages demonstrating ally intentions. Examples includes acknowledging LGBTQ+ support in conversation (e.g., "I was a member of a PFLAG chapter in college"), positive references to local LGBTQ+ social establishments and events (e.g., "I attended the Pride Parade in 2018"), mentioning recent social engagements with LGBTQ+ family and friends (e.g., "My brother and his husband. . ."), deliberately stating preferred pronouns, gently correcting coworkers who use gender inappropriate pronouns (e.g., by saying "I think you meant 'she'"), avoiding heteronormative assumptions about the sex of coworker's partner, and through verbal censure of individuals displaying hostility, intolerance, or aggressions. Further, when a coworker does come out, an ally can respond helpfully with "thank you for sharing such a personal disclosure, please let me know how I can support you."

3. Allies can recognize that their nonverbal personal indicators and artifacts might fit within common cultural schemas: This study demonstrated that participants used artifacts (such as wearing a cross on a necklace) from others in their sensemaking processes. Venkataraman et al. (2013) assess that "just as narratives infuse artifacts with meaning and value, artifacts shape and give value to narratives" (p. 164). Allies can realize that they may inadvertently trigger perceptions of non-ally status through artifacts displayed at work. In the instances where a person desires allyship but might fall into a more traditionally linked non-allyship category (e.g., conservative region, displayed religious affiliation, industry associated with intolerance), we recommend that the person demonstrate external visible markers indicating ally status. Such markers could include LGBTQ+ bumper stickers, flyers posted to the office door, an email signature that identifies desired pronouns, sharing a supportive LGBTQ+ event, article, or message on digital platforms like LinkedIn, or advertising an LGBTQ+ work-related resource or event, like World Aids Day, or a local Pride Event. This visual display allows for LGBTQ+ members to recognize both personal artifacts from an ally and the artifacts demonstrating support and allyship without having to engage in self-disclosure about sexual orientation.

4. Organizations can reduce the mental load burden through event or campaign collaboration with LGBTQ+ ERGs: Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) have been around since the 1960's and provide a safe space for minority populations in the workplace, like individuals with disabilities, ethnic and racial

groups, and LGBTQ+ populations and contribute to career development, inclusion, and community building (Dennissen et al., 2016). ERGs can create opportunities for employees to demonstrate allyship (e.g., meeting invitations that use language such as: "open to all LGBTQ+ & straight ally associates of COMPANY NAME"). As a means of showing support and reducing mental load, organizations promote better ally visibility. Visibility can occur through organization participation at LGBTQ+ centered events, like World Pride Day, the Aids Walk, or through creating a marketing campaign that prioritizes LGBTQ+ clientele.

5. LGBTQ+ employees can create space to engage in appropriate self-care: Because of the aforementioned mental load, members of the LGBTQ+ community experience strains that many straight colleagues do not. This study reveals ways that this mental processing overload might be routinized in ways that LGBTQ+ employees do not consciously recognize. For LGBTQ+ employees who are still unfortunately working in environments where they do not feel comfortable sharing their sexual and/or gender identity, we encourage them to understand that increased mental load exists, is valid, and requires additional, deliberate attention to self-care.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although we were successful in achieving diverse ethnicities and LGBTQ+ subgroups, further diversification would be desirable in the inclusion of additional ethnic groups. Although participants were asked to self-identify in their own words, we found difficulty in capturing the myriad of positionalties for each participant. Future studies might consider including more representation including individuals who identify as some of the more nuanced or emerging designations (e.g., as pansexual, intersex, or asexual). Additionally, our study had excellent representation in the demographics of caucasian and black participants, with less representation among the Latinx, and Asian demographics. Future studies might expand data collection to include greater demographic diversity to identify the influence of culture and heritage in the findings. Future work could also parse out the nuance in LGBTQ+ specific mental load concerns.

Conclusion

This study addressed how LGBTQ+ participants use schema and sensemaking to determine whether a coworker is an ally or non-ally. We addressed this from the perspective of assessing how LGBTQ+ participants make sense of coworkers, rather than how cis gender, straight colleagues make sense of the LGBTQ+ community. We developed specific practical recommendations pertaining both to nonverbal artifacts and verbal indicators of allyship. We supported the idea that LGBTQ+ sensemaking is complex, nuanced, and difficult, and that allies can take deliberate and actionable steps to ease the mental load burden. In engaging with the results, we also indicate that

recognizing such a burden is worth validation of the struggle and compassionate self-care.

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. In what ways are any LGBTQ policies communicated in your organization?
2. In what ways are your (work policy) needs different from the individual groups within LGBTQ?
3. In your experience, how has the organizational policy been supportive, or non-supportive of the LGBTQ community?
4. What policy would you change at work regarding your LGBTQ identity?
5. Please tell me about any aspects of your (LGBTQ) identity that you "hide" or avoid referencing in your work life that straight employees can be more open about?
6. Please recall any behaviors by co-workers that have made you feel particularly well accepted at your workplace?
7. How do you identify potential allies (or non-supporters) at your workplace? Are there any telling behaviors?
8. Tell me of any evidence of heterosexism or discrimination toward (LGBT) persons existing within your workplace? In what ways do you respond to those occurrences?
9. When you are among other members of the (LGBTQ) community, do you ever find yourself "blowing off steam" about your work life? What kinds of things have you said or heard?
10. If you could change one thing about your workplace, as it relates to your (LGBTQ) identity, what would it be?

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