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Out at work: a phenomenological study of influencers in a persons choice to self-disclose sexual orientation in the workplace

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OUT AT WORK: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF
INFLUENCERS IN A PERSONS CHOICE TO
SELF-DISCLOSE SEXUAL ORIENTATION
IN THE WORKPLACE

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A Research Project

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graziadio Business School

Pepperdine University

_____

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science

in

Organization Development

_____

by

Norman Matthew Barbour

August 2019

This research project, completed by

NORMAN MATTHEW BARBOUR

under the guidance of the Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been

submitted to and accepted by the faculty of The Graziadio Business School in partial

fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE
IN ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

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Faculty Committee

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Abstract

This qualitative study done through phenomenological and lived experience research, set out to further the understanding of out at work employees and explore the factors that most influenced their decision to come out in the workplace. 11 employees across the country who identified as out-at-work were interviewed and asked to describe the things that were most influential to them in the process of deciding whether to come out. Findings indicated that employees were motivated by a desire to help others by being out, the visibility of other out-at-work employees, and multiple supportive leadership behaviors. Employees also indicated that there were external factors that had an influence on their decision, inclusive of the political environment and geography.

Keywords: out-at-work, visibility, supportive leadership behaviors

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Chapter 1: Introduction

All organizations have purpose. That purpose may be philanthropic, to provide a service, or to make money. Regardless of intent, there is a need to both fund the operation and do so as efficiently as possible. Large financial institutions are charged with providing financial services to the public and, in turn, deliver monetary gains to its shareholders or members. One can look back millennia to see that this is a model that has always existed, exchanging a product or service for something of value in return.

With the intent of maximizing performance and return, most organizations push to do more of what they do, to do it faster, and cheaper. Organizations big and small ask themselves this, and there have been many answers: increased productivity, increased quality, streamlined business processes, role definitions for the workforce, generalist or specialist, etc. One relatively new area being explored is employee engagement, coupled with greater diversity and inclusion initiatives.

As organizations began to recognize that an engaged workforce was a productive workforce, they began to formalize efforts to increase engagement. Today, this most frequently has taken the form of employee engagement surveys to garner direct feedback, employee resource networks, and formal diversity and inclusion programs and practices. The understanding that there is value in difference runs core to many of these initiatives. Diversity is encompassing of most differences including race, religion, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, and ability. Many large organizations have made broad efforts to demonstrate a line of inclusiveness that, from afar, look spot on. The positive impacts for many cannot be under-valued, yet there are still gaps despite these human enterprises. As one moves further from the "initiative" and closer to real life, an opportunity for improvement starts to reveal itself.

The LGBT Workforce

This opportunity exists for all subordinated groups at different times and in different ways. This research will focus on the lesbian, gay, bi, and transgender (LGBT) community. The evolution of inclusiveness for the LGBT workforce is still in its relative infancy and, in many ways, the corporate world has led the charge. With pride alliances, Out at Work, and Ally programs nearly ubiquitous, there is no shortage of outward support. It is important to remember there is an espoused "company stance" and there is the practiced "real world." It's also important to remember that none of this works unless an employee is out at work and has chosen to "self-disclose."

Being Out at Work

This element of self-disclosure is where further exploration is necessary. Research shows that between 10% - 14% of all employees in today's workforce are "non-heterosexual" (Powers, 1996). And though one may feel (in 2019) there are broad protections in the workplace for this population of employees, there are currently only 22 states plus the District of Columbia that have non-discrimination labor laws that are inclusive of the LGBT community (Movement Advancement Project | Non-Discrimination Laws, 2017). It is important to note that two of these states, New Hampshire and Wisconsin, do not include transgendered protections in their laws. Put another way, it is legal to fire an employee for their sexual orientation or gender identity in 28 states. Furthermore, before the historic Supreme Court ruling in *Obergefell vs. Hodges* on June 26th, 2015, 13 states had either amended their state constitutions or created new laws to prohibit same-sex marriage. These statistics demonstrate that within the United States, there is not wholesale acceptance of the LGBT community. Today, "religious freedom" laws are arising as a means of granting those who chose the capacity

to deny service to LGBT patrons. The political and cultural climate for this community is as polarizing as ever.

This polarization and disquiet for LGBT employees leaves ever-present the question about whether they feel safe enough to come out at work. The choice to come out at work is a deeply personal and an incredibly difficult one for many to make. Unfortunately, despite nearly 89% of Fortune 500 companies including non-discrimination protections for their LGBT employees, 25% of those employee's report discrimination within the last five years and one in 10 LGBT employees have left their place of employment because the environment was unwelcoming (Out and Equal, 2017). These statistics demonstrate that even with significant corporate initiatives to create inclusive environments, the implications of being out at work (discrimination and fear of retaliation specifically) are varied and impactful.

As parity to the implications of being out at work, there are concerns with choosing not to self-disclose. Employees who have chosen to remain closeted report higher levels of stress, lower job satisfaction, lower productivity, and a drain of energy while focusing on the attempt to hide their true identity (Griffith & Hebl, 2002). The experiences of closeted employees are counter to the aim of inclusive corporate guidelines. There is reasoning behind this choice though. An employee may face a multitude of factors that make the decision to come out difficult. They may work in a line of business that is highly masculinized, there may be a leader who does not actively demonstrate inclusive behaviors, there may be a history of retaliation or discrimination within a department, or there may even be coworkers who actively discuss their opposition to this group of individuals. Many of these factors serve to reduce the

psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). an employee feels at work. Individuals who choose not to be out with their families may also be less likely to be out at work (Griffith & Hebl, 2002).

Considering the complexity of someone's decision to be out at work, there is a paradox in these environments where a company may actively encourage this decision, yet the choice remains incredibly difficult. Research exists that supports these efforts, but there is a lack of understanding about the experiences of these LGBT employees.

Research Objective

The purpose of this study is to develop further understanding of out at work employees and explore the factors that most influence their decision to come out in the workplace. This study could also generate a sounder perspective on other considerations that either encourage or inhibit an employee's willingness to be out.

Implications of the Study

The benefit of this research would be to have an impact on both the LGBT employee experience and gain insights into what an organization could do to create better environments in which their employees felt safe coming out. Ultimately, that improved future state would increase employee engagement that leads to higher discretionary effort which subsequently equates to a more productive and profitable workforce. Not only is it the right thing to do, but it generates a symbiotic reward for organization and employee, and this proposed research may garner further valuable insights to be used in the future.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this research was to develop further the understanding of out at work employees and explore the factors that most influence their decision to come out in the workplace. Like others that carry an invisible stigma, the LGBTQ employee must weigh risks and assess their environment before making that choice. The risks often outweigh the benefits as social stigmas can be detrimental to a person's identity and leave them subjects of discrimination. The importance of leadership behaviors and inclusive company policies to any diverse employee is crucial to their ability to bring their full selves to work.

This chapter reviews existing literature on the considerations that the LGBTQ community take into account when making the critical decision to be out at work. It also reviews the impact that corporate diversity initiatives have on laying the groundwork for leaders to create an inclusive environment. In essence, this chapter seeks to answer the question: what are foundational factors the LGBTQ associate considers when choosing to disclose hidden parts of their identity?

Invisible Stigma

The Oxford dictionary defines stigma as a "mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality or person." Certain qualities they may possess easily characterize individuals, and there are often values, positive or negative, that correlate with these characteristics. Dependent on the social constructs of one's environment, some of these characteristics are seen as a stigma on their existence. These stigmas have lasting and powerful impacts on a person and can result in varying outcomes for the individual.

And given that stigmas are often considered "socially undesirable, deviant, or repulsive," the outcomes for many are adverse (Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007, p. 1104).

Some have no choice but to disclose their stigma as it is outwardly visible (e.g., race, disability, gender), yet others may carry what is called an invisible stigma. These particular stigmas are not outwardly apparent and require a level of disclosure by the stigmatized person. Mental illness, certain religions, invisible medical conditions (e.g., Hepatitis, HIV/AIDS, PTSD), sexual orientation, and/or gender identity would all be considered invisible stigmas. The pressures are unique for those with invisible stigmas as there is often a weight carried with the choice to disclose. A constant need to assess and reassess the environment and the type of reception one may receive creates a tremendous amount of stress for an employee who has not yet disclosed. This is especially true for the LGBT employee as it is still legal in many states to discriminate against someone for their sexual orientation or gender identity (Ragins et al., 2007). The LGBT employee is therefore left to carefully analyze the environment which consists of opinions of peers, corporate inclusion policies, and the attitudes held by their leaders (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003). The past is also a reliable indicator to those with invisible stigmas as they layer in the experiences preceding the current environment when making an assessment. In fact, it is hypothesized that these stigmas have an impact on identity, behaviors, cognition, and affect (Levin, n.d.).

Not only is the LGBT employee's mental well-being tested in these moments, but their performance and integration as a whole person in the workplace is also impacted. Those who have not yet chosen to disclose their sexual orientation at any level are left expending tremendous amounts of energy hiding their identities and end up in a fearful

and costly internal battle. This energy takes away from their ability to focus on the tasks at hand and can lead to a decline in productivity or inability to meet or exceed expectations. The result is the potential for promotional opportunities to go to others or even possible disciplinary action. Though the research has provided inconsistent results, it does show there is a higher level of engagement, productivity, and a more positive experience for those that do choose to disclose their sexual orientation (Fassinger, 1995). It is important to note that given the struggle of this particular group of employees, a primary indicator as to whether or not an employee chooses to disclose their full identity is the presence of a supportive leader (Jordan & Deluty, 1998).

Disclosure

Disclosure can vary in both scope and breadth. As a person considers the consequences of disclosing their invisible stigma, they may come to a variety of decision-making criteria such as "to who" and "how much" should be shared. Ranging from full-disclosure to none at all, a multitude of factors have been considered when the time comes to determine what will happen next for the person in each scenario.

Ragins et al. (2007) state some of the factors under consideration are: past experiences in similar situations, the current environment and culture, perceived leadership support, corporate policies that either affirm or omit ones perceived stigma, fear of negative repercussions, attitudes of co-workers, and even the persons own comfort with themselves. The process is a very stressful one for an employee to undertake and, in many cases, it is an ongoing process that takes place with every new interaction. For the LGBT employee, past experiences weigh heavily. Upwards of 53% of LGBT employees report having been discriminated against in a manner that negatively impacted the work

environment ("2017 Workplace Equality Fact Sheet," 2017). Barrett and Swim (1998) observed that prior discrimination sensitized individuals to the potential for discrimination and proposed that those that have experienced previous threats may see threats in their current circumstances. This fear has led up to one-third of gay and lesbian employees choosing not to disclose their sexual orientation in the workplace (Croteau, 1996; D'Augelli & Grossman, 2001).

Those who choose not to disclose will proceed to conceal their real identities at varying costs to their psychological health but have often wanted to do so as a means of self-preservation. The cost-benefit analysis has, at least in the current situation, led the employee to determine it is best to continue to "pass" as heterosexual. Conversely, some employees have done the analysis and decided to disclose. The level of disclosure may also depend on this thorough analysis of the current circumstances. Some may choose to tell a close, trusted peer and leave it at that. Others may decide to tell only their close peers and their leader. Some may even choose to be entirely out in all situations. Nonetheless, a process has taken place that leads the employee to determine what is most comfortable for them at the moment. This does not mean that one's choice does not evolve; it is merely a starting point (Ragins et al., 2007).

Corporate Inclusion Culture

Corporate inclusion practices have often either been mandated due to federal or state law or they have, at times, led the path for more progressive culture. As non-discrimination policies have evolved, they have included everything from gender to race. Other additions have included disability, veteran status, and religion. Many of these are nearly ubiquitous throughout the modern workplace. However, many companies have not

included sexual orientation in their non-discrimination policies. The fear of termination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity is one many LGBT employees face. There have been pioneering companies that led the way with their inclusive policies. IBM hailed a "Respect for the Individual" policy upon its founding which, by 1985, included sexual orientation and uniquely situated itself as a leader in this area. (Colgan, Creegan, McKearney, & Wright, 2007).

IBM's early internal efforts with the LGBT community have demonstrated their commitment to creating an inclusive culture. The concept of an inclusive culture is predicated on the idea that those with varying backgrounds, life experiences, and differences have value to add to the workplace *because* of their differences. Though seen as the "right thing to do," it is also known that this type of environment allows for employees to better contribute in the workplace and therefore achieve superior outcomes (Pless & Maak, 2004). Given that diversity and inclusion have become business imperatives, the importance of creating this inclusive culture is as foundational. As communities grow in diversity, the employee's that serve them are also increasingly more diverse. Given these dynamics gaps in the culture may prevent someone from feeling as though they can bring their full selves, and therefore all their talents, to the workplace. Wentling (2004) discovered that companies that simply have top executives support inclusive strategies was insufficient. Success was found when the *culture* of the organization supported these initiatives. Wentling (2004) also discovered that when leaders did not understand the value of diversity, this would get in the way of creating the inclusive culture the executive leaders were striving to build.

More specifically, the LGBT community relies on organizational leaders to be proactive in creating this environment. And, for many LGBT employees, they have seen an implementation gap in policy and actual practice (Colgan et al., 2007). This leaves the norms needed to support the inclusive culture in jeopardy and a stronger reliance on other diversity initiatives to aid in helping diverse employees in their professional environment.

Corporate Diversity Initiatives

Diversity initiatives have come about for a multitude of reasons. From being the "right thing to do," to legislative adherence, to the fear of litigation, companies have taken the opportunity to introduce policies that bring a variety of experiences to the table. And as globalization had taken deep root in the corporate environment, a diverse workforce is seen as the optimal tool to meet the needs of most companies (Pless & Maak, 2004).

These tools began to see their prominence rise with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibited discrimination in the workplace based on race, color, sex, national origin, and religion. Other classes have come to be protected over time such as age, veteran status, pregnancy, familial status, disability, genetic information, and (on a limited basis) sexual orientation. Since, companies have adopted a wide range of programs and policies to meet the needs of these prohibitions (Williams, Kilanski, & Muller, 2014). The many new policies introduced included special recruitment efforts, affinity groups, and diversity programs; specific mechanisms to reduce bias in performance reviews; committees to reduce barriers to diversity; and numerical goals to increase diverse and underrepresented populations (Bielby, Krysan, & Herring, 2013).

To underscore the importance of these initiatives, many larger companies require robust diversity and inclusion training by both employees and leaders alike.

Specific to the LGBT population, corporations have introduced amendments to their non-discrimination policies that include sexual orientation and in some cases gender identity. Domestic partner health benefits, the recognition of domestic partners as family in bereavement policies, the inclusion of DP's in the use of medical leave, and the introduction of medical coverage for employees who are undergoing various gender identity treatments are a few of the benefits now afforded the LGBT community in many corporate settings (Davison & Rouse, 2005)

In addition to the benefits that many LGBT employees have at their disposal (specifically in larger national and multi-national corporations), other efforts to create an inclusive environment are also relatively robust. There are employee networks for LGBT associates prevalent in many large cities with virtual representation in more rural areas. There are "Ally" programs in which heterosexual co-workers can actively demonstrate their support for their LGBT peers. And there is also representation at many pride events or sponsorship of organizations that support LGBT rights, such as the Human Rights Campaign. Collectively corporate diversity initiatives are strong at the highest, most visible layers of the organization for most people with a difference that defines them. Where many of these efforts seem to fall short is in the implementation of the more inclusive policies. This provides a definitive gap for future research to explore (Colgan et al., 2007).

Leaders – The Implementation Gap

As organizations create various initiatives that demonstrate support and value for diversity in the workplace, they are largely reliant on their leaders to execute the implementation of these policies. When the number of employees reaches tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands, the expectation of leaders is to conscientiously implement policy. However, as leaders juggle operational expectations or struggle with personal commitment to diversity, the benefits are difficult to realize (Cornelius, Gooch, & Todd, 2001; Foster & Harris, 2006; Noon, 2007). It is often seen that the benefits of diversity do not come to fruition as the front-line leaders are left to implement and frequently fail to do so. For instance, race and gender diversity may be an espoused value corporately, but as both hiring and management of teams are left to the organization's leaders, the workplace may remain heterogenous (Kirton, Robertson, & Avdelidou-Fischer, 2016).

Leaders have also expressed that managing diversity expectations meant more to navigate daily. This caused the value of diversity to be lost as leaders must then be concerned about managing differences in the workplace. This can lead managers to become less enthusiastic about creating an inclusive environment as diversity work is something that they "have to do" (Foster & Harris, 2006).

Specific to the LGBT employee, affirming policies may exist; however, without the support of leaders, gay and lesbian employees may see "fewer rewards, resources, or opportunities on the job than they deserve" (Button, 2001, p. 18). Ready access to supervisors, group acceptance, and autonomy may also be limited in a less supportive

leadership structures (Burke, 1991). In fact, despite organizational efforts to the contrary, some leaders and peers openly promote a homophobic atmosphere through jokes and trivialities of sexual minorities. The open disregard for an inclusive work environment may be extreme, but it indeed exists. Other examples could include being complicit through silence or participating in conversations that use non-inclusive language. This leaves the employees in the workplace highly guarded, as it is obvious they are not in a safe environment in which they can bring this aspect of their identity to work (Gregory, 2011). Some overt and others less so, the implementation gap can have a significant impact on the culture and environment.

Support of Others/Allies

A strong predictor of self-disclosure is the presence of supportive others or allies in the workplace. It is known that employees will have a higher likelihood of disclosure if they are surrounded by people they perceive as supportive (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003). Considering the stigma theory mentioned supra, these supportive co-workers need not necessarily share the stigmatized trait. There is, however, research that demonstrates the presence of others that share the stigma will have a positive impact on an employee's decision to come out (Ethier & Deaux, 1994). There is a positive correlation between the environment where the employee sees visible support and rates of disclosure.

Socio-Political Considerations

As an employee navigates this decision, it is important to note that socio-political considerations may arise. The location of the employee may dictate what supportive legislation exists to protect them as well as implications to the general sentiment toward

LGBT people. A study by Gallup (2012) demonstrated that attitudes towards the LGBT community were between 13% and 25% lower in the South than in other states. This is evidenced by the political landscape of these geographies. For instance, Missouri has omitted sexual orientation from its Missouri Human Rights Act, which outlines the states non-discrimination policies (Henrion, 2016). Conversely, California has some of the most robust protections in the United States. California includes both sexual orientation and gender identity in its non-discrimination laws (Glaser, 2003).

Additionally, the socio-political climate is influenced on a national level where candidates for office often harshly debate the inclusion of LGBT protections and legislations during campaigns. The climate for LGBT employees (citizens) can be influenced by the current political administration. For example, during the Obama administration, he was a vocal supporter of the repeal of *Don't Ask, Don't Tell*, a controversial law that allowed the discharge of military service members if they disclosed their sexual orientation (Reinke & Smith, 2011). He also lauded the 2015 Supreme Court decision which made it legal for all same-sex couples to marry in the United States saying, "This ruling is a victory for America. This decision affirms what millions of Americans already believe in their hearts: When all Americans are treated as equal we are all more free" (Remarks by the President on the Supreme Court Decision on Marriage Equality, 2015).   In contrast, President Trump has rolled back the ability for Transgender troops to serve in the military and is actively working to increase religious protections which are seen by many as a legal way to discriminate against LGBT citizens (Staff, 2017). Sexual orientation continues to be a controversial talking point in politics and there is an impact on the LGBT employee in the process.

Conclusion

The literature review presented the multi-dimensional paradigm that LGBT employees navigate when deciding whether be out at work. It is clear that many elements must be considered when the choice presents itself. From the phenomenon of invisible stigmas which must be disclosed to be known, to the varying levels of disclosure and the parameters considered on that continuum, the decisions are not a given. From the evolution of diversity in the workplace and initiatives that follow, to the varying levels of implementation from leaders, the external elements that tee up an employee's decision to come out are highly impactful.

It is clear that the existing literature supports the proposed research question at hand. Leaders do play a fundamental role in an employee's decision to be out at work. However, there is less literature to demonstrate what specific behaviors leaders exhibit that create a supportive culture in which this decision is made easier. There is also scant literature that reviews the impact of a substantive Out at Work program.

The support of others and the socio-political environment also have influence on employees. The degree may vary but it is known that these are influencers on the environment at large in which the employee is making their decision. A more in-depth exploration is needed to better understand the optimal factors that create an inclusive environment where LGBT employees can more comfortably be out at work.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

The purpose of this study is to develop further understanding of out at work employees and explore the factors that most influence their decision to come out in the workplace. This study could also generate a sounder perspective on other considerations that either encourage or inhibit an employee's willingness to be out.

Research Method

A qualitative mixed method approach was used in this research. Specifically, the use of phenomenological and lived experience research through narrative inquiry was chosen to further investigate this topic. The use of interviews allowed for a more authentic response from participants about their experiences while gaining valuable insights into the key-drivers of their behaviors. Using phenomenology and narrative research, questions could be used that share "life experiences of an individual and how they unfold over time" and identify "the essence that all persons experience about a phenomenon" (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007, p. 239). This approach also allowed for flexibility in response and data collection, especially for the LGB participants. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, it was important to ensure participants felt they could simply share their experiences.

Using phenomenology allowed the participants lived experiences, as told through their interview responses, to inform phenomena as it relates to coming out in the workplace. As the decision to be out at work is deeply personal, and the reasons vary for every person, this type of research makes space for humanness and helps the researcher avoid reductionistic tendencies (Giorgi, 2005). As the goal was to identify themes from a

diverse group of individuals with the shared phenomenon of coming out in the workplace, this research method was the most appropriate for the given objective. The specific interview questions used can be found in Appendix A.

Research Population

The population used for this research was LGB employees that self-identify as out-at-work with their current employer. Subjects spanned industries, organizations, and were from multiple states across the U.S. The goal was to interview a minimum 12 employees across varied organization sizes and industries. When possible, these interviews were in person, otherwise they were via webcam or phone. The interviews were conducted in a private setting of the participants choosing. This allowed confidentiality to be maintained.

An invitation was sent to potential participants that have already identified themselves as out-at-work drawn from the researcher's business and social network. The use of purposive sampling allowed the identification of subjects that were representative of the out-at-work population. This also allowed the researcher to establish relationships that best supported answering the questions (Maxwell, 2013). However, there was a minimal amount of convenience and snowball sampling where participants were asked if they might know at least one other individual who would be willing to participate in the research (Goodman, 1961). As these additional participants were not known to the researcher, a request for a warm introduction by the original participant was made in order to establish some initial rapport building.

Risks, Confidentiality, and Participant Protection

In general, there was minimal risk to the participants as they had already disclosed their sexual orientation in a public manner by being out in the workplace. However, the participants were anonymized. This was useful in the case that the participant disclosed anything they may have felt may have an impact on their experience in the workplace. Nevertheless, participants may have experienced some discomfort in recalling their coming out experiences if they were not favorable. Subjects participation in the study remained confidential. In an effort to protect the participants, invitations were sent to directly to participants via personal email accounts.

Administration

Once a subject responded affirmatively to the invitation, the research was overviewed, consent was gained, and data collection proceeded. Also, the participant received informed consent disclosures to further detail the process. Data was collected through interviews over one month. Interviews were recorded and participants were assured that they could drop out or refuse to answer a question without penalty.

Data Analysis

Creswell's (2007) six-step process of analyzing qualitative research was utilized to guide this project. Themes were identified from the data. Given the phenomenological nature of the analysis, recurrent moments of significance from the participants were employed. The nature of this research is highly personal, and it notably was used to see where the data intersects from participant to participant and where the data diverged. This data was then used to begin telling a story of what the primary influencers were in the

coming out process. A coding process was used to aid in the interpretation of the data. Where possible, meaning was given to the themes and categories to support the research outcomes (Creswell et al., 2007).

Summary

This chapter presented a description of the research methods for this study. The studies purpose was restated, and an explanation was given for choosing this particular methodology. Finally, this chapter discussed the intentions of how data would be collected. Chapter 4 presents the results of the research.

Chapter 4: Study Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the research question: what factors most influence an employee's decision to be out in the workplace? Specifically, the study addresses the following questions:

- What factors most influence an employee's decision to be out in the workplace?

- What behaviors does an employee's leader exhibit that either support or discourage an employee's decision to come out?

- What external factors, if any, influence an employee's decision to come out in the workplace?

Participant Demographics

32 participants were invited to join the study and 11 participated. Of these participants, five identified themselves as White/Caucasian, three identified as Chinese, two identified as Hispanic, and one identified as bi-racial. One of the participants was educated at the associate's degree level, five held bachelor's degrees, and five held master's degrees. The study was inclusive of five men, all of whom identified as gay, and six women, of which five identified as lesbian and one identified as bi-sexual. One participant was between the ages of 20-29, six were between 30-39, one between 40-49, and three were between the ages of 50-59.

Study Results

Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions to identify what influenced their decision to self-disclose in the workplace. The questions were crafted such that the participant would consider multiple factors when formulating an answer. The first set of questions was broad and elicited their most personal reactions as to why

they felt they wanted to come out. The second set of questions introduced leadership and culture as a consideration. The final set of questions wanted to the participant to consider if any external factors from the work environment may have influenced their decision to be out in the workplace. The themes that arose can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Themes from the Research Study

Personal Motivators	Frequency
Being of Service to Others	7
Costs of Covering	5
Presence of Out Employees	3
Relationships with Others	2
Supportive Corporate Policies	2
Outed by Leader	1

Personal Motivators

Service to Others. Participants answered two questions during this portion of the interview: "Why are you out in the workplace?" and "What factors were most important in influencing that decision?" As participants told their stories, themes evolved. The most common theme discussed by the participants was a desire to be out in order to be of service to others by being an example of someone who *was* out. This was mentioned throughout the interviews at various points but was repeated as a primary driver during this first section of questioning. For example, one participant said,

> I think it would be a disservice to myself and others if I weren't my full authentic
> self. I have worked with students in the past, and now I work with vulnerable

patients and they need to feel safe. I think it's important for me to be fully authentic and vulnerable in order to be my best self for them.

Another participant stated, "I want to be visible for others so they can be comfortable to be out." Participants stated they felt it was important for them to feel as if they were making a difference for others by being out. There was a recurrent acknowledgment that they knew having examples of others out in the workplace would make it easier for those considering it, as the visibility of others had an impact on their decision to self-disclose. This ties back to the stigma associated with being LGBT in the workplace. In fact, one participant shared that when she disclosed her sexual orientation to her leader, she was *discouraged* from further disclosing. She shares why she feels disclosure on her part is important in breaking this stigma:

> I think probably the biggest component is the advocacy piece, to make sure I contribute to others feeling comfortable being out at work. I have been in the position of not being comfortable and want to make sure others are comfortable. That is kind of important to me.

This same participant went on to say, "My manager knew I was gay and discouraged me from coming out because she thought it would hurt my career." The research shows that invisible stigma is incredibly impactful and a majority of the participants acknowledged that visibility on their part may help others. One participant stated, "It makes me part of the solution and not part of the problem." When it comes to sexual orientation, merely having others out in the workplace "may precipitate a social identity process that facilitates disclosure" (Ragins et al., 2007, p. 1106).

Costs of Covering. The next most common theme from was a desire to stop covering; the act of portraying oneself in a manner which is not authentic to who they are. Research shows that covering has detrimental effects on a person's career as well as their physical and psychological well-being (Ragins et al., 2007). Participants in this study used words such as "tired," "exhausted," "difficult," and "hard" when describing what it was like to cover their full authentic selves. These descriptions are indicative of the energy that is used to hide their identity and has an overall net-negative effect on the person. One participant said, "It's tiring, and it weighs on your spirit to have to lie about who you are." Another participant stated, "I find it stressful not to be out. I feel as if I am lying by omission and like I am doing an injustice to my community. I think it's important for me to be authentic and talk about my weekend." Finally, another participant continued, "It's tiring and exhausting to hide. If I'm hiding, that implies I have shame in myself, and I don't want to do that."

Participants discussed that in their past experiences there had been moments where they may have found it easier to cover or hide given the circumstance. However, none of them found this to be an optimal state of being and recognized the toll it took on them which ultimately led them to disclosure more often than not. Disclosure is also not a one-time event. A person must go through this decision-making process with each new introduction. Yet, participants have used their past to help inform these decisions and recognize the benefits of self-disclosure, even when difficult to so. One participant also describes how he differentiates disclosure in a social environment versus a professional one:

If it was a social conversation, I would be more apt to feel it out and put up a wall

before I disclose. If it was a professional conversation, I would think I need to be

more authentic for that; my walls would come up less. When I say it out loud, the

two situations shouldn't make a difference, but they still do. The lines are not as

clearly defined but I still feel my way through. If I had a student or someone that I

feel is opposed to my sexual identity, I will skirt the issue. But I wouldn't lie, I

would just change the subject. But if it was important to them, I would disclose so

they could decide if they wanted me to treat them.

Regardless of the situation, the energy participants needed to use to cover was a factor

that ultimately helped them determine it was in their best interest to disclose. This energy

can subsequently be spent on relationships and work. One participant said, "[I am out] so

I can bring my whole self to work. I don't have to cover, and I can spend all my energy

on my work and my relationships with people. This allows me to represent my

community. I owe it to my community to be out and open and vocal."

Presence of Out Employees. The visibility of others already out in the workplace

influenced many study subjects (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003, Ethier & Deaux, 1994;

Ragins, 2004). Subjects felt that others being out in the workplace was an indicator of

the safety for them do so. One participant said, " I felt a level of comfort with those I

worked with. I worked with several gay individuals who were out at work. This made it

easier to identify with others who came out, or it would have been much tougher."

Another continued, "There were other coworkers and supervisors that were out, and that really

helped me feel safe to do so.

This reference to safety is important as it returns as an additional theme throughout the interviews. The presence of others who share similar stigmas has a powerful effect on the psychological safety a person experiences in groups and can facilitate disclosure of a stigmatized identities (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003).

The importance of others out in the workplace cannot be understated. Participants agreed that if someone was not out, their decision to come out would have been more difficult. There is an innate knowledge that being out creates an environment where psychological safety is increased and makes way for others to disclose. This creates a positive feedback loop which begins to impact the culture of the workplace. As some of the respondents also noted, they have experienced workplaces (and may currently work) where there was no one out, and this made it very difficult to be authentic to who they were. If not for other personal convictions or circumstances, it is possible they may find themselves in a place where they were covering. One participant stated:

> It's a lot of work to hide. I'm the only out person at work. In fact, I was afraid to come out for social reasons. But it was difficult to hide my sexuality and my life, more than anything. My workplace did not help in any way, and I'm not comfortable speaking with our chairman about any personal stuff.

Relationships with Others. Another unexpected motivator to have arisen from this research was being out due to relationships with others outside of the immediate work group. Examples include relationships with customers, partners or spouses, and LGBT social networks such as LGBT sports teams or choruses. One participant explained it this way:

> Being in a relationship helps make this decision. When you live with someone,
> you have to make a decision about what person is to you. Are you going to talk
> about them as if they were your roommate? Getting married made a huge
> difference. You have to make the decision, "I'm either going to hide, or I'm going
> to be out."

Having a relationship really influences your decision to be out. The connection to the broader LGBT community was meaningful in the decision-making process. Feeling that there is a support system that demonstrates how important it is to be out – some participants again tied this back to being of service to others:

> At this point in my life, I've gained a close connection to the LGBT community. I
> can easily cover because I present in a very feminine manner, but because of my
> connection to the community, I think it has become a "thing" for me to be out
> because it helps break stereotypes about what a gay person looks like. It helps to
> live an experience that others can see.

Finally, more than one participant mentioned their relationship with customers or clients as a motivator for being out. One participant has transitioned from one company to another and had established relationships with customers that were very important to him. They knew him authentically, and though he was still learning to navigate his new organization, he was resolute in remaining authentic to the customers that would follow him. This meant being inclusive of his whole self at work when with his clients, even when that meant outing himself to the new organization. One participant mentioned, "A lot of it has to do with when I was working at my previous employer. I had relationships

with my customers that knew I was gay, and they didn't care. I kept a lot of those relationships, and they knew who I was. Yeah, my customer relationships."

Supportive Corporate Policies. The theme of supportive corporate policies was present at numerous points throughout the study. For two respondents, it was a primary decision factor. The knowledge that the company for which they work had specific non-discrimination policies for LGBT associates was influential. Secondly, the presence of LGBT inclusive benefits such as domestic partner health insurance, transgender-inclusive medical coverage, and adoption benefits that were inclusive of same-sex partners created a sense of security for these participants. They felt the corporate voice was affirming their belonging and protection. One participant said, "I want to be visible for others. Having job security or job safety helps me to do that. Being at the bank, I know I can't be fired for being lesbian. There are policies set in place to protect me, like the non-discrimination policy." Another stated:

> Other things that our company does; our inclusive benefits, partner inclusion, our trans health benefits. Our regular benefits but the population of bi or pan community may need to take advantage of more frequently statistically. Those are the things I look for, even if I'm not going to use them myself. Like if our company didn't offer trans benefits, that would tell me a lot about our company. But as a member of the LGBT+ community, I may not use trans benefits, but their presence means to me that my company means it when they say LGBT+ is important.

Outed by Leader. Though this was a one-off finding, it is worth noting. When this participant was asked about why she was out in the workplace, her immediate response was that she was outed by her leader. The participant shared that she would have potentially disclosed eventually, but the leader took the choice away from her which was demotivating. This participant shared,

> In this job, I am out because my former CEO outed me to the staff when I got engaged. I have been selective about telling people and only did so as I felt comfortable. The non-profit I work at has a diverse group of people and a lot of them are religious, and I had perceived them as being less tolerant of LGBT people. I wanted to make sure they wouldn't treat me differently. I had heard people make jokes, use heteronormative language, and make gender jokes. Once I was outed, I noticed a carefulness with some people; there was a hesitation with some people. Nothing strongly negative, but awkward.

In this case, the participant felt like her ability to choose had been taken away. As the consequences of coming out can be detrimental in the wrong environments, up to one third of employees choose not to disclose their sexual orientation at work (Croteau, 1996). The impact of outing someone can be dangerous to someone, especially if there are safety concerns or potential negative repercussions to their employment.

Culture and Leadership

Inclusive Culture. As participants responded to questions about culture and subcultures, answers varied as the respondent's interpretations varied. However, themes did arise that were consistent with the research on inclusivity and culture as determined

by leaders and policy. With that said, the influence of culture may not have been the deciding factor in many cases, yet it was instrumental in helping respondents determine how they would navigate coming out in the workplace. Inclusivity, being the most common theme with regards to culture, was critical in supporting the decision-making process. For example, one participant said, "With regards to culture, there is a large amount of influence. It is a culture that is inclusive and tolerant, and it makes it more comfortable with your decision to be out in the workplace." Another participant went further in their description of how this inclusive culture looks:

> Culture comes from our stated values, observing them in our actions and in our communication. I see updates on the intranet; I see updates from our employee networks, I see it on my campus, I see leaders using appropriate language and doing things that support the stated values. We walk the walk and talk the talk in all settings, small or large, personal and intimate, in the cafeteria or a volunteer event, or an after-hours cocktail party. This demonstrates its not just a list of things we have to check off; it defines who we are. I've worked for companies that do it because they have to. We do it because it has become who we are, and that's important.

As the research supports, this creation of an inclusive culture helps employees feel confident in being out and feel as though they are supported versus alone and isolated (Colgan et al., 2007). As employees sort through various reasons why they should or should not disclose in the workplace, having an inclusive culture was critical.

Conversely, two respondents specifically called out that their culture was not inclusive nor supportive. This was a factor that they had to consider. There was an

understanding there may be consequences for disclosure and the decision-making process needed to account for other things rather than just the corporate culture. One participant said:

> My current organization has very strong religious ties. My experience with this population of people has shown that there is still stigma. I always had this at the back of my mind. When I got to the organization, I found that there was no sensitivity training at all. We are a youth organization, and there was no training on how to deal with LGBT youth. There was clearly no focus on this as a culture or workplace culture. When I suggested cultural competence training, I was ignored.

However, this same respondent shared that she felt like it was stressful not to be out and she was doing an injustice to her community by not being out. The need to be authentic was of greater importance to her than the corporate culture. Similarly, another respondent discussed the organizational culture he works in as a reflection of their chairman, who he described as homophobic:

> My workplace did not help in any way to come out. It's not conducive for coming out. My chairman is very homophobic, so the corporate culture is not helpful at all. The chairman's opinion permeates the corporate culture, and I think he is the most important part of shaping that culture. My peers, however, did make me more comfortable.

He later went on to describe the influence the chairman had on a lack of anti-discrimination policies or omission of any domestic partner benefits, which were all determined by the chairman. In spite of this, the participant felt the need to be authentic

to who he was, especially to honor his relationship with his husband. As noted, the support of his peers was of value to him, and this same participant mentioned the support he knew existed for him in the gay men's chorus in which he participates.

Supportive Corporate Policies

The inclusion of supportive corporate policies did come up throughout the study as something that influenced decision-making. Participants spoke about the fact that these policies created a sense of safety for them. There was an understanding that they could not be fired for their sexual orientation, per company policy. This was important, especially when participants considered that state and national laws do not include sexual orientation or gender identity in anti-discrimination laws. One respondent, living in North Carolina, where its sexual orientation is not protected stated shared the following:

> Being in the south, I thought I would not be out because it is not as accepted as it
> is in the north. Sexual orientation is also not protected in North Carolina. But
> fortunately, I work for the bank, and I know I can't be fired, there are policies in
> place the protect me, specifically the non-discrimination policy.

Another participant shared her experience at her employer, a liberal arts college, which is an all-female college. They recently changed their policy of acceptance to include women who identified as transgender. She felt this was powerful for her, even though she was not transgender herself. The policies of the college were inclusive in general, but the adoption of this new admissions policy further made her feel safe in her working environment as an out lesbian. The feelings of this participant are supported by the

literature where "the more prevalent these policies are within an organization, the less discrimination faced by lesbian and gay employees" (Button, 2001, p. 22).

Supportive Leadership Behaviors

Supportive leadership behaviors were helpful in overcoming "the detrimental effects of status differences by increasing group members' engagement through heightened perceptions of psychological safety" (Randel et al., 2016). The question was asked of the participants, "What leadership behaviors do you see as supportive?" The responses to the questions fell into four basic categories as indicated by Table 2.

Table 2

Themes Regarding Leadership Behavior

Leadership Behavior	Frequency
Use of Inclusive Language or Behavior	7
General Positive Leadership Behaviors	2
Being a Visible Ally	3
Self-Education	1

Leadership Behavior

Use of Inclusive Language of Behavior. A majority of respondents included language or specific actions that were deemed to them as inclusive when describing supportive leadership. Inclusive language in this context was identified as using gender neutral and non-heteronormative terms such as partner or spouse. It also included the presentation of preferred pronouns, something that signals inclusion to transgender or gender fluid employees. Though no participants in this study identified as transgender or

gender fluid, they noted this as a gesture that the LGBT+ community would consider to be inclusive. For example, one participant said, "One of my executives was addressing a group and used "spouses and partners," nothing that was gendered." Another followed up, "Inclusive language is important. If you are in a meeting for example, and people are doing introductions, it is very common for people to say their pronouns. You can see people add extra effort versus the one person who might be gender variant having to explain because everyone does it."

Specific to inclusive behaviors, respondents spoke of how leaders create culture and are an example to others. Leaders simply asking about how an employee's weekend was with their partner, and using their partner's name, was impactful and meaningful to the employee. As leaders demonstrate these inclusive behaviors, it reduced the stigma between the LBG employee and their heterosexual peers. One participated said:

> I once had a supervisor who threw me a bridal shower. This was very surprising for me. But the fact that she and the team took the time to celebrate me and my wedding…that was amazing and so public, it touched me a lot. When a leader doesn't hesitate to simply ask about your *wife* or girlfriend, it's really nice. It creates a sense of normalcy.

This normalizing was important to the participants as they sought to find security and safety in their work environment.

General Positive Leadership Behaviors. Respondents also identified behaviors generally associated with positive leadership when they discussed supportive behaviors. These behaviors included leaders who demonstrated openness, were good listeners, and

strong communicators. Further defining what leadership behaviors were supportive, one participant shared:

> Leaders that are non-bias are able to look at all aspects and not take sides and are supportive. They are able to encourage and support anyone's decisions or mistakes or errors. They are nurturing. They take mistakes and turn them into learning opportunities. They are able to address the big picture. When I see my leadership behave in a way that I would, it makes it more comfortable for me to be authentic and feel safe and nurtured and supported. I feel promoted.

Another study subject shared, "The leader is a forward thinker exercising inclusivity. Everyone is treated fairly, respectfully, and professionally. It looks like a mixed group of people with different backgrounds and education levels and the leader is celebrating all these things." The participants felt that these general supportive leadership behaviors were indicators of how they would be treated by leaders regardless of the context, including the disclosure of sexual orientation. Their lived experience was that leaders who exhibited these behaviors were inclusive of their authentic selves. The subjects did not distinguish between LGBT+ specific inclusive behaviors and those that were inclusive of everyone.

Being a Visible Ally. Three participants included leaders becoming an ally during this portion of questioning; however, more than three participants mentioned the need for allies during other segments of the study. Participants described this in different ways. Study participants wanted leadership who could demonstrate they were a visible ally, by stepping into leadership roles in LGBT+ employee networks or by being on the board of an LGBT+ organization. For example, one participant shared, "Leaders can make it a

point to make space for LGBT+ employees. They actively speak about the Pride network. Or they use days of visibility to ensure we are included in the conversation. They react positively to things you share and demonstrate support." Another said, "Leaders who are a visible ally or out at work. They are registered on the [Ally/Out at Work] portal, having stickers or having something visible."

Participants discussed the difference between being tolerated or finding an ally determined the level of comfort that they felt being out in the workplace. When leaders demonstrated these supportive behaviors, employees were more comfortable bringing their authentic selves to work, which allowed them to give more energy and attention to their jobs.

Self-Education. Not a frequent response, yet one worth mentioning is a supportive behavior demonstrated by leaders when they took the opportunity to educate themselves on LGBT+ issues. This behavior demonstrated a care for their employees and the issues that were important to them. One participant said:

> I think general education and understanding is helpful. Going back to my first manager who discouraged me from coming out, I really think she thought she was being helpful about my career. I think if she understood and was more educated about how to be an ally and what she should have said to me, I think she would have done things differently. You know, the ancillary stuff, once they are educated, they will do the other stuff like support you by being on an employee network or board, use the right pronouns. Just being educated on how to better be an ally.

This behavior correlates with the general leadership behaviors mentioned in the previous dimension. The respondents spoke about general positive leadership behaviors and self-education was considered one of those behaviors.

Obstructive Behaviors. Participants were asked about leadership behaviors they felt were *not* supportive or would be considered obstructive to someone's comfort in disclosing. Many respondents were able to call upon past and present experiences to inform their answers. Two types of leadership behaviors were identified – those that were direct actions by the leader and those that were due to inaction. Participants also linked the lack of inclusive policies with obstructive leadership.

The most common theme was the use of non-inclusive or offensive language. This was represented by the use of heteronormative terms in one on one conversations such as asking a female about her boyfriend or husband. This was also demonstrated by leaders who had used derogatory language in the workplace such as the word "faggot" or "dyke." One respondent summarized, "I've heard homophobic comments in meetings, the company has failed to incorporate anti-discrimination policies at work, and they don't offer certain benefits to same-sex spouses."

Participants also felt that inaction on the part of their leader was considered obstructive. As respondents shared, their experiences varied from ignoring a suggestion about training to ignoring a concerned raised about discrimination. For example, one participant shared, "Leaders that don't support someone who is begin bullied. There was a man who was antagonizing me about who I was, and I went to my leader, and he did nothing about it. I was so worried that this would reflect poorly on me. It clearly wasn't a priority from management." Another said, "When leaders are silent, it's very telling. I

suggested cultural competence training and was ignored. I also brought up a concern I had experienced to the broader leadership team. They agreed it was not appropriate, yet there was no follow through at all."

A lack of action to escalated concerns or missing a moment to coach others was viewed as equal to direct action by the leader. Again, as respondents correlated general positive leadership behaviors viewed as supportive, similar parallels were drawn for obstructive behaviors:

> When I see leadership, take sides, or being totally bias. When they blame rather than nurture. Reprimanding errors versus learning. Creating an environment that is volatile. As a leader, you have to be non-biased and show support to everyone. These behaviors are unsafe, and I can't be confident you are going to keep things confidential. If I think they won't have my back, there is no reason to share anything additional about myself like my sexual identity.

Finally, one respondent shared that her leader outing her to her team was not supportive at all. The respondent did not feel like the leader had ill intent, however, had she been more educated about the appropriate nature to handle a situation of that sort, the experience for the participant would have been different.

External Societal Factors. Several external societal factors that may influence a person's willingness to disclose their sexual orientation in the workplace were identified. Responses ranged from geography to social movements to celebrities who came out. The most frequent response was the political climate meaning local state as well as national politics.

Regarding politics, five of 11 participants saw this as a primary external factor when they were making their decision to be out in the workplace. The consideration occurred with four of the respondents that lived in California. They each referenced the supportive and inclusive political landscape of the state. There was a feeling of safety based on where they lived and the knowledge that the state has strong anti-discrimination policies that include sexual orientation and gender identity. For example, one participant said, "Because I live in California, I was protected. I mean, working and living in Los Angeles, you feel protected by their laws. In California, I feel we are pretty spoiled." Another spoke of California as well, "The laws where I live (California) make me really comfortable to be out." Another participant mentioned, "Look at the current political environment. I'm lucky I live in Los Angeles. If you don't live in such an environment, you are not legally protected, and people may not want to come out." Finally, another participant shared, "I think that without necessarily realizing it, I think it made a huge difference that I lived in the bay area of California when I came out."

National politics was a factor as well. Two participants had differing experiences when processing their coming out as they took place during two different presidential administrations; the Obama administration and the Trump administration. For the participant who came out during the Obama administration:

What really helped, when the Obama administration was so supportive and friendly, just to know the government was on your side. When marriage equality was legalized, and the White House lit up in the rainbow colors, that summer was really important because I finally felt like I was part of society. I had never felt more American than I did then. I finally felt like I was equal in society, just to

know the President of the United States and the government was on our side. This influenced my self-worth and my feeling like I was an American. This made it very comfortable to come out at my new job.

With regard to the Trump administration, one participant shared, "When I started at this job, Trump was already in office. This was something I had to consider. It was certainly a factor at that point." Some participants even mentioned what it would be like if they had to come out today under the current administration:

You may have a very vibrant LGBT community and still not feel comfortable being out. I think about the current political landscape; if I'm a young millennial and starting my career under the Trump administration, I'm starting in a world where people are emboldened to strike out against the LGBT community, and those are things I'm thinking about every single day. My local and state government doesn't support me because I'm not supported at the highest level of government.

Aligned with the political influence was a geographic consideration. As was evidenced by the mention of California, it was seen as a haven of sorts to the participants as they considered coming out. California has some of the most inclusive legislation in the country for people of all differences. LGBT protections in California are incredibly robust and afford the citizens of the state peace of mind, which was mentioned throughout the participant's responses. Conversely, as people considered coming out in North Carolina and Texas, they cited the lack of inclusive legislation in their responses. Though the lack of inclusive legislation did not ultimately prevent them from coming out, it was a significant factor in the decision-making process.

Social movements have also inspired participants to disclose more frequently. Some participants recalled feeling obligated to be out during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. There was a need for activism, and the respondents thought that it was necessary for them to be able to talk about what was going on. One participant shared:

> One of the reasons I came out when it wasn't as safe was the gay rights movement. Like 1989 and 1990, ACT UP, the AIDS crisis, we would march in the streets. It was important to feel like we had equal rights. Then there was the fight for marriage equality, it started with domestic partnerships, but that wasn't enough. I had to be out to be able to fight for these things.

These themes are supported by previous research as well. Colgan et al. (2007) suggests political and organizational climates have encouraged lesbian and gay employees to disclose more frequently and challenge disparate treatment on the grounds of sexual orientation.

Not frequently mentioned but of note was the influence of celebrities that were coming out for one of the participants. He recalls specifically Melissa Ethridge coming out and keeping that in mind as he navigated the decision to come out in his workplace at one of his first jobs. He felt empowered by her bravery, and that made him for more secure in his decision to disclose. He also used that as a barometer to measure reactions. He said, "Melissa Ethridge was a gay activist, and there was dialogue going on that gave me some security. There was more of a barometer about how people felt. It felt like a safe time to be able to come out."

All of these external factors were part of the participants thought process. Each person considered several things when making a choice to disclose their sexual orientation in the workplace.

Summary

After reviewing and analyzing the stories collected from the respondents, it is evident the decision to come out in the workplace is multi-dimensional and inclusive of factors internal to the workplace and elements external to the workplace as well. An unexpected result of this study found the need to be of service to others by being an out example was a primary driver of the respondents. Inclusive corporate policies and state laws were also major elements in this process. The complexity of this decision was outlined by the differing viewpoints of what each person considered. Though there may be themes that were common, there was no one repeated set of considerations. Nearly every respondent had a unique path to ultimately disclosing in the workplace. Further discussion about the implications of this study and potential recommendations for employers will be present in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to develop further the understanding of out at

work employees and explore the factors that most influence their decision to come out in

the workplace. Three primary questions were explored:

- What factors most influence an employee's decision to be out in the workplace?

- What behaviors does an employee's leader exhibit that either support or
  discourage an employee's decision to come out?

- What external factors, if any, influence an employee's decision to come out in the
  workplace?

This chapter presents a discussion of the study results. First, a summary of findings is

offered, followed by conclusions, recommendations for employers, limitations, and

suggestions for future research.

Summary and Discussion of Findings

A summary about disclosure in the workplace has been provided for each of the

research questions in the order listed above. Following each summary, conclusions will

be presented that are built on the data.

What factors most influence an employee's decision to be out in the workplace?

This study revealed five factors that influenced employees to disclose their sexual

orientation in the workplace. The first is that participants were driven by a desire to be an

authentic example to others. Prior research concluded that the known presence of "similar

others" improved the self-esteem and mood of those with invisible stigmas, including

sexual orientation (Frable, Platt, & Hoey, 1998). This study found that the desire to be of

service to others in this capacity was of great importance to many participants and was

the primary reason that they disclosed their sexual orientation at work. This represents a notable addition to motivators.

Second, participants in the study were also motivated to disclose because they perceived that there was a personal cost to them continuing to cover part of their identity. They stated that covering is draining of energy and takes away from their capacity to devote full attention to their work. As Ragins et al. (2007) pointed out, there is a negative impact on the employee's well-being when they feel the need to cover.

Third, participants also shared that they felt the need to be authentic to who they are because of their relationships with others. This included partners/spouses and customers with whom the relationship for the employee was very important and there was a desire to honor those relationships. Subjects added that their involvement in outside activities that were LGBT based, such as sports teams or choruses, made them feel supported outside of the workplace and positively influenced an employee in the coming out process at work.

Inclusive and supportive policies in the workplace was the fourth factor influencing employee's decision to come out. Participants discussed both their presence and absence in the workplace as they navigated this decision. As Button (2001) presented, the introduction of non-discrimination policies in the workplace for LGBT employees led to a decrease in discrimination against those employees. Secondarily, benefits packages that are inclusive of same-sex partners and transgender employees were a recurrent theme amongst the subjects. Finally, the absence of these policies and benefits may not have prevented the current participants from disclosing, but it gave them pause.

The last reason discovered for coming out was being exposed by their leader was one subject's primary motivator to disclose to the remainder of the team. This action took the opportunity of choice away from the subject and presented another set of circumstances for them to navigate.

What behaviors does an employee's leader exhibit that either support or discourage an employee's decision to come out?

This study found in the case of bisexual, lesbian, and gay employees, they were looking for leaders to use inclusive language and for them to outwardly demonstrate their "allyship." This social support is important to employees and as research by Woods (2015) indicates, that the choice to disclose was impacted by both the presence of other gay employees but also the presence of supportive heterosexual leaders.

Participants also stated that general positive leadership behaviors inclusive of being good listeners, advocating for the welfare of their employees, and seeking to help them develop further supported their comfort in coming out. Correspondingly, a leader's effort to educate themselves and build their acumen on LGBT+ issues was influential to an employee's decision as well.

What external factors, if any, influence an employee's decision to come out in the workplace?

Respondents frequently identified that their geography influenced their comfort level to disclose. In cities and states where anti-discrimination laws were present and comprehensive for LGBT employees, they felt "safe" in their ability to come out without negative impact to their jobs. California was mentioned numerous times by multiple participants as a place where they felt protected and safe. Conversely, when participants mentioned states like North Carolina and Texas, there was hesitancy to disclose because those states do not offer the same protections for LGBT employees in the workplace.

Though not a primary driving factor, several participants shared that major social movements were significant in their decisions to come out. Additionally, participants stated that seeing influential people, such as celebrities, come out helped them feel more comfortable and safer to come out.

Conclusions

1. Service to Others. The desire to be of service to others motivated many LGB employees to come out. LGB employees often weighed their decisions by considering the benefit of them coming out to others in the work environment.

2. Social Support. The social network, inclusive of friends, family, partners, and other groups, had a significant impact on the support an employee feels they have in being out. Some subjects felt the need to honor their relationships with authenticity, while others called upon the knowledge they were supported outside of work as a means to aid in the decision to disclose. Ultimately, this suggested that an employee's external social network plays a significant role in their decision to come out at work.

3. Workplace Policies Matter. Employees place considerable importance on the presence of inclusive workplace policies and benefits as a measure of whether or not coming out at work is going to be safe for them. This implies that the presence of these policies supports a higher likelihood of an employee's self-disclosure.

4. Leaders Have Impact. Information garnered through the interviews confirmed that leaders and managers have the ability to influence an employee's decision to come out. The more positive and supportive the behaviors by the leader, the more

likely an employee was to feel safe enough to disclose. This confirms that leaders have the direct ability to create a safe environment by modeling inclusive behaviors.

5. Socio-Political Environment. Where an employee lives dictated the political backdrop of their environment. The presence or absence of legal protections is weighted heavily in the decision to come out in the workplace. There are parts of the U.S., such as California, where employees may feel more or less anxiety about coming out.

6. Affinity/Employee Networks and Out-At-Work Programs. Employees do not place significant value on the existence of either employee networks or out-at-work programs when making the decision to disclose. The presence of these programs does not seem to increase an employee's sense of safety but are used as a support after coming out.

Recommendations to Organizations

1. Anti-discrimination policies that include protections for sexual orientation and gender identity, even when not required by local, state, or federal law, were instrumental in supporting coming out. While the presence of these anti-discrimination policies is more prevalent today than ever, they are not ubiquitous and not always overtly supported by leadership.

2. Wellness can be impacted by not coming out. There is an incredible amount of energy devoted to those that feel the need to cover up their identity, this can negatively impact performance and productivity in the workplace. With

wellbeing an increasingly important focus for corporations, this would have a positive impact on the wellbeing of those that feel it safe to come out.

3. Out at Work/Ally programs. Entering the study period, it was believed that LGBT Employee Networks and Out at Work/Ally programs would have been a key contributor to helping people come out. The results of this study do not demonstrate that they were, as they were not a consistent part of the responses. However, it is recommended that organizations continue to make them a part of their diversity practices.

   Out at Work/Ally programs are opportunities for employees to publicly share that they are out at work or an ally. These programs are completely voluntary and serve as a portal for all employees to search. They offer a way to publicize your status so that there is visibility to others may see others like them or that their leaders are an ally. The positive effects of this cannot be underestimated as we know that public acknowledgments of like others and support from leaders does lead to higher comfort levels for those who are wishing to disclose.

4. Leadership LGBT Awareness Training for all Supervisory Levels. Leaders who use inclusive language are more apt to help employees fulfil their aspirations to contribute authentically in the workplace. As not all leaders may consider themselves an ally, it is important for them to still create inclusive environments for their employees. Many organizations, if they have diversity training, may reserve it for higher level leaders. This should be made more readily available to all leaders throughout organizations. This training may

simply be training on difference in general, but the inclusion of an LGBT

focus would be beneficial as it is nuanced and has impact.

Additionally, invest in unconscious bias training. For leaders to support

differences on their teams, they need to be as open-minded as possible. An

example might be to have organization speak with the LGBT+ community to

learn more about their experiences and gain a better understanding of their

unique needs.

Study Limitations

1. Sample size. There were 11 respondents which limited the amount of data

    that could be collected. Additional respondents would add to the research in

    the future. Though a greater number of participants would have contributed to

    deeper findings, enough data was collected to drawn appropriate conclusions

    for this study.

2. Limited geography. Respondents were from four states across the U.S. It

    would be valuable to have a broader representation across states which have

    varied socio-political environments. The ability to see how respondents

    navigate coming out at work in these varied geographies would be beneficial.

Suggestions for Future Study

The following are suggestions for future study:

1. Increasing the sample size would add further data to the topic. This would add

    both a diversity of background and experience to the research. This study

    obtained participants through convenience and snowball sampling. The field

would benefit from additional quantity and further diversity in participants on the subject of what factors influence the decision to be out in the workplace.

2. The finding in this study that participants were motivated to disclose in the workplace in order to be an example for and be of service to others is worth further exploration. This was not something that the researcher found in the literature review as a reason for disclosure. The field could greatly benefit from exploring this topic further. Identifying the prevalence of this would help organizations understand further what they could do to support their employees.

3. The socio-political and geographic influences would be of interest to investigate further. There is little research specific to how one's geography, which has political implications, may influence a person's decision to come out. As identified in this study, it was a factor of consideration for several subjects.

Summary

Overall, this study confirmed that the process related to an employee's decision to come out in the workplace is complex. There are multiple dimensions of the employee's workplace dynamics, leadership behaviors, and culture that are taken into consideration. This study also identified a new factor that was not identified in the review of the literature, which is an employee's willingness and desire to disclose in order to be of service to others. This study finding could have implications for other populations with hidden stigmas but certainly has implications for the LGBT community.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

The following protocol of questions were used in the interviews with LGB associates:

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender identity?
3. What is your sexual orientation?
4. What is your racial/ethnic background?
5. What is your educational level?
6. What is the name of your employer?
7. Are you out in the workplace?
8. Why are you out in the workplace?
9. What factors were most important in influencing that decision?
10. What structures were in place that helped you in making this decision?
11. What influence does culture and subcultures in the workplace have on the decision-making process?
12. What leader behaviors do you view as both supportive and obstructive?
13. What other factors come in to play that help in that decision-making process?
14. Are there areas within the organization you would be less comfortable being out? Why?
15. Why do you think everyone isn't out at work?
16. What, if any, external societal factors had an impact on your decision?