Sexual Orientation Discrimination in the Workplace:
A Systematic Review of Literature

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Abstract

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (GLBT) employees constitute one of the largest, but least studied minority groups in the workforce. Given the scarcity of an up to date systematic literature review on sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace since Croteau (1996) and Ward (2003), this study aims to fill this gap through systematic literature review based on rigorous criteria. By examining 52 selected papers, the study specifically attempts to systematize the existing literature, explore key emerging themes and recent developments, identify research gaps, and suggest potential areas for future research. As a result, ‘coming out’, ‘wage inequality’, ‘GLBT employee groups’, ‘the effects of GLBT (non) discrimination on the workplace and business outcomes’ were identified as the major themes of the current review. Social institutions, legal frameworks, and cultural norms were determined as the key pillars of sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace.

1. Introduction

Today’s workforce is becoming more diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, and religion as well as in sexual orientation. Sexual orientation remains the –so-called “last acceptable and remaining prejudice”- in modern societies and organizations in comparison with other dimensions of diversity. Thus, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (hereafter, GLBT) employees continue to face a variety of challenges that range from being forced to remain closeted to actual job dismissal. It is apparent that traditional diversity management research focused limited attention on sexual orientation discrimination. In fact, the topic has almost been ignored. Until now, very few scholars have examined this notion as a particular aspect of diversity management in the workplace. Previously, diversity management scholars tended to focus on more visible aspects of diversity such as age, gender, and ethnicity. However, Bower and Blackmon (2003) indicated, “Managing invisible diversity (as in the case of sexual orientation diversity) may be just as crucial as managing visible diversity”. Today, the changing nature of workforce is apparent with respect to sexual orientation diversity in comparison with what is widely assumed a heterosexist business environment. Employers, trade unions, human resource managers, and public authorities can interpret this as a serious challenge that requires resolution and compromise. According to Kossek and Lobel (1996, p.2), although race, ethnicity, and gender are the most widely known types of diversity, other forms also exist that offer important implications for organizations and sexual orientation is one of them.

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GLBT employees face a variety of problems and challenges in the workplace. First, the number of GLBT employees within the population and within the total workforce is considerable. According to several estimates reported in a study by Day and Greene (2008, p.639), the ratio of GLBT employees to the entire workforce is between 3% and 12% in the US. Between 5% and 7% of the total UK population is GLB (Colgan, Creegan, McKearney, & Wright, 2007, p.591). However, the majority of them tend to remain in the closet. Thus, GLBT individuals might also be considered a fairly large minority group to have important implications for labour and consumer markets (Day & Greene, 2008, p.639). Second, unlike in the US and the UK, only a limited number of well-established equality laws and inclusive workplace policies have been developed within the context of emergent economies to protect excluded sexual minorities and to gain leverage based on sexual orientation diversity in the workplace. For instance, Sural (2009) indicated that no specific laws or regulations to protect sexual minorities from sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace have been developed within the Turkish legal system. Ironically, the number of legal clauses related to gender discrimination (e.g. positive discrimination of female employees vis-à-vis their male counterparts) exists in Turkish law. It can be seen that GLBT workplace issues have received scant or cursory attention in diversity management literature as well as legal systems in several emergent economies remain reluctant to safeguard GLBT people against workplace discriminatory behaviours under their specific legal frameworks. Third, the career prospects of GLBT employees can become extremely difficult in comparison with heterosexual employees if other workers, peers, or managers know their hidden sexual orientations. This is particularly important in unsafe environments in which differences in sexual orientation are not tolerated. Gedro (2009) examined the various issues and challenges GLBT employees encounter with respect to career development. Accordingly, organizational heterosexism and homophobia appear to be obvious phenomena that pervade the workplace. GLBT people must navigate a complex mix of personal, sexual, social, interpersonal, and intrapersonal issues as they establish, develop, and maintain their careers. Fourth, unequal treatment of GLBT employees is both unfair and dehumanistic. In addition, it can cause negative consequences for key employee workplace outcomes (Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Tejeda, 2006), as well as for overall organizational performance.

Given the importance of this topic, the major aims of this paper are twofold: First, this study aims to reveal the major research streams and key emerging themes related to sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace and to develop an integrated understanding. Second, this study aims to identify a number of research gaps that exist in this field and suggest several directions for future research. To achieve the aims noted above, a ‘systematic literature review’ was adopted as the major research design. This approach is consistent with similar approaches conducted by a number of other methodologically sound studies (Abatecola, Mandarelli, & Poggesi, 2011; Cafferata, Abatecola, & Poggesi, 2009; Crossan & Apaydin, 2010; Newbert, 2007; Thorpe, Holt, Macpherson, & Pittaway, 2005). This study aims to present a well-organized discussion of current knowledge and possible research gaps that may become potential subjects for research in this field. Accordingly, the following research questions were investigated for the current study: (1) what major themes were discussed in previously published scholarly research related to sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace? (2) Based on the systematic literature review, what research gaps were identified? (3) Why is sexual orientation diversity a relevant theme for organizations? (4) What factors form the major pillars of sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace? A current review of literature is important and relevant because it can advance our understanding of the possible impact of sexual orientation diversity in the workplace and increase our awareness of the major research streams and discussions that prevail in the field. Ultimately, it can provide organizations with insight on the impact of GLBT diversity as a business case, as well as the importance of developing effective GLBT-inclusive policies.

2. First versus Second Wave Research Agenda

The current debate on sexual orientation discrimination in workplace can be better understood by examining the first and second wave research agendas stressed by Ozturk (2011, p.1101). The first wave research agenda basically addresses overt forms of abuse directed at GLBT employees in situations in which legal and institutional protections are generally lacking. The second wave research agenda considers that GLBT employees have received some recognition in the public sphere and it focuses its attention on the extent to which policies and legislations can be effectively developed to address the variety of challenges encountered by GLBT employees in more inclusive environments (Ozturk, 2011; Day & Greene, 2008). Currently, efforts to reduce sexual orientation discrimination in
the US (i.e., several states have prohibited sexual orientation discrimination despite the absence of a federal legislation), or the UK (Employment Equality Regulations based on sexual orientation were passed in 2003), or the European Union context (Employment Equality Directive 2000/78) are believed to be promising. These efforts are better suited to the second wave research agenda in which certain improvements have already occurred. However, more progress is required. Despite the fact that a number of regulations and/or protective measures have been passed in those countries in which GLBT workplace rights have been developed, at least for ‘de jure’, GLBT employees, ‘de facto’ continue to face subtle forms of discrimination. These can be verbal harassment, jokes, and disparagement that include homosexual content rather than direct homophobic treatment (e.g. physical abuse). In addition, inequality in wages (Drydakis, 2012, 2011; Badgett, 1995; Allegretto & Arthur, 2001; Clain & Leppel, 2001; Plug & Berkhout, 2004) and hiring processes (Drydakis, 2011; Pichler, Varma, & Bruce, 2010; Weichselbaumer, 2003; Hoye & Lievens, 2003) continue to occur. As argued by Colgan et al. (2007), legal protections do not necessarily ensure GLBT inclusiveness in the workplace. On the other side, sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace within regions or nations outside the US or EU continue to lag far behind the goals of the second research wave agenda. In fact, the current situation in these problematic zones appears to be closer to the first research wave agenda. For instance, most GLBT people in Turkey are vulnerable to remain outside the formal employment sphere because of hiring discrimination. They may be forced to become sex workers to maintain their survival given compulsory heterosexuality that is enforced by various institutions, such as families, schools, the media, and the military. Consistent with this assertion, in a study focused on workplace sexual orientation discrimination in the context of Turkey, Ozturk (2011, p.1115) pointed to the “pervasive presence of a significant level of blatant discriminatory activities ranging from sustained harassment through to repeated unwanted jokes and innuendos, to actual job termination, to threats of violence”. In all likelihood, these exploratory findings refer to first wave literature related to workplace sexual orientation discrimination in Turkey.

3. Methodology

Despite the significant number of studies previously conducted in this area, only a limited number of attempts have been made to translate these findings in a systematic manner to create a comprehensive review of currently available knowledge. This study adopted a systematic literature review methodology consistent with methods adopted by other studies in management literature (Abatecola et al., 2011; Crossan & Apaydin, 2010; Cafferata et al., 2009; Newbert, 2007; Thorpe et al., 2005). To identify the main arguments, this study organized the fragmented literature into distinct streams. Unlike traditional narrative reviews, this type of review better connects future research to questions posed by past research. It also supports the application of rigorous and reproducible methods of selection and evaluation of related literature.

The current study adopted the three-stage approach (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003) that involves the planning, conducting, reporting and dissemination of appropriate literature. During the initial stage of planning, the domain of research (i.e. sexual orientation discrimination, with a particular focus on the workplace), and the main data source (i.e. EBSCO) were identified. Based on the systematic literature review protocol adopted for this study, only scholarly articles published by peer-reviewed journals indexed in EBSCO host research databases were selected. Thus, books, book chapters, conference proceedings, working papers, and other unpublished works were excluded. In addition, all selected articles had to be published in English. During the conducting phase of the systematic review, a four-stage approach was adopted. It consisted of (1) the identification of keywords, selection criteria, and articles to be downloaded, (2) examination of abstracts to gauge article relevance, (3) the download of relevant articles based on abstract examination (initial screening), (4) thorough reading of downloaded papers and final selection of only those papers relevant for this study (second screening).

Efforts were made to ensure the substantive relevance of each selected article’s focus on sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace. All selected articles were required to contain at least one of the following six keywords in their abstracts or titles: ‘sexual orientation discrimination’, ‘GLBT employee’ ‘GLBT employ*’, ‘GLBT and workplace’, ‘GLBT and employ*’, or ‘sexual orientation and discrimination’. Initially, 1086 articles were selected. Out of those articles, 221 were deemed relevant based on information provided in their abstracts (first screening process). Duplicated results were eliminated. Those 221 papers were thoroughly read and analysed. A total of 52 articles were considered relevant to be included in the final sample used for the current review (second
screening process). One of the methodological strengths of this study was its reliance on a relatively large sample and recent research findings in comparison with other systematic literature reviews. A study conducted previously by Ward (2003) was based solely on nine articles. Similarly, Croteau (1996) conducted a review focused on the same topic.

4. Findings

Based on the research sample comprised of 52 scholarly articles, the following emerging themes related to sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace were identified: ‘coming out’, ‘wage inequality’, ‘GLBT employee groups’, ‘the effects of GLBT (non) discrimination on the workplace and business outcomes’.

4.1. Coming Out

The term, ‘coming out’ refers to an individual’s disclosure of his/her sexual orientation (i.e., the individual openly reveals his/her sexual orientation). Self-disclosure of sexual orientation or sexual identity might be considered one of the most critical decisions a GLBT employee can make. Coming out is a complex process that involves question such as whether the individual should come out, when the individual will come out, where the individual will come out, and to whom the individual will come out (Gedro, 2007). Each GLBT employee should carefully evaluate the risks and benefits of coming out in a particular context. Although previous research has revealed the positive outcomes of coming out, the many risks related to the decision to come out must be considered. For example, the overall perceptions of respondents interviewed by Ozturk (2011) revealed that homosexual men were the most likely employees to be fired once identity disclosure occurred. The research stream related to ‘coming out’ concentrates on the issue of self-disclosure by GLBT employees. Issues addressed include timing, methods, and consequences of coming out in the workplace.

Several authors noted that GLBT workers who identified themselves as ‘out’ in the workplace possessed higher affective organizational commitment and greater job satisfaction as well as fewer work and home conflicts, and lower role ambiguity and conflict (Day & Schoenrade, 1997; Griffith & Hebl, 2002). Companies that implement certain policies to prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation are more likely to encourage the degrees to which GLBT employees will come out at work by creating environments perceived to be safe (Rostosky & Riggle, 2002). Some proponents of the US ‘don’t ask, don’t tell policy’ argue that requiring employees to work with sexual minorities who disclose their sexual orientation can undermine employees’ performance. However, several empirical studies have revealed contrasting effects. For example, in their empirical study, Everly, Shih, and Ho (2012) tested this claim. They discovered that participants who worked with openly gay partners actually performed better on both cognitive and sensory-motor tasks than individuals who were unclear about their work partners’ sexual orientation. Drydakis (2011) asserted that coming out at work can help lesbian employees feel confident, might encourage happier work experiences, foster more open interactions with colleagues, and improve productivity. Similarly, King and Cortina (2010) highlighted the fact that no difference exists between GLBT and heterosexual employees’ job performance. However, GLBT employees may underperform when their cognition is undermined because their cognitive energy might be expended on hiding or concealing their true sexual orientation (Madera, 2010). Thus, it can be suggested that, in certain cases and contexts, coming out may facilitate performance. In contrast, nondisclosure of sexual identity may exert a negative impact on performance. This conflicts with the popular belief that working with openly GLBT employees will harm performance.

One important implication of coming out with respect to career choices is that GLBT employees may feel pressure each time they change jobs because they will have to repeat the coming out process in each situation. GLBT employees promoted to new work settings must renegotiate the coming out process with new employers or managers. They may experience difficulties each time (Colgan et al., 2007). A study conducted by Colgan et al (2007, p.597) revealed that a variety of factors can facilitate the coming out process for GLBT employees: the existence of an equal opportunity policy (that includes sexual orientation); feelings of safety because employees receive appropriate signals from their organisation; the presence of an organisational GLBT group; employees’ involvement in a trade union-related-GLBT support network; the presence of other GLB colleagues; the presence of senior GLB people; and the presence of a GLBT-friendly organizational culture.
According to Martinez and Hebl (2010, p.8283), coming out in the workplace has three organizational implications for the promotion of GLBT inclusiveness: Coming out may increase GLBT visibility within an organization, relieve GLBT employees’ intrapersonal tensions, and enhance intergroup interactions within the workplace. Similarly, a meta-analysis conducted by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) demonstrated that interactions between heterosexual and gay/lesbian intergroup members were among the most successful actions that helped reduce prejudice and discrimination. King, Reilly and Hebl (2008) proposed that both situational and contextual factors were required to achieve successful coming out. The situational factor involves timing and method of disclosure. The contextual factor hinges on whether the organizational climate is supportive or non-supportive. They discovered that an organization’s supportive climate is more critical than timing or method when gay and lesbian individuals choose to disclose their sexual orientation. This finding is consistent with the results discovered by Ragins and Cornwell (2001). They found that the perception of a positive work context is associated with positive outcomes for gay and lesbian employees. Heterosexual co-workers who were the recipients of disclosure considered timing of disclosure (later disclosure was preferable to immediate disclosure in work relationships) more critical than their attitudes toward homosexuality and their organizations’ climates (King et al., 2008). These findings underline the importance of both situational and contextual aspects of the coming out process.

4.2. Wage Inequality

The concept of wage differences (unequal pay) between GLBT and heterosexual employees has been widely discussed in earlier econometric studies. Research in this area tended to focus on gay men and lesbian women. With respect to gay men, empirical research (Badgett, 1995; Allegretto & Arthur, 2001; Clain & Leppel, 2001; Berg & Lien, 2002; Black, Makar, Sanders & Taylor, 2003) consistently pointed out that gay men had a significantly lower income than their heterosexual counterparts did. In very recent research, Drydakis (2012) examined the relationship that exists between sexual orientation and wages in the Greek labour market. He found that wage inequality existed between gay/bisexual men and heterosexual men. Accordingly, it is possible to state that gays and bisexuals earn lower monthly wages than similar heterosexual male employees do. Drydakis (2012) again confirmed the findings of previous research related to gay men’s unfavourable earning differences. He suggested that gay and bisexual employees encountered strong prejudices within the Greek context. In general, almost a consensus can be found in the literature that describes lower earnings for gay men in comparison with heterosexual men in work settings.

With respect to the relationship that exists between females’ sexual orientation and wages, prior studies have been conducted (Black et al., 2003; Clain & Leppel, 2001; Arabsheibani et al., 2005; Plug & Berkhout, 2004) across different contexts (the US, the UK, and the Netherlands). They revealed that lesbian women earned more than heterosexual women employed in similar positions. This can be considered the ‘lesbian income advantage’. One explanation for lesbians’ higher earnings, as opposed to heterosexual women, might be that lesbian couples (with or without children) are more likely to engage in equitable allocation of household and child-rearing responsibilities than heterosexual couples (Patterson, 1998; Kurdek, 1993; cited in Elmslie & Tebaldi, 2007). Traditional heterosexual women are more likely to assume additional household responsibilities. Therefore, they may prefer part-time employment so they can balance home and work duties. Alternatively, lesbians are more likely to work additional hours. They are also more likely to be employed full-time as compared with their heterosexual colleagues. This may contribute to the so-called ‘lesbian income advantage’. Consistent with findings reported by Colgan et al. (2008, p. 33), a lesbian lifestyle might necessitate lifelong economic self-reliance that will exert an important impact on a lesbian’s income.

An additional explanation for lesbians’ favourable earnings could derive from the fact that female stereotypes assume that women are feminine and they have a lack of masculine features that are perceived to be required to perform male-dominated jobs. This may result in perceptions of women as being unfit to perform masculine-type jobs. Therefore, it is less likely that they will be selected for those jobs (Pichler et al., 2010, p. 2530). A similar logic might also explain why lesbians earn more than heterosexual women do. A common perception states that gays and lesbians tend to have opposite gender roles from their heterosexual counterparts. Since lesbians are more likely to be suited to and selected for certain jobs which are indeed perceived to be required to have more masculine qualities, they tend to work in traditionally ‘male’ areas. Thus, they would more likely earn higher income in comparison with their heterosexual counterparts, at least in those occupations. It should be noted that those gender stereotypes have
been heavily criticized by queer theory that questions fixed binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine, husband/wife, and other taken-for-granted socially constructed assumptions that permeate the workplace (Gedro, 2007).

However, in his study of over 9000 young lesbians (aged between 22 and 27) in Australia, Carpenter (2008a) found that lesbians earned significantly lower personal income in comparison with heterosexual women. Differences between both groups were not solely limited to income. Differences also occurred among other aspects of economic well-being. In addition to income disadvantages, the young lesbians studied by Carpenter (2008a) had lower scores than heterosexual women in reporting distressing harassment at work, they also had greater difficulty in finding jobs and were more likely to lose jobs. Thus, researchers should pay more attention not to make over-generalized assumptions that lesbians are a universally privileged minority with respect to income status and should consider the roles of context and lifecycle variations. For instance, Carpenter (2008b) found that adult lesbians in Canada have personal income advantages. However, he also found that young lesbians in Australia had income disadvantages (Carpenter, 2008a). Similarly, Drydakis (2011) attempted to assess hiring prospects and entry wage inequality for lesbians in the Greek labour market. Drydakis' study represented the first time a study was performed using the field experiment method. He achieved a number of results that were inconsistent with previous studies conducted in the US, the UK, and the Netherlands. The empirical evidence presented by Drydakis (2011) reveals that employment discrimination against lesbians, such as different treatment during the hiring process and the offer of lower entry wages than those offered to heterosexual counterparts, continues to occur at alarming levels in Greek society.

4.3. GLBT Employee Resource Groups

In a study focused on voice, silence and diversity, Bell et al. (2011) described GLBT employees as invisible minorities who provide valuable focal points that can be used to examine employee voice mechanisms. The researchers examined the negative consequences of GLBT silence in the workplace and discussed the ways their voices might be heard. The voice mechanisms of GLBT employees have become more varied because sexual orientation diversity has been on the rise. We have witnessed the growth of GLBT employee groups (-also known as employee networks or affinity groups). More recently, these new voice mechanisms have begun to stand apart from widely known traditional voice mechanisms. Bell et al. (2011) defined GLBT groups as ‘employer recognized but employee run, groups of workers who share a common identity, characteristics, or set of interests’. GLBT groups offer spaces for social support. They provide organized platforms from which employees can advocate for changes within their workplaces (Githens & Aragon, 2009). The major goals of these groups are to initiate the change process, foster change efforts in their organizations, and, ultimately, to increase organizational effectiveness. Similarly, Raeburn (2004) found that employee groups or diversity councils could serve as particularly powerful tools and resources to promote change within organizations. These groups facilitate the increased awareness of managers and other employees of GLBT issues. They contribute to enhanced diversity climates. For instance, Oracle’s Lambda employee affinity group strives to educate Oracle employees about GLBT issues, provides sponsorships to social events for GLBT individuals, and offers various links and network opportunities for their members (Oracle, 2013).

4.4. The Effects of GLBT (Non) Discrimination on Workplace and Business Outcomes

Previous studies have consistently noted the fact that GLBT employees have reported various kinds of discrimination in the workplace. Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation can take two forms: formal and informal discrimination (Croteau, 1996). Formal discrimination involves firing or failing to hire an individual solely because of his/her sexual orientation, career difficulties, barriers such as decisions not to promote, unequal wages between homosexual and heterosexual employees, and GLBT employees’ exclusion from other benefits. Informal discrimination involves verbal harassment, homophobic and bizarre jokes, loss of credibility, and lack of acceptance and respect by peers and managers (e.g. failing to invite partners of GLBT employees to social events). Both types of sexual orientation discrimination can create severe consequences for both GLBT employees and the organizations in which they work. According to one report (Poe, 1996), productivity losses caused by discrimination against gay
and lesbian employees in the workplace equalled $1.4 billion in 1994. That figure represents a serious business outcome for organizations. With respect to workplace outcomes, Ragins and Cornwell (2001) pointed out that GLBT employees who experienced discriminatory treatment in the workplace demonstrated more negative job attitudes, felt reduced job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and had fewer career opportunities. Several other authors (Wang & Schwarz, 2010; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Tejeda, 2006; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001) have argued that non-discriminative, supportive workplace policies may lead to favourable employee outcomes related to higher levels of organizational citizenship behaviour and job satisfaction. They may also result in lower levels of job anxiety among GLBT employees. These policies range from explicit written rules to prevent sexual orientation discrimination to diversity training programs that emphasize GLBT concerns to domestic partner benefits offered by companies. Similarly, in a study conducted with 220 gay men and 159 lesbians, Griffith and Hebl (2002) found that sexual orientation disclosure at work and perceived gay supportiveness in the workplace were related to higher job satisfaction and lower job anxiety. In this relationship, co-workers’ reactions to gay or lesbian colleagues were considered mediating variables between disclosure and job attitudes of gay/lesbian employees. In general, these studies demonstrate the effects of sexual orientation non-discrimination (supportive/inclusive) policies on favourable workplace outcomes.

A very limited number of studies have placed particular focus on the effects of GLBT non-discrimination policies on business or financial outcomes such as firms’ stock performance. Johnston and Malina (2008) investigated the short-term financial effects of GLBT-friendly policies on firms’ value by examining the relationship that exists between firms’ stock market value and the extent to which those firms manage sexual orientation diversity in the workplace. Although the researchers failed to discover any evidence of this type of association, their findings suggest that GLBT-friendly workplace policies are, at worst, neutral. Firms are not penalized for supporting sexual orientation diversity. This finding is rather important because it challenges opponents’ view that GLBT-friendly practices constitute major threats to shareholders’ value. Recent study focuses on the same issue was conducted by Wang and Schwarz (2010). Unlike the study conducted by Johnston and Malina (2008), Wang and Schwartz (2010) analysed the long-term effects of firms’ GLBT non-discrimination policies on stock price valuations. In other words, they attempted to determine whether publicly traded firms that possessed more GLBT-friendly policies generated higher stock values, in comparison with other firms that possessed no or less-favourable policies. The importance of Wang & Schwarz’s (2010) study lies in the fact that it was the first attempt to provide empirical support for the positive effects of GLBT non-discrimination policies on firms’ stock market performance.

5. Managerial and Organizational Implications

In their handling of GLBT issues in the workplace, managers are supposed to engage their leadership skills to enforce certain policies within their organizations. They are supposed to allow GLBT employees to speak up. Managers’ initiative is important because it must be used to change the existing hostile or discriminatory environment for GLBT workers. Even in cases in which particular equality and inclusion policies or legislation related to GLBT rights are absent, managers must adopt leadership roles and implement policies that will be applied equally to all employees that will not neglect individuals’ sexual minority status. Managers can benefit from the use of several methods and tools when they attempt to give voice to GLBT employees. Based on Dundon, Wilkinson, Marchington, and Ackers (2005)’s framework, Bell et al. (2011, p.140) listed four major types of voice and related voice mechanisms at work that might be used by GLBT employees: (1) articulation of individual dissatisfaction (provision of anonymous complaint mechanisms, allowance of feedback free from harassment, scrutiny of all policies and practices to discover sexual orientation bias, provision of safe places for GLBT networking, and provision of staff time for participation); (2) expression of collective organization (creation of inclusive diversity councils, establishment of intra-organizational GLBT virtual or real networks, and union representation that includes GLBT employees); (3) contribution to management decision-making (explicit commitments to issues unique to GLBT employees will be considered during decision-making processes, allocation of adequate staff and financial resources to ensure sexual orientation equality efforts, integration of GLBT employees’ voices in training and development programs, and the inclusion of sexual orientation questions in human resource monitoring systems);
and (4) mutuality (development of representatives of internal and external GLBT networks, engagement in GLBT equality initiatives to invite external scrutiny of the organization, identification and promotion of champions of sexual orientation equality). It should be noted that these mechanisms should not solely be considered relevant for GLBT employees. They also apply to other invisible minorities, such as religious minorities, stigmatized individuals, or individuals with invisible disabilities. If upper management levels through the aforementioned channels, in all likelihood, can hear the voices of GLBT employees organizations will enjoy greater satisfaction and commitment levels, as well as lower turnover rates (Tejeda, 2006) and absenteeism by GLBT employees.

Diversity training plays a key role in the fight against widespread homophobia, prejudice, and other negative attitudes towards GLBT employees. Diversity training improves awareness and encourages dialogue among all levels of employees. Consistent with this concept, King, Hebl, Madera, Beier, and Quinones (2005) suggested that diversity training could be linked to positive attitudes towards gays and lesbians. Similarly, Pichler et al. (2010) underlined the importance of the provision of diversity training to reduce discriminatory tendencies. Day and Greene (2008) proposed that organizations should provide diversity training taught by gay or lesbian instructors. Organizations should openly communicate their diversity/inclusion policies, or their viewpoints related to sexual minorities with their workers, regardless of whether anti-discriminatory legislation is available within each organization’s particular context. Organizations should also disclose information related to diversity policies with the public. This may attract potential investors when those investors assess companies for possible investment. Human resources or recruitment managers should also receive training to increase their awareness and sensitivity to sexual orientation issues. This will help avoid possible mistreatment of GLBT job candidates because of their sexual orientation.

Organizations should consider that there is an underlying economic rationale in carrying out GLBT-inclusive workplace policies that favour equal treatment for all. The positive impact of managerial efforts to pursue GLBT non-discrimination policies on stock market performance was noted by Wang and Schwarz (2010). These policies also contain other business implications that may exert significant effects on firms’ human resources and marketing sides. With respect to human resources, the adoption of GLBT-supportive policies may facilitate the development of a firm’s strong corporate image and reputation because of its fair and equal treatment of all individuals regardless of sexual orientation. This, in turn, may attract more skilled job candidates from within the GLBT group. This can be considered a firm’s particular recruitment advantage. Cox and Blake (1991) posited that employers who value diversity would be more likely to possess greater advantages in the attraction, selection, and retention of employees. Firms that aim to attract and retain the ‘best and brightest’ employees should embrace the principle of inclusiveness for all employees because inclusive policies that favour GLBT workers might also be considered good recruitment tools for non-GLBT workers and prospective employees (Day & Greene, 2008, p.639). With respect to marketing side, the growth of the GLBT population within the market can be considered a potentially relevant consumer market that represents approximately 21 million individuals who possess yearly incomes that total more than $641 billion (Witeck & Combs, 2006). According to Bell et al. (2011), ‘the estimated 8.8 million GLBT individuals in the United States and nearly four million in the United Kingdom are valuable current or potential employees, customers with significant purchasing power, and stakeholders with interest and influence’.

Research has demonstrated that top managerial support is crucial to the enhancement of GLBT employees’ commitment levels (Day & Schoenrade, 2000). Managerial support should be articulated and translated into well-formulated policies that allow sexual orientation diversity and into good implementation records and practices that reflect the inclusive climate of the organization. Colgan and Wright (2011, p.566) warned that, the commitment at top levels might not be well communicated to middle or lower level managers who might be unwilling to focus on GLBT workplace-related issues. Finally, these implications related to sexual orientation diversity should be considered relevant for large firms, as well as for small and medium sized organizations. Empirical evidence exists to support this claim. In fact, Day and Greene (2008) found that gay and lesbian employees who worked in smaller organizations were more affectively committed and satisfied than their counterparts who worked in larger organizations.
6. Research Gaps and Directions for Future Research

The systematic literature review results revealed that almost all scholarly researches examined within the current sample were conducted in US or UK work settings. It was apparent that previous studies conducted in US or UK workplace contexts pointed out that the employment decisions, work-related experiences of sexual minorities were significantly influenced by their sexual orientation. However, little is known about other contexts. Brooks and Edwards (2009, p.146) indicated that GLBT rights in the workplace vary dramatically depending on the context. For example, the Netherlands and the UK possess a number of existing laws related to GLBT inclusiveness. However, during a speech at Columbia University, Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared that no homosexuals live in Iran. The evidence suggests that employment discrimination against lesbians persists at alarming levels in Greek society (Drydakis, 2011). Thus, it seems obvious that additional research should be conducted to develop a more representative picture of the actual work experiences of GLBT employees across different contexts. This would enable diversity management scholars to compare and contrast findings obtained from different contexts. It is important to consider that GLBT individuals operate in vastly different contexts (nations, industries and occupations). Many variations occur among these situations and individuals with respect to race, ethnicity, economic, and social class (Day & Greene, 2008).

It is possible to state that sexual orientation minorities have long been overlooked in organizational studies. Although the subject has received scant attention in organizational research in the past, currently, scholarly interest has been growing, as evidenced by the number of presentations made at the 24th Annual Conference of the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP), as well as by the number of recent articles published in peer-reviewed journals. Nevertheless, the majority of these studies predominantly reflect the current situation in Anglo-Saxon contexts. It should be underlined that GLBT employees’ experiences of discrimination in the workplace can be closely related to contexts based on legal frameworks, institutional structures and cultural norms. Future research should address these underlying dynamics of workplace sexual orientation diversity in more detail to allow full comprehension of these multifaceted complex phenomena.

Colgan et al. (2008, p.39) noted that compulsory heterosexuality is sustained at the institutional level, as well as in everyday, informal conversations and practices. Thus, it is strongly suggested that organizational scholars who study sexual orientation discrimination at work should adopt ethnographic, participant observation and relational methods rather than surveys or structured interviews to gain in-depth understanding of daily workplace practices, interactions, and lived experiences of GLBT employees. This type of understanding is generally lacking in the existing literature.

It is important to consider that, although sexual minorities have been generally examined in many studies under the broad terms, ‘GLBT’, or ‘LGBT’ (even within this paper), these individuals are not homogeneous with respect to difficulties and discrimination they have experienced. It is important to recognize the heterogeneity of GLBT employees. This might be described as ‘diversity within diversity’. For example, transgender is a gender identity that differs from sexual orientation. Individuals who identify as transgender are more vulnerable to open homophobic attacks and are at greater risk of violent discrimination than gays or lesbians. Based on the results of the systematic literature review, it was apparent that, in particular, bisexual or transgender employees’ work-related difficulties have received less attention. These individuals have been underrepresented in the mainstream diversity management literature, in comparison with gay or lesbian colleagues, with the exception of a few studies (Campos, 2011; Green, Payne, Green, 2011; McCarthy, 2003). This is a particular research gap that should be addressed in future research. In addition, multiple memberships and related multiple prejudices may exist in a number of cases (e.g. black lesbian, Kurdish transsexual, disabled gay employee). Diversity management scholars should carefully address the specific concerns and unique needs of these groups. An individual’s sexual orientation must not be considered in a vacuum. Rather, an individual’s sexual orientation, in all likelihood, can be linked to that individual’s ethnic, religious, and other forms of identity. Thus, scholars in this field should carefully and simultaneously consider an individual’s ethnic and/or religious identity, as well as the individual’s sexual orientation. Additional research is required to explore the complex interactions that occur between multiple group
identities in the workplace and the effects of these identities on GLBT employees’ workplace experiences (Ragins, Cornwell & Miller, 2003, p.71).

7. Discussion

Based on the comprehensive systematic literature review conducted for this paper, social institutions, legal frameworks, and cultural norms were identified as the major pillars of sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace. Changes to any of these pillars may affect the other pillars. However, simple changes might be insufficient. An overall transformation is required to achieve sexual orientation equality in the workplace.

In all likelihood, social institutions outside the workplace play significant roles in the development and co-construction of the variety of discriminatory experiences that permeate the workplace. Workplace-based studies seem to have adopted views that were too narrow to account for the depth of discrimination experienced by GLBT individuals (M. Ozbilgin, personal communication, February 21, 2013). If we consider the widespread compulsory heterosexuality enforced by various institutional settings, such as families, schools, the media, and the military, it is very important to explore the everyday experiences of GLBT individuals using a lifecycle approach similar to methods used in recent research conducted by Ozturk and Ozbilgin (in press) to reveal discriminatory practices within those institutions. Thus, this area certainly deserves further academic attention, particularly if scholars can adopt a relational method (Syed & Ozbilgin, 2009; Forstenlechner, Lettice, & Özbilgin, 2012), because compulsory heterosexuality across key institutions remains entrenched and largely unchallenged (Ozturk & Ozbilgin, in press).

A possible research question for further research can be formulated as follows: Based on the lifecycle approach, how might these institutional domains (e.g. family, school, and so on) shape the lived experiences of GLBT individuals? The results of the systematic literature review revealed the significance of legal frameworks in the fight against sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace. Employers can easily fire or fail to hire GLBT employees in work contexts in which specific non-discriminatory legislation related to sexual orientation does not exist. A very dramatic example of this type of dismissal situation was provided in Ozturk’s (2011) study, which was conducted in the Turkish context. A gay respondent stated that one day while walking hand-in-hand with his partner on a crowded street, one of his colleagues suddenly saw them. The next day, the respondent’s boss invited him into his office and asked him to quit his job immediately. The Turkish labour act and constitution do refer to ‘sex’; but they do not specifically refer to ‘sexual orientation’. Although some authors interpret the term, ‘sex’, to include ‘sexual orientation’, it is disputable whether this type of interpretation accepted by the Turkish Court of Cassation (Yenisey, 2005, p.245). In principle, legislation provides an overall umbrella to protect GLBT individuals and to ensure their inclusion at work. Discrimination based on sexual orientation is most likely to occur in an employment sphere that lacks this type of legislation. As put forward by Colgan and Wright (2011), legal and constitutional amendments such as the introduction of the Employment Equality Regulations that outlaw sexual orientation discrimination in employment in the UK, offered opportunities for sexual orientation equality at least a step forward for GLB employees in British workplaces. Indeed, the favourable legal, political, and organizational climate that developed since the introduction of the Employment Equality Regulations in the UK encouraged many GLBT employees to come out and to feel more confident about opposing sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace (Colgan et al., 2008, p.43). Similarly, Gates (2011) argued that the absence of non-discrimination laws in the workplace is one of several factors that affect the workplace well being of queer employees. The introduction of non-discrimination laws can be related to changes in specific workplace behaviours (e.g. discrimination in hiring decisions), as well as to increases in overall tolerance and acceptance in the workplace (Barron, 2010). It is possible to suggest that, despite its shortcomings, as a regulatory apparatus, the law has played a significant role in the shaping of organizational policy, practice, and ‘the production of cultural norms’ (Skidmore, 2004, p.230).

Nevertheless, legislation itself may not be sufficient to alter the intolerant social and cultural atmosphere that opposes the existence of GLBT employees in the workplace (Wang & Schwarz, 2010). Despite the fact that several policy changes were introduced in UK public service organizations following the passage of legislation aimed at sexual orientation equality, those changes seemed to have exerted limited effects on practices across organizations (Colgan & Wright, 2011). Thus, it is possible to state, ‘while improved legal protections are necessary, establishing a more hospitable social and cultural environment is a catalyst and most likely a necessary precondition that sets the stage for improved legal protection’ (Beatty & Kirby, 2006, p.41). Culturally embedded norms remain in the
background that shape individuals’ mindsets, attitudes, and viewpoint towards homosexuality because heterosexuality is the expected norm in both society and the workplace. Even in school settings, administrators tend to oppress homosexual behaviour to uphold political and social norms of heterosexuality (Lugg, 2006). It can be inferred from the current review that in most cases, gay employees tend to behave in more masculine ways and lesbian employees tend to behave in more feminine ways to comply with compulsory heterosexist norms that prevail in society. Thus, many GLBT employees attempt to conceal their identities or simply ‘pass’ (pretend to be heterosexual). They tend to adopt identity strategies they believe might be ‘appropriate’ in workplace settings. However, those self-regulating behaviours may lead to negative outcomes that might negatively affect GLBT employees’ work-related attitudes and well-being. The greater cognitive efforts made by GLBT employees in order to be seen ‘acceptable’ by the majority of society, the greater the psychological costs they will have to pay (Madera, 2010). In addition, Martinez and Hebl (2010) argued that the organizational culture and climate are partially determined by the social norms of the employees. Therefore, it can be suggested that the creation of an inclusive workplace requires that prejudices and discriminatory behaviours against GLBT individuals will not be considered socially accepted within an organization.

8. Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that the formulation of GLBT-inclusive/supportive policies and the consolidation of these policies will soon become prerequisites for firms that seek to achieve competitive advantages in the labour market. Given the changing nature of workforce demographics, narrowing pool of qualified job candidates, and growing number of GLBT individuals as being both consumers and employees, organizational decision makers should be aware of sexual orientation diversity as a business case and they should consider how effective this diversity element can be put into practice within their organizations.

References


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