Heterosexism and Work-Family Concerns

Authors
Shaun Pichler, Michigan State University- School of Labor & Industrial Relations
Christina “Tt” King, Boston College Master’s of Social Work Candidate

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Introduction
Before defining heterosexism and describing the extant research literature related to heterosexism in the workplace, it is important to briefly describe the scope of this entry and its boundary conditions. Given that the study of heterosexism in the management and organization literature has developed significantly in the past decade, the scope of this review is generally limited to research on heterosexism in U.S. workplaces. Because the purpose of this review is to link research on heterosexism in the workplace to work-family research, the intent of this review is not to comprehensively analyze the literature on gay and lesbian families from the family studies domain.

Central to our purpose is identifying key concepts, definitions, and research literatures related to heterosexism in the workplace, as well as synthesizing study findings in order to make recommendations to researchers, workplace practitioners and policy advocates. The review below covers the following topics: 1) an introduction to the concept of heterosexism in the workplace, as well as related concepts, 2) the relevance of heterosexism to work-family research, 3) existing research on heterosexism in the workplace, and 4) potential directions for future research and workplace practice implications.

Basic Concepts and Definitions
Before defining heterosexism more formally, it is important to understand sexual orientation and gender identity more precisely. Kauth and Kalichman (1995) define sexual orientation as, “the cumulative experience and interaction of erotic fantasy, romantic-emotional feelings, and sexual behavior directed toward one or both genders” (p. 82). Similarly, the American Psychological Association defines sexual orientation as “an often enduring pattern of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attractions of men to women or women to men (heterosexual), of women to women or men to men (homosexual), or by men or women to both sexes (bisexual)” (https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/index). These definitions emphasize the
multidimensional nature of sexual orientation and are inclusive of all sexual orientations, i.e. heterosexual and homosexual, as well as identities such as bisexual, pansexual, asexual, and others. While sexual orientation can be defined in terms of fantasy, emotion, or behavior, not all of these dimensions need be in accordance with one another. It is important to note, then, that one’s sexual identity may in fact not be determined by one’s actual sexual behavior. For instance, a man who has sex with men may still identify as heterosexual because of his emotional (i.e., romantic) feelings towards women.

Other definitions of sexual orientation recognize that sexual orientation is perhaps best represented by two continuous scales, i.e. heterosexuality and homosexuality. That is, an individual can be high on both axes (i.e., bisexual), low on both axes (i.e. asexual), high on only one axis and low on the other (i.e., heterosexual or homosexual), or somewhere in between on both axes. The term homosexual includes the term ‘gay’, which is generally used to refer to men who are homosexual, but can also include homosexual women, and ‘lesbian’, which is generally used to refer to women who are homosexual. Measures of sexual orientation in the management and organization literature typically rely on self-reports of one’s sexual orientation, i.e. whether or not a respondent considers themselves to be gay, lesbian, bisexual. Estimates of the proportion of the workforce that is gay or lesbian range, in part because of different definitions and measurement protocol, but nevertheless suggest that this is a relatively large minority group. For instance, estimates suggest that approximately 9 million LGBT persons live in the United States (Renna, 2011), comprising up to 12% of the workforce (Day & Greene, 2008) While research on heterosexism in the workplace often includes transgender employees, it is important to note that there is a difference between sex and gender, as well as sexual orientation and gender identity. For the purposes of this entry, the difference between sex and gender is that the former is assigned based on one’s biology at birth, whereas the latter is comprised of one’s experience as being male or female. One’s gender identity, then, is the gender with which one self-identifies.

Gagne and Tewksbury (1998) define identifying as transgender “as a discursive act in which the transgendered individual is an active agent in the establishment of an alternative gender identity and the presentation of an alternatively gendered self” (p. 92). For a transgender person, one’s gender identity is discordant with one’s gender assigned on the basis of biological sex. In other words, ‘transgender’ is an umbrella term that refers to persons who identify with a gender that differs from the one they were assigned at birth, and those who identify along the gender spectrum (i.e. genderqueer, genderfluid, non-binary). While the experiences of transgender employees are substantively different than homosexuals (Law, et.al, 2013), gay men,
lesbians, bisexuals and transgender persons are typically regarded, as a group, as sexual and gender minorities.

It is important to note that gender identity and sexual orientation are not mutually exclusive concepts. For example, a male (sex) can have a woman gender identity (transgender), yet still be attracted to women (homosexual). This person would be considered a gender minority given that her gender identity is deviant from the “gender binary,” and a sexual minority, given that her sexual orientation is deviant from heterosexuality. Now that a proper understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity has been established, it is important to more clearly understand workplace discrimination related to these concepts. Because of controversy surrounding the use of the term homophobia to describe anti-gay attitudes and behaviors, this taxonomy is important to prevent confusion among both scholars and laypeople.

While the term homophobia is commonly understood to refer discrimination related to homosexuals, the term is in fact meant to reflect a fear of homosexuality (Weinberg, 1972) based on a fear of being or becoming gay. As Weinberg himself explained, he “coined the term homophobia to mean it was a phobia about homosexuals… It was a fear of homosexuals which seemed to be associated with a fear of contagion” (Herek, 2004, p. 7). The problem with the usage of this word is that feelings among heterosexuals about sexual minorities do not typically constitute a phobia per se, and the existing research evidence indicates that homophobia does not typically reach the level of a pathology in general (Herek, 2004). Of course, this term also limits the conceptualization of anti-gay attitudes (i.e. prejudice) or behaviors (i.e. discrimination) to deviant, individual-level psychopathology, ignoring the broader cultural and societal sources and implications of discrimination against sexual minorities, or those perceived to be sexual minorities (Herek, 2004).

Given the problems and limitations inherent in the term homophobia, heterosexism is more appropriate when referring to anti-gay attitudes (i.e. prejudice) and behavior (i.e. discrimination) (Herek, 2004). Perhaps most simply, heterosexism can be understood as discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Pichler, 2007). Further, while some authors conceptualize heterosexism as inclusive of prejudice and discrimination directed towards sexual minorities, Herek (2004) differs by defining heterosexism as, “the cultural ideology that perpetuates sexual stigma by denying and denigrating any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community” (p. 16). In this sense, then, the source of discrimination and its perpetuation are social and cultural forces and institutions. While this definition applies easily at a macrosocietal level, this definition can apply, and has been applied, to organizational systems. That is, heterosexism in the management and organization literature is typically
measured as an individual-level perception about features of an one’s employing organization, e.g. organizational climate (Pichler, 2018).

It is important to note that discrimination towards sexual minorities can be studied at multiple levels of analysis. Since heterosexism refers to a macro-level construct, Herek (2000) argues that negative attitudes and behaviors about sexual orientation held by individuals are most appropriately labeled sexual prejudice. Herek (2004) defines sexual prejudice as, “negative attitudes based on sexual orientation” (p. 16). Prejudice, of course, is an individual-level phenomenon, and is operable at the interpersonal or social-psychological level (Herek, 2004).

Heterosexism and sexual prejudice should not be confused with heterocentricism, which refers to the assumption that someone is heterosexual, or heteronormativity, which is “the privileging of heterosexual relationships and identities… as the norm by which all others are evaluated” (Hylton, 2005: 61). That is, heterosexism refers to discrimination, whereas heterocentricism and heteronormativity refer to assumptions and normative evaluations of heterosexuality, respectively.

Despite the fact that LGBT employees represent a relatively large proportion of the workforce, they remain an understudied minority group. There has been a noticeable increase in attention paid to the workplace experiences of LGBT employees in recent years, however. The vast amount of this literature focuses on heterosexism and disclosure (Button, 2001; Scully & Creed, 2000; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Hebl, Foster, Mannix & Dovidio, 2002; Horvath & Ryan, 2003; Ragins, in press; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001).

**Stigma theory** (Goffman, 1963) is often used as a framework for understanding heterosexism in the workplace. This theory proposes that attributes about individuals are devalued in certain social or cultural contexts and are, therefore, stigmatized (Crocker, Major & Steele, 1998), which can lead to stereotyping and discrimination. That is, sexual minorities may or may not be stigmatized in a particular environmental context; this context is dependent upon shared norms and beliefs. An invisible stigma is one that is concealable, i.e. is not readily visible (Clair, Beatty, & Maclean, 2005). Sexual orientation is considered an invisible or concealable stigma since it is not readily observable (Tilcsik et al., 2015). A transgender identity, too, can be considered an invisible stigma depending on its manifestation, often referred to as “passing” for cisgender. Sexual minorities, therefore, can, in most circumstances, decide to conceal or reveal their stigma at work.

As many researchers have previously noted, individuals with invisible stigmas face a different set of challenges in the workplace than do individuals with visible stigmas, or stigmas that are readily observable, such as presumed race (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Tilcsik, et. al., 2015). This is because employees with invisible stigmas must
decide whether or not to disclose their identity to others at work. In the context of the present discussion, disclosure is the decision to reveal one’s sexual or gender minority status at work. Disclosure is typically not an all or nothing concept. Since there are obvious negative consequences associated with disclosure, or “coming out”, in the workplace, sexual and gender minorities are often strategic about who to come out to at work, when, and under what circumstances (Griffith & Hebl, 2002). Further, this decision process is often repeated over multiple social interactions in any given setting. That is, instead of making an organization-wide announcement, LGBT employees often disclose to those work colleagues whom they trust and feel will support them.

There are a variety of passing and revealing strategies that persons with an invisible stigma may employ when choosing to conceal or disclose sensitive aspects of their identities (Clair, Beatty, and Maclean, 2005). For instance, a LGBT employee can “pass” with concealment, which involves suppressing and keeping hidden information about one’s identity, or by fabrication, which involves actively constructing a false identity at work, such as by pretending to be in an opposite-sex relationship or even bringing opposite-sex friends to company events as dates. Revealing, on the other hand, can take the form of signaling, or dropping clues about one’s identity, or by normalizing, which involves minimizing the significance of one’s stigma by talking about it in heterosexual terms or by drawing parallels to heterosexual experience. While the ability to conceal one’s sexual orientation or gender identity may seem like an advantage compared to being unable to hide a stigmatized identity, suppressing one’s true self can be extremely challenging and stressful (Button, 2001; Scully & Creed, 2000; Goffman, 1963). Further, perceived heterosexism has been linked to psychological stress and strain among sexual minorities (Mays & Cochran, 2001; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001), as well as negative job attitudes and lower organizational self-esteem, increased job anxiety (Button, 2001), and psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety (Ragins et al., 2007).

Since part of the review below addresses how heterosexism is related to work-family research, it is important to lastly define what an LGBT family is. As Allen and Demo (1995) note, assigning labels to families is oftentimes counterproductive; labeling a family as “LGBT” is no exception. Nevertheless, it is important to be able to define the population briefly for purposes of clarity here, which will focus on “gay and lesbian” families for the purpose of this entry. The authors contend that a gay and lesbian family is, “defined by the presence of two or more people who are a same-sex orientation (i.e., a couple), or by the presence of at least one lesbian or gay adult rearing a child” (p. 113). Following Laird’s lead (1993), a dual-orientation family is defined as “families involving one or more lesbian or gay member(s)” (p. 113). Thus, for instance, a family characterized by heterosexual parents and a gay or lesbian child would be a dual-
orientation family. While these terms are incomplete, the concepts behind them can be utilized to understand how a “transgender,” “gender diverse,” or “bisexual” family may be understood.

Now that the reader is equipped with an understanding of heterosexism and related concepts, the following section will explain how heterosexism is related to the study of work and family. This is not meant to be an exhaustive review. Instead, the purpose of the next section is to 1) highlight important connections between the study of heterosexism and work-family research, and 2) briefly consider the family lives of sexual minorities and how this might be related to heterosexism in the workplace.

Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

Work-family conflict is a type of role conflict that occurs when the demands of one’s work role conflict with the demands of one’s family role or vice versa. Greenhaus & Beutell (1985) outlined three types of work-family conflict: time-based, strain-based and behavior-based. Time-based conflict occurs when the time spent in the work (family) domain makes it difficult to fulfill one’s obligations in the family (work) domain. Strain-based conflict occurs when the strain experienced in one life domain makes it difficult to meet role demands in the other domain. Behavior-based conflict occurs when the behaviors expected in one domain conflict with the behaviors expected in the other domain.

Sexual orientation discrimination is pervasive, according to scholarly literature, (Brewer & Lyons, 2016), resulting in various stress and strain for LGBT employees outside of ordinary job stress. This information in mind, one would expect that heterosexism would be related to strain-based work-family conflict. One would also expect that the stress and strain associated with concealment at work would also lead to strain-based work-family conflict. Of course, concealment at work may also be related to behavior-based work-family conflict when passing at work is incongruent with one’s behavior outside of work. That is, an LGBT person may experience a disclosure disconnect (Ragins, in press) if he or she is non-disclosed at work, for instance, but disclosed outside of work. Different levels of disclosure in one’s work and family lives, then, may lead to role conflict (Ragins, in press).

The limited existing empirical research tends to suggest that LGBT employees experience similar levels of work-family conflict as heterosexual employees, but for different reasons. For instance, a unique study found that levels of work-family conflict did not differ by couple type when comparing same-sex couples to heterosexual couples(Hammer, Brockwood, Huang, &Nice, 2004) found that levels of work-family conflict did not differ by couple type. For instance, family involvement was a significant predictor of work-family conflict only for gay and lesbian employees. Moreover,
crossover effects for work-family conflict were found between heterosexual partners and employees only. These results suggest that there may be important differences in how same-sex couples experience work-family conflict as compared to heterosexual couples.

In an initial investigation of the relationship between work-family conflict and satisfaction with work and family roles among gay and lesbian employees, Huffman and Watrous (2005) surveyed gay and lesbian conference attendees to determine if a model of work-family conflict which typically holds for heterosexual employees similarly applied to homosexual employees. This model did not represent a good fit to the data, but the model was generally a good representation of the data when workplace climate was included as a moderator variable. These results suggest that frameworks used to understand work-family conflict among heterosexual employees can be applied to LGBT employees, but only under certain boundary conditions.

While this research indicates that LGBT employees may experience work-family conflict for different reasons or under different circumstances than heterosexual employees, it is important to more fully understand why this is the case. Disclosure seems to be an important explanatory variable here. For instance, Day and Schonerade (1997) found that while there were no differences in work-family conflict between heterosexual employees and disclosed lesbian and gay employees in their sample, nondisclosed lesbian and gay employees experienced significantly more work-family conflict than disclosed employees. As only 21 states and the District of Columbia prohibit sexual orientation discrimination, including a lack of federal legislation protecting LGBT folks, choices to remain undisclosed may reflect tactful employment protection on the part of employees (Human Right Campaign, 2014). Despite advances in legislation such as the repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and the Obergefell v. Hodges (2015) decision, it remains nationally legal to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation in employment decisions (Supreme Court of the United States, 2015).

As employment protections have been found to reflect local attitudes toward gays and lesbians (Tilscik, 2011), one may question the extent to which decisions around disclosure vary based not only on organizational norms, but local norms as a whole. Further, supportive organizations have been related to improved employee recruitment (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2011), lower employee turnover (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2011), and a less stressful work environment (Ragins and Cornwell, 2011). Nevertheless, while even among Fortune 500 companies, 93 percent of firms endorse sexual orientation non-discrimination policies and 75 percent based on gender identity (Human Rights Campaign, 2016), there still remains 90 percent of transgender persons and 37 percent of LGB folks who report discrimination in the workplace (Pizer et al, 2012).
Prince (1995) posited that while dual-career gay couples face the same challenges of balancing two careers that heterosexual couples do, they must grapple with additional concerns such as the decision to include partners at company events, which requires the employee to be disclosed. Further, reasons for discrimination and wage differences varied from sexual orientation itself (Pichler et al., 2010) to perceived job misfit based on gendered expectations (Pichler et al, 2010) and expectations of jobs for persons of certain sexual orientations (Tilcsik et al, 2015). Some researchers have even referred to a “lavender ceiling,” similar to the “glass ceiling” that refers to limited promotions for cisgender women in professional settings (Gedro, 2010). Contrarily, however, gays and lesbians were found to be viewed as more “promotable” than heterosexual counterparts, though were expected to have trouble “fitting-in” to workplace social environments, and faced more traditional forms of stereotyping based on sexual orientations (Pichler, 2017).

While this exposition is not intended to provide a comprehensive review of family diversity, it is important to at least understand the unique family circumstances of sexual minorities, as well as how these circumstances might be related to heterosexism in the workplace. As such, this literature will be briefly reviewed further below.

Just like LGBT employees are relatively understudied in the mainstream management and organization literature, so too are their families in the family studies literature. As scholars have previously noted (Allen and Demo, 1995), the lack of research on gay and lesbian families has limited the development of family systems theory as well as related empirical research. Citing figures from the Federation of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), eight in ten persons in the United States know someone that identifies as LGB, and one in three know someone who identifies as transgender (2016). Thus, to exclude this population from family studies research is to exclude a very large proportion of American families, friends, and allies. Further, nearly 220,000 children under the age of 18 are in the custody of same-sex parentage, according to the Williams Institute (Gates, 2013), and to an increasing extent.

Existing research on gay and lesbian families is often influenced by heterosexist assumptions and fails to capture the full diversity of these families. The American Psychological Association’s publication on common questions about gay and lesbian persons and families outlines major heterosexist assumptions about gay and lesbian parents, e.g. that they are unfit to parent, and provides a summary of research which documents the similarities, as opposed to dissimilarities, between gay and heterosexual parents (APA, 2008). Prejudice regarding sexual orientation is associated with a variety of negative outcomes for gay and lesbian families; particularly important perhaps are the limits to parental rights that gay and lesbian parents must sometimes grapple with.
simply because of their sexual orientation. As the author explains further, beliefs that lesbian and gay men are unfit to parent, and concerns among the courts that their children will face developmental or social challenges are unfounded empirically. Despite the fact that gay and lesbian families face rampant discrimination, Human Rights Campaign is one of many organizations that conclude the irrelevance of sexual orientation and gender to positive parenting, as well as child outcomes, based on professional organizations such as the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and American Academy of Family Physicians (2019).

In other words, existing research on gay and lesbian families tends to indicate that these families are in fact quite healthy. For instance, research indicates that, while heterosexually coupled, employed mothers typically experienced a "second shift", newly adopting homosexual couples tend to share household work and childcare more evenly (Goldberg et al., 2012). Further, research indicates that family adjustment and family functioning did not vary based on parental sexual orientation (Farr, 2017). Over 30 years of research has also illustrated similar outcomes in child sexual orientation, cognitive abilities, and gender identity when comparing children of same-sex and different-sex parents (Fedewa et al., 2014). Little research has examined if and how heterosexism in the workplace is related to family diversity, e.g. same-sex couples raising children. While positive view of LGBT persons are increasing in the United States, 30 percent of respondents endorsed believing that homosexuality is morally wrong in the 2018 Gallup poll (Gallup, 2018). Therefore, while work-family researchers have yet to examine how, for instance, openly raising a child in a gay or lesbian family might be related to workplace hostility or discrimination, though research on heterosexism otherwise in workplaces offers illumination. Of course, this represents an opportunity for work-family researchers who are interested in exploring the full range of family diversity and how family diversity might affect individuals at work.

**Body of Knowledge**

Now that we have reviewed connections between the study of heterosexism in the workplace and work-family research, we can move to a fuller treatment of heterosexism in the workplace. Existing research suggests that heterosexism in work organizations is pervasive. One in four LGBT-identifying persons reports experiencing workplace discrimination in the past 5 years, and as many as 27% of transgender employees report being fired, not hired, or denied a promotion on the basis of their gender identity (Out and Equal, 2017). Further, nearly 1 in 10 LGBT employees has left because of a perceived unwelcoming workplace, perhaps offering light into one reason
why, as an example, the transgender unemployment rate was 3 times the national average in 2017.

A review by Beatty and Kirby (2006) sheds light on reasons behind heterosexism in the workplace. According to the authors, stigmatization of invisible minorities is influenced by four major dimensions: responsibility, course, moral threat and performance. To the extent that sexual orientation and gender identity are perceived to be controllable or determined by preference, responsibility is attributed and LGBT employees are blamed for their sexual orientation or gender identity, which of course leads to decreased acceptance and increased stigmatization. When a stigma’s course is perceived to be reversible or changeable, it is less stigmatizing. Beatty and Kirby note that while sexual orientation is perceived to be changeable, and should therefore be less stigmatizing, the powerful belief that sexual orientation is controllable ultimately suppresses this dimension. Moral threat signals that stigma is determined by socialization and group beliefs, not the stigma itself, meaning that LGBT employees will be perceived more or less favorably by groups with different value systems; for instance, persons with various religious affiliations have been found to have negative attitudes towards gay men and lesbians (Herek, 1994; Horvath & Ryan, 2003). When a stigma is less likely to affect performance, it is thereby less likely to affect acceptance among coworkers. In summary, since sexual orientation and gender identity are often perceived to be controllable, reversible, and morally threatening, these combined factors explain why being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender is stigmatized.

Given that the aforementioned survey research indicates that perceived heterosexism is pervasive, it is important to compare these data to indicators of discrimination in the econometric literature. Econometric data tend to indicate that gay men, but not necessarily lesbian women, experience discrimination in earnings. Previously referred to as “gay ghettos,” Badgett (1995) describes the tracking of gay men into low-paying positions or industries. Along the same lines, the virtual invisibility of LGBT people in management positions can be understood as a “lavender ceiling” with similar effects to the “glass ceiling” that cisgender women experience (Gedro, 2010). While gay men continue to make more than lesbian women on average, both gay men and lesbian women report making less than their heterosexual counterparts according to a study completed by Prudential Financial in 2016-2017. This study also found that bisexual women earn the least compared even to lesbian and gay counterparts, however this was also attributed to a greater number of millennial-aged bisexual women compared with older generations of lesbian women and gay men (2017).

Contrary to these data, however, one 2015 study which compiled data from 29 students between the 1995 and 2012 suggested that, after controlling for parenthood,
lesbian women had a 9% increased income versus heterosexual women (Klawitter, 2013). Factors of education and work experience were suggested as possible correlations. Another explanation for this difference has to do with gay men and lesbian women’s reversal of gender roles as compared to heterosexuals. That is, gay men may be discriminated against for higher-paying, masculine gender-typed jobs because of their femininity, whereas lesbian women may be advantaged for these same jobs because of their masculinity (Pichler, Bruce & Varma, 2006). Another explanation, at least as applied to lesbian women, has to do with perceptions about heterosexual women “opting-out” of the workforce due to family-related responsibilities. The notion here is that heterosexual mothers may be discriminated against as compared to lesbian mothers because the latter are perceived as more likely to remain committed to their careers since they are less likely to rely on a partner breadwinner, or to be viewed as “nurturers” and possible mothers.

Laboratory-based experimental studies tend to indicate that gay men and lesbians face discrimination in hiring situations. These studies also shed light on individual attributes that are related to discriminatory tendencies in hiring scenarios. Beliefs about an LGBT employee’s ability to “fit-in” in a given position or promotion, as well as beliefs about the controllability of sexual orientation, were significant correlated to a candidates perceived promotability in one study (Pichler et al., 2017). In the same study, however, lesbian and gay candidates were overall rated as more promotable than their heterosexual counterparts, suggesting that sexual orientation alone does not determine promotability. The authors found that religiosity, previous contact with homosexuals, traditional gender role beliefs, and beliefs about the controllability of sexual orientation were all related to attitudes towards gay men and lesbians, which affected ratings of employability.

In the example above, expectations about ability to “fit in” or assumed morality based on beliefs about the controllability of sexual orientation illustrate more informal forms of discrimination. Interpersonal discrimination may also occur, to the extent that LGBT employees received fewer interpersonal interactions and eye contact in workplaces, according to one study (Barron & Hebl, 2013). Further, research suggests that male raters, particularly those without diversity training, are more likely to view gay males as the least suitable for employment based on gendered characteristics, rather than sexual orientation necessarily (Pichler et al., 2010). Further, anti-gay attitudes and employability beliefs were found to be related to a socially dominant personality, regardless of gender of the rater (2010).

Since the extant research evidence, in total, suggests that sexual minorities face heterosexism in work settings, both formally and informally, it is important to consider the legal protections that are available to this population. Currently, no comprehensive
federal legislation prohibits employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. Proposed federal legislation, has consistently been voted down by Congress every year since 1994, though scientific and political support has increased considerably (Hunt, 2011). While no federal legislation prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, certain states, localities, and organizations do offer some protections. These protections vary regionally and are reflective of local attitudes towards gays and lesbians (Tilscik, 2011). Since discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is legal in some, but not all, areas of the country, examining the relationship between legal protections and discrimination is an important area for future research. Ragins and Cornwell (2001) found that the existence of local anti-discrimination laws was negatively related to perceived heterosexism. Still, anti-discrimination laws, while essential, may not be enough.

Although protective legislation related to sexual orientation and gender identity is limited, research indicates that LGBT-supportive organizational policies and practices can have a dramatic impact on organizational climate, perceptions of heterosexism among LGBT employees. Examples of these policies include an anti-discrimination policy that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, inclusion of LGBT issues in diversity training, and management support for LGBT-related resource and support groups. As research has established that perceived heterosexism is negatively related to important job attitude variables, the relationship between perceived heterosexism and self-disclosure has suggested that individuals are more likely to “come out” in workplaces perceived as welcoming, which are more likely to be workplaces with LGBT-affirming policies (Badgett et al., 2013; Webster et al., 2018). Fully, 93% of Fortune 500 Companies have non-discrimination policies on the basis of sexual-orientation, and 75% have policies for non-discrimination based on gender identity (Human Rights Campaign, 2016). It is important to note that Fortune 500 corporations cannot necessarily be compared to smaller, locally-based organizations in terms of wealth, scope, or influence, however may illustrate where the future is heading. Further, while these policies, like legal protections, have limits to their effectiveness, research suggests that LGBT-supportive policies are related to job attitudes and perceived discrimination amongst LGBT workers (Law et al, 2013).

These policies also benefit non-LGBT employees. Employees recognize feeling supported when a company’s policies support their well-being, including through fair treatment, and value as a group to the organization (McKay and Avery, 2015). Further, such equality policies are currently “in vogue” according to some researchers, particularly with consideration to the increasingly millenial job market (Theadorakopoulos & Budhwar, 2015). Further, LGBT-inclusive workplaces were considered to be “employers of choice” for all employees according to Cordes’ 2012
research. According to theories on Corporate Social Responsibility, employees and stakeholders are likely to view socially responsible policies positively, resulting in a correlation to positive firm performance in terms of both employee satisfaction and the “bottom line” (Edmans, 2011). This is not always the case, however, as LGBT-affirming policies may not be considered “socially responsible” by all parties.

While some companies have adopted LGBT non-discrimination policies as a result of negative media attention, consumer uproar, and an anti-LGBT political backdrop (Myers, 2015), there are some importance exceptions to the above research evidence. For example, though some firms have adopted policies to tap into the so-called “pink-market,” or $800 million in disposable income of lesbian and gay consumers (Paul et al., 2011), others recognize the controversial and possibly backlash-instigating effects of such adoption (Chuang, Church, & Ophir, 2011). Further research is also needed to confirm the causation between firm-level LGBT-supportive policies and decreased heterosexism in the workplace, as well as in relation to positive firm outcomes on economic and business levels. Negative outcomes in terms of talent management and profitability have been linked to heterosexist organizations, making the uptake of sexually-inclusive policies seem imperative for business leaders today (Pichler, Ruggs, & Trau, 2017). This data could provide significant bargaining power for those fighting to increase non-discrimination policies at organizational levels, while also impacting the legislative landscape moving forward.

To be more specific on the so-called “business case” for non-discrimination, these policies have been suggested to give firms a competitive edge in terms of positive stock market reactions (Li and Nagar, 2013), as well as improved recruitment and lower turnover of LGBT employees (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2011). LGBT employees who remain in these organizations were also found to view work more positively, resulting in improved performance, and thus business gains (Badgett et al., 2013). Higher firm value, productivity, and profitability, particularly for research and development organizations, were found to be associated with LGBT-supportive policies, regardless of the level of protection at the state level (Pichler et al., 2018). This suggests that, even if the value of such policies is primarily nominal, the business case may remain. Further, some studies suggest that LGBT non-discrimination policies are related to higher credit ratings, even when controlling for variables such as overall firm friendliness, and when comparing with comparable firms without such policies (Chintrakarn et al., 2018).

While these findings have encouraged the argument for the “business case,” it is still relatively understudied why firms decide to take on such policies. Pichler, et al. (2018) suggest that Corporate Social Responsibility theory may be a factor, referring to firms’ attempts to behave with social responsibility in order to engage stakeholders and boost business. Further, matters such as regulative influences, social-normative
influence, and cultural cognitive influences have been considered as important mediating factors (Trau et al., 2018). These may include, but are not limited to, the influence of governmental non-discrimination legislation, norms around sexuality and gender expression in a given socio-geographic location, and cultural expectations for treatment and acceptance of LGBT persons.

While there remains more to be seen in research surrounding the choice and outcomes for LGBT-affirming policies, there remain roadblocks to such studies. LGBT research presents a number of complexities around sampling due to different definitions and measures of sexual orientation, self-disclosure amongst sampled individuals, and determining a large sample size from the general population, to name a few. Future research can should similarly investigate the causal mechanisms that explain heterosexism-attitudinal relationships as to better understand the unique workplace experiences of LGBT employees. Research should also examine behavioral outcomes of perceived heterosexism.

Implications for Research and Practice

Early reviews of the literature on the workplace experiences of LGBT employees criticized the domain for a lack of theory and rigorous empirical research (Croteau, 1996; Lonborg & Phillips, 1996). While scholars in the field have increasingly used established theoretical frameworks to guide and inform their research, scholarship in the domain is nascent and open to many new avenues of research.

For instance, work-family scholarship could be greatly enhanced by more fully investigating work-family issues among gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and gender non-binary families since the domain historically studies heterosexual or non-trans families, or assumes heterosexuality and non-trans identities (i.e. heteronormativity). As a potential example, transphobia experienced in the workplace may spillover into the family domain, which could cause stress and strain not only for employees, but for their loved ones as well. This is an important area of research that has yet to be investigated.

Similarly, work-family scholarship could be advanced by investigating heterosexism and transphobia in the workplace specifically related to family status. Researchers have previously investigated how formal support for sexual diversity is related to perceptions of heterosexism in the workplace. Extending this line of research, scholars could investigate more specifically how a lack of same-sex partner benefits, e.g. health insurance benefits, is related to financial pressures among LGBT couples. Alternatively, scholars could investigate the experiences of gay and lesbian families who work for supportive organizations that provide health benefits to their adopted children.

Research on informal discrimination in the workplace, i.e. interpersonal prejudice,
related to being in a LGB family and raising children is another uninvestigated area of potential research.

Even further, research on the effects of gender-diverse protections for transgender employees is an area of minimal research, particularly considering the limited number of organizations that have taken on such policies. Additionally, the impact of employer-sponsored health insurances that support gender-affirming procedures have been scarcely considered in terms of effects on work-family and work-life experience. Similar to research on informal discrimination in the workplace against LGB persons, research related to being a transgender and/or gender non-binary person, partner, or parent is uninvestigated, particularly in terms of affirming use of gender pronouns, names, and understanding of trans identities.

While some researchers have begun investigating related issues, there is currently very little clarity on how the unique workplace experiences of LGBT employees relate to work-family issues, particularly considering recent developments in LGBT rights in terms of marriage and non-discrimination. It is important to note here that extending benefits to LGBT families can create conflict in terms of perceptions of organizational justice in the workplace. For instance, perceived justice may come into conflict with experiences of both implicit and explicit discrimination by the organization and individuals who comprise it. Additionally, while providing equal benefits for all families has the advantage of acknowledging different notions of what a family is, redistribution of benefits based on an equality principle can sometimes lead to unequal treatment towards larger families.

Employers must be prepared, then, to manage competing interests when adopting LGBT-supportive policies, as has been made evident by backlashes against corporations such as Target and Ben & Jerry’s and the Walt Disney Company for doing just that. As another example, diversity programs that include topics related to sexual orientation and gender identity are subject to backlash among employees due to religious convictions and other belief systems, to the extent that Mississippi passed the “Religious Liberty Accommodations Act” (2016) to protect the right to refuse service to LGBTQ+ folks in certain industries (Mississippi Legislature, 2016). As a result, in certain instances, employers can be subject to claims of religious discrimination due to LGBT inclusion. Summarizing three court cases involving claims of religious discrimination due to inclusive diversity training, Kaplan (2006) delineated three major factors that, in part, were related to the court’s judgments for diversity training specifically; namely, the level of participation required of employees, the content of the training program, the employee’s response and the employer’s response. In total, these cases highlight the need to carefully balance the business case for inclusive diversity training with individual
rights to religious freedom and accommodation, particularly in light of increasing calls for “religious liberty” legislation.

Organizational-level research is needed to understand why organizations adopt LGBT-supportive policies and practices, and how differences across organizations are related to differences in reactions among affected parties. U.S. organizations are increasingly offering LGBT-supportive policies and practices; the Human Rights Campaign, the nation’s largest LGBT advocacy group, recently announced that more companies than ever before are offering employment protections and benefits to LGBT employees (For a copy of the full report see www.hrc.org/cei). It is important, therefore, to understand what predicts adoption, why backlash occurs and under what circumstances, and what impact this has on employers who adopt these policies and practices.

Comparative international research on the workplace experiences of LGBT employees is also lacking despite the notion that the international landscape towards sexual and gender minorities is changing. For instance, the Human Rights Committee decided in Toonen v. Australia that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, in this case criminal sanctions of homosexual activity, equated to discrimination on the basis of sex and violated the rights to privacy and equality provided by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Sanders, 2002). Further, movement has been made in various nations toward rights and protections for LGBT persons, including India’s legalization of gay sex, the legalization of same-sex marriage in Australia, and transgender protections legalized a second time in Massachusetts, United States (BBC, 2018; Karp, 2017). Nations without specific or particularly visible LGBT movements have also witnessed cultural and legal advances, including debates on rights in Kenya and the first gay pride parades in parts of Israel, the United States, Switzerland, and even Antarctica (Burke, 2019; Newman, 2018).

In summary, the study of heterosexism in the workplace is a growing area of interest in the management and organization domain. Existing research is typically conducted at individual level of analysis, and is usually restricted to U.S. employees. The literature on heterosexism in the workplace has traditionally been criticized for lacking a strong theoretical foundation and empirical rigor; scholars have addressed these criticisms through integrative theoretical work as well as empirical research reports. This research suggests that heterosexism and transphobia are common in work organizations, and that legal protections prohibiting heterosexism and transphobia are contested, challenged, and limited. Organizational-level protections seem helpful in the sense that they seem to reduce perceptions of heterosexism and related adverse psychological sequelea for LGBT employees and their allies.
While this body of research would suggest that employers should adopt LGBT-supportive policies and practices in order to more effectively recruit and retain employees from this relatively large minority group, organizational-level and cross-level research is still needed to help explain reasons for, and the broader ramifications of, policy adoption among organizations in both the U.S. and abroad.

References


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