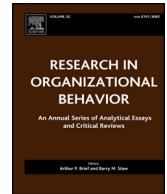




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Research in Organizational Behavior

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/riob



The shifting landscape of LGBT organizational research



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 18 September 2014

Keywords:
LGBT
Gay
Lesbian
Sexual minorities
Gender
Frame analysis
Discrimination
Workplace diversity
Organization studies
Organizational behavior

ABSTRACT

Over the past generation, sexual minorities—particularly lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons—have gained increased visibility in the public arena. Yet organizational research has lagged behind in recognizing and studying this category of organizational members. This article offers a critical review of this growing body of research. More specifically, we identify and discuss four dominant scholarly frames that have informed LGBT organizational research from the late nineteenth century to date. The frames include a “medical abnormality,” “deviant social role,” “collective identity,” and “social distinctiveness” view of sexual minorities. We argue that these frames have profoundly shaped the scope and range of organizational scholarship devoted to sexual minorities by showing that scholars using such contrasted frames have been drawn to very different research questions with respect to sexual minorities. We document and discuss the main and contrasted questions asked within each of these frames and show how they have both enabled and constrained LGBT organizational research. We conclude by calling for more attention to the frames organizational scholars adopt when studying sexual minorities, but also for more research on both minority and majority sexual orientations in organizations.

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1. Introduction

Sexual minorities—particularly lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons—are a significant and increasingly visible constituency within organizations. As an example, a review of recent studies puts the number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons in the United States at approximately 9 million, or nearly 4 percent of the total population (Gates, 2011). Also, survey data collected as part of the U.S. National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health attest to both the magnitude and variety of this population: 7 percent of respondents report some degree of same-sex attraction and 2 percent claim a primarily or exclusively same-sex orientation (Harris, 2009). These numbers echo earlier results from a large-scale survey putting the percentage of respondents reporting either same-sex attraction or interest at 7.6 percent, and those identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender at 2.1 percent (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994, p. 297).

Moreover, the above numbers are likely conservative estimates, as surveys continue to show that a significant proportion of LGBT individuals keep their sexual identities fully or partly concealed since disclosure in the workplace has been shown to lead to discrimination, termination, and even physical threats and attacks (D’Augelli & Grossman, 2001; Deitch, Butz, & Brief, 2004; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). Regardless of level of disclosure, sexual minorities are gaining visibility in the workforce. Many U.S. employers and legislatures have recognized this. In 1992, just two Fortune 500 companies offered same-sex partner benefits; in 2014, 67 percent offered these benefits. Though sexual minorities still lack formal protection on the federal level, 21 states, scores of municipalities, and 91 percent of Fortune 500 companies have included sexual orientation in employment nondiscrimination policies (Human Rights Campaign, 2014).

Despite their numerical force and their increasing public visibility, sexual minorities remain “one of the largest, but least studied, minority groups in the workforce” (Ragins, 2004, p. 35). The topic has been to a varying degree taboo in the social sciences in general (Taylor & Raeburn, 1995) and management or organizational studies in particular (Creed, 2006; Githens, 2009; Williams & Giuffre, 2011). Indeed, sexual minorities are scarcely visible in mainstream management scholarship: The twelve most highly cited journals in the field have published, between them, just ten articles referencing LGBTs in their title, key words, or abstract. Half of those

journals have published none at all.¹ Moreover, the limited research that exists is often scattered. It draws on multiple disciplines (e.g., sociology, social psychology, cultural history, social work, psychiatry, clinical and counseling psychology) and deploys a wide array of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches.

Our aim in this article is twofold. First, our goal is to identify and review—despite its scarcity—past LGBT organizational scholarship ranging from the late nineteenth century to the present. By LGBT organizational scholarship, we mean studies dealing broadly with sexual minorities in organizations.² Our goal is, therefore, to provide other scholars with a comprehensive review of what has been done to date. In addition, while organizational research tends to be somewhat atemporal (Daniel, Arzoglou, & Lamont, 2011), we purposely foregrounded the date and the chronological sequence of the studies reviewed to provide an overview of the field’s evolution. Indeed, the historical perspective we adopt here aims to use the past as a tool for sharpening our understanding of the present (Anderson, 2006; Halbwachs, 1980; Olick, 2007). This historical approach allows us to critically discuss the past, present, and possible future state of LGBT organizational research, but also draw implications more broadly for research on sexual orientations (including majority ones) in organizations.

Second, our aim in this article is to shed light on the largely un-acknowledged scholarly frames that have structured this research on sexual minorities, and show how these frames have shaped the type of research conducted. We define a scholarly frame as a set of interrelated ideas that, for a time, provides a model, problems, and solutions for a community of scholars to

¹ The search was conducted in 2013 with the key words LGBT, GLBT, gay, lesbian, bisexual, homosexual, and same-sex benefits (with wildcards to catch variants) in the following twelve journals: *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, *Journal of Management*, *Management Science*, *MIS Quarterly*, *Organization Science*, *Research in Organizational Behavior*, *Strategic Management Journal*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*. For details on the journal sampling see Battilana, Anteby, and Sengul (2010).

² We use fairly interchangeably the terms “LGBT persons” and “sexual minorities” throughout our text, but we are well aware that little organizational scholarship examines bisexual and transgender individuals’ experiences. Moreover, we are cognizant that the terms used to label sexual minorities has shifted significantly over time. For an example of such a shift, see Chauncey (1994, pp. 14–23).

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