




Intersections of gender and sexual diversity in the career trajectories of LGBTQIA+ individuals



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Dates:

Received: 20 Apr. 2023

Accepted: 04 July 2023

Published: 22 Aug. 2023

How to cite this article:

Ubisi, L.M., Tsabedze, W., &
Fourie, E. (2023).
Intersections of gender and
sexual diversity in the career
trajectories of LGBTQIA+
individuals. *African Journal
of Career Development*, 5(1),
a81. [https://doi.
org/10.4102/ajcd.v5i1.81](https://doi.org/10.4102/ajcd.v5i1.81)

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Background: In searching, entering and adapting into a career, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other non-conforming (LGBTQIA+) individuals must consider how an organisation's cultural norms will not only affect their work but also their gender and sexual identity. This includes actively seeking welcoming workspaces, employing coping strategies against minority stressors or having to exit a work environment because of prolonged homophobia. However, it is not constructive to immediately assume that this will be the career trajectory of all LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Objectives: This review sought to explore how LGBTQIA+ individuals navigate intersections of gender and/or sexuality diversity in varied work environments.

Methods: A desktop review of qualitative and quantitative studies was conducted to search for publications to answer the following question, what are LGBTQIA+ individuals' experiences of gender and sexuality diversity within various work environments?

Results: Given limited scholarship in this area in South Africa, local and international studies were consulted to further the body of knowledge. Evidence suggests that while LGBTQIA+ individuals have found much visibility and accommodation within most organisations, they still encounter discriminatory practices including minority stressors, such as racism, queerphobia and marginalisation.

Conclusion: As such, it is suggested that most LGBTQIA+ individuals will either exit or risk experiencing strain or burnout under such conditions of multiple oppressions.

Contribution: An immediate call for mental health services is required to buffer adverse wellbeing for LGBTQIA+ individuals in the work environment. Anti-discriminatory guidelines are recommended to promote gender and sexual diversity for LGBTQIA+ individuals in the work environment.

Keywords: career trajectory; gender and sexuality diversity; LGBTQIA+ individuals; queerphobia; homophobia.

Introduction

South Africa is said to have Africa's most protective rights for minority groups such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other gender, and sexuality non-conforming (LGBTQIA+) individuals (Andam & Epprecht, 2019; Beatriz & Pereira, 2022; Ibrahim, 2015). For example, De Vos (2000) maintains that South Africa is among the first to have an equality provision in its constitution (Section 9(3)), which forbids discriminatory practices such as genderism, sexism or exclusion based on sexual orientation (The Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the Republic of South African, 1996). However, as it stands, many workplace organisations still have a culture of prejudice such as racism, misogyny, queerphobia or prejudice based on several overlapping social categories (Astle et al., 2023; Cheng et al., 2017; Thuillier et al., 2022). These attitudes might cause fear, anxiety and uncertainty for marginalised groups such as LGBTQIA+ individuals when searching, entering or choosing to stay within a particular career (Eliason et al., 2018; Maree, 2014; Uttarapong et al., 2021).

The work environment does not operate in a vacuum devoid of any pre-existing gender or sexuality norms (Lupton, 2006; O'Connor, 2015; Simpson, 2004). As Butler (1990) has previously asserted, conformity to gender performativity is rewarded, while deviance to normativity often results in marginalisation. As such, it is commonplace for most organisations to adopt a compulsory heterosexuality, culture within their policy strategies (Astle et al., 2023; Cheng et al., 2017; Thuillier et al., 2022). Compulsory heterosexuality refers to the overpreference or overreliance

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of heteromascuine or feminine roles, identities or experiences at the neglect of other non-normative gender or sexualities (Francis, 2021). A similar pattern is evident when cisgendered men enter female-dominated occupations such as nursing, early childhood education and social work. Kalembe (2020), Khunou et al. (2012) and Petersen (2014), for example, reported that genderism still 'pushes' cisgendered men out of female-concentrated professions. Genderism involves drawing gender binaries, such as assumed gender roles for men and women based on biological sex. At the same time, Williams' (2013) glass escalator strategy suggested that cisgendered men enter the work environment with privilege, which they may use to gain more status, higher positions and better employment conditions over women in the same occupation. However, this was not applicable to non-white and gay men (Williams, 2013).

More importantly, it is important to note that global movements, such as the hashtags: (1) #MeToo, (2) #BlackLivesMatter, and (3) #BlackQueerLivesMatter movements, have caused transformations for the world of work to reconsider their stances towards disenfranchisements such as racism, misogyny and queerphobia (Zeng, 2020; Zulli, 2020). For instance, Mara et al. (2021), Medina-Martínez et al. (2021) and Cech and Rothwell (2020) systematic reviews of entry of LGBTQIA+ individuals into the labour force suggest that the absorption rate has gradually increased in entry level but not significantly within management or senior positions. As such, it may be necessary to also explore whether LGBTQIA+ persons may enjoy greater visibility and acceptance within certain workspaces (Maake et al., 2021). For this reason, this review asked, what are the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals in navigating gender or sexuality diversity in various work environments?

Research methods and design

A desktop review was consulted to peruse for literature within this area. Publications (e.g. special issues, journal articles, books, chapters, briefs, editorials, workplace guidelines, annual reports and so on) from multiple search engines (Google Scholar, PsychNet, World of Science journals, online journals, provincial and governmental departmental websites, among others) were consulted to search for studies available within this body of knowledge.

Selection criteria

The search for both qualitative and quantitative publications utilised certain keywords, such as 'gender and sexuality diversity', 'LGBTQIA+', 'work environment', 'homophobia', 'transphobia', 'queerphobia' and other variants of similar key terms. Reference lists from consulted publications were followed to snowball for more publications. Because of the scope and word limit of this review, the search was limited to publications from the period of 2000–2023. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis as well as the population (or participants), concept and

TABLE 1: How the population (or participants), concept and context framework was applied during the data analysis process.

PCC element	Definition (per JBI Reviewer's Manual Ch. 11)	Example
Population	'Important characteristics of participants, including age and other qualifying criteria'. (11.2.4) You may not need to include this element unless your question focuses on a specific condition or cohort.	LGBTQIA+ identifying individuals of various ages
Concept	'The core concept examined by the review should be clearly articulated to guide the scope and breadth of the inquiry. This may include details that pertain to elements that would be detailed in a standard systematic review, such as the "interventions" and/or "phenomena of interest" and/or "outcomes"'. (11.2.4)	LGBTQIA+ individuals' experiences of gender and sexuality diversity within various work environments
Context	'May include ... cultural factors such as geographic location and/or specific racial or gender-based interests. In some cases, context may also encompass details about the specific setting'.	South African working environments

Source: Adapted from Pollock, D., Peters, M.D., Khalil, H., McInerney, P., Alexander, L., Tricco, A.C., Evans, C., De Moraes, E.B., Godfrey, C.M., Pieper, D., Saran, A., Stern, C., & Munn, Z. (2023). Recommendations for the extraction, analysis, and presentation of results in scoping reviews. *JBI Evidence Synthesis*, 21(3), 520–532. <https://doi.org/10.11124/JBIES-22-00123>

Note: Topic: Intersections of gender and sexuality diversity in the career trajectories of LGBTQIA+ individuals in South Africa. Primary review question: What are LGBTQIA+ individuals' experiences?

PCC, population (or participants)/concept/context; LGBTQIA+, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other gender, and sexuality non-conforming.

context (PCC) framework (Pollock et al., 2023). Table 1 shows how the PCC framework was applied during the data analysis process. Data saturation was reached after finding a duplication of themes from the authors individually analysing the retrieved data with a cross-checking of an external moderator. All in all, 800 articles were retrieved, but only 239 sources could be included based on this selection criteria for analysis. As such, the study might have missed publications outside the stipulated time period, keywords or consulted search engines.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa College of Human Sciences' Research Ethics Review Committee (No. 90352025_JUNE_CREC_CHS_2023).

Results

Table 2 presents findings reported as clustered themes reporting on the experiences of gender and sexual diversity during entry, adjusting and choosing to stay in various work environment by LGBTQIA+ individuals. The gaps identified from the review are that few studies (both qualitative and quantitative) are available locally around the intersection of gender and sexual diversity regarding the career trajectories of LGBTQIA+ individuals. For example, no studies were available of how LGBTQIA+ individuals experience the interviewing process. There were no available research that studied the phenomenon from a longitudinal approach to understand the problem from entry to exit. Another gap was few studies that focused on the positive experiences of entering, coping and staying in tolerant and accommodating

TABLE 2: Experiences of gender and sexuality diversity during entry, adjusting and choosing to stay in various work environments by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other gender, and sexuality non-conforming individuals.

Area of their career trajectory	Issues of gender and sexuality
Entry into the work environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not all work environments are welcoming LGBTQIA+ individuals to enter (Astle et al., 2023; Cheng et al., 2017; Thuillier et al., 2022) Gendered assumptions about careers serving to discourage LGBTQIA+ individuals from pursuing (Eliason et al., 2018; Maree, 2014; Uttarapong et al., 2021)
Adjusting into the work environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discriminatory practices encountered by LGBTQIA+ individuals (Cech & Rothwell, 2020; Mara et al., 2021; Medina-Martínez et al., 2021) Existing microaggressions (Astle et al., 2023; Cheng et al., 2017; Thuillier et al., 2022) Need for coping strategies (Cech & Rothwell, 2020; Mara et al., 2021; Medina-Martínez et al., 2021) Psychosocial stress factors within toxic work environment. (Cheng et al., 2017).
Exit or remaining in the work environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Queerphobic work environments causing psychosomatic symptoms (Zeng, 2020; Zulli, 2020) Inability of securing organisational support (Cech & Rothwell, 2020; Mara et al., 2021; Medina-Martínez et al., 2021) Dual experience of racism and queerphobia (Maake et al., 2021) Regulating mannerisms, dress and body movements (Cech & Rothwell, 2020; Mara et al., 2021; Medina-Martínez et al., 2021) Feeling disconnected from colleagues or organisational goals (Maake et al., 2021)

LGBTQIA+, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other gender, and sexuality non-conforming.

work environments for LGBTQIA+ individuals. For this reason, the study opted to consult with local and international literature around the intersection of gender and sexuality diversity in the work environment.

Discussion

The review established that there are various challenges encountered by LGBTQIA+ individuals as they attempt in seeking employment, coping while in the job, or in some cases had to leave an unfavourable work environment. The findings showed that stigma and discrimination are still a reality faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals during various phases of employment. The discussion is separated into these various phases, namely: (1) entry into the work environment; (2) adjusting to the work environment; and (3) exit or remaining in the work environment.

Entry into the work environment

In terms of searching different work environments, although most work environments have attempted to address gender and sexual diversity in their recruiting, hiring and workplace cultures (Astle et al., 2023; Cheng et al., 2017; Thuillier et al., 2022), the results show that not all work environments are accommodating for LGBTQIA+ individuals to enter (Astle et al., 2023; Cheng et al., 2017; Thuillier et al., 2022). One reason for this is that certain career fields (e.g. medicine, engineering and nursing) are heteromasculine or feminine in nature (Kalemba, 2020; Khunou et al., 2012; Petersen, 2014). In turn, their job descriptions are designed with gender roles in mind (Lupton, 2006; O'Connor, 2015; Simpson, 2004). For example, Kalemba (2020), Petersen (2014)

and Khunou et al. (2012) posit that certain job roles have built in assumptions based on gender binaries, such as the ability to make decisive decisions (e.g. medicine), showing physical strength in harsh conditions (engineering) or possessing compassion to care for others (nursing). As the evidence shows, these assumptions serve to discourage and exclude non-normative gender and sexual identities from entering such fields (Eliason et al., 2018; Maree, 2014; Uttarapong et al., 2021). However, because being gainfully employed plays an integral role in our lives, such misconceptions force individuals such as LGBTQIA+ individuals to respond by denying, hiding or delay 'coming out' about their gender and sexual identity, especially during the entry phase of their careers (Astle et al., 2023; Cheng et al., 2017; Thuillier et al., 2022).

Adjusting to the work environment

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other gender, and sexuality non-conforming individuals are aware that most workplaces operate within a system of entrenched discriminatory practices such as homo-, trans-, queerphobia, or a combination of transphobia and racism to maintain their reputational and organisational standing (Lupton, 2006; O'Connor, 2015; Simpson, 2004). As such, Astle et al. (2023), Cheng et al. (2017) and Thuillier et al. (2022) suggest that most LGBTQIA+ individuals will enter such organisations aware of the microaggressions (e.g. hateful comments, insults, assaults) faced by minority groups such as LGBTQIA+ individuals. Francis (2021), Kalemba (2020) and Khunou et al. (2012) maintain that because voluntary disclosure of gender and sexual identity is often seen as a lessor or secondary option to obtaining employment, non-disclosure prevents strategic dialogue and intervention to accommodate individuals who identify with non-normative gender and sexual identities. With the lack of organisational support, Kalemba (2020), Khunou et al. (2012) and Petersen (2014) state that LGBTQIA+ individuals become compelled to develop coping strategies (e.g. adopting a passive-aggressive attitude, absenteeism, substance abuse) to manage psychosocial stressors such as fatigue, strain and burnout, which present from such toxic work environments (Cheng et al., 2017). For this reason, prolonged psychosocial stressors may force LGBTQIA+ individuals to reconsider whether they wish to stay or exit such work environments (Astle et al., 2023).

Exiting or remaining in the work environment

As Table 2 shows, one of the reasons for LGBTQIA+ individuals in exiting queerphobic work environments was, among others, to avoid psychosomatic symptoms such as exhaustion, depression and other stress-related medical conditions (Zeng, 2020; Zulli, 2020). According to Mara et al. (2021), Medina-Martínez et al. (2021) and Cech and Rothwell (2020), the inability of securing organisational support, work stress affecting well-being and hopelessness remained among the common motivations for leaving queerphobic workspaces. Within certain conditions, the dual experience

of racism and queerphobia was reported as provocations for not staying within such work environments (Maake et al., 2021). For those who chose to stay within these unfavourable work environments, similar strategies aligned to Butler's (1990) gender performativity of regulating the body according to the expected gendered and sexualised norms were reported. For example, Mara et al. (2021), Medina-Martínez et al. (2021) and Cech and Rothwell (2020) systematic reviews reported how LGBTQIA+ individuals regulated aspects of their mannerisms, dress and body movements by 'passing' or 'acting straight' to avoid being 'outed'. However, such denial of their gender and sexuality presented with other complications such as feeling disconnected to their colleagues or organisational goals (Maake et al., 2021).

Conclusion

This review attempted to explore the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals in navigating gender or sexuality diversity in various work environments. Findings suggest that despite global strides to increase the visibility and accommodation of LGBTQIA+ persons, homo-, trans-, queerphobia remain significant experiences encountered by most gender and sexuality conforming individuals during entry, adjusting or deciding to exit certain work environments. For LGBTQIA+ individuals, the study suggests that a combination of racism may further exacerbate their experiences. Furthermore, the study showed that those who remain within these workspaces relied on regulating their gender and sexuality to avoid being sidelined. A limitation of this study was the given word cutoff and limited scope of desktop reviews; only certain studies and their findings could be elaborated. Future research could explore the phenomenon from a triangulated approach such as a mixed-methods approach reporting on both quantitative and qualitative findings.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

L.M.U. perceived the idea and, together with W.T. and E.F., edited the drafts.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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