

The Role of Telecommuting, Sexual Identity Management Strategy, and Industry
on Work-Related Stress in Gay Men

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The modern-day workplace does not look like the workplace of previous decades. While most industries were primarily based in a central location or building, the concept of telecommuting has changed the structure of a workplace. Telecommuting (also known as telework or work-from-home) is an option that over 24% of employers are offering on at least a part-time basis (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015). This idea of remote work is potentially transformational for not only workers, but also the business bottom line.

Literature Review

Work-life balance has been a source of contention for employees for many years and telework seems like the logical solution for this problem. By giving employees more autonomy and freedom to work flexibly from any location, employers can also benefit from increased productivity due to a reduced level of work-to-family conflict (Sardeshmukh, Sharma, & Golden, 2012). However, there is evidence that perceived social support in the workplace is reduced for employees who telecommute, leading to an increased level of stress that is not fully offset by the reduced work-to-family conflict experienced from telecommuting (Elst, Verhoogen, Sercu, Van den Broeck, Baillien, & Godderis, 2017). This effect could reasonably be influenced by industry type, as industries such as computer engineering may be less socially driven than other industries such as marketing. Overall, work-related stress seems to be social in origin.

These previous studies focus on employees, generally, but do not consider some important individual differences that could play a large role in work-related stress levels. For example, sexual orientation plays a large role in stress levels for people who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB), especially in the workplace (Croteau, Andersen, & Vanderwal, 2008). It

is common knowledge that LGB individuals have a process of “coming out” in their personal lives; what is less commonly known is that LGB individuals also have to decide if they will “come out” at work. There are three sexual identity management strategies differentially utilized by LGB individuals in the workplace based on the level of comfort they have with their coworkers, as well as the entire organization (Woods, 1993). *Counterfeiting* is considered the safest strategy and involves a homosexual person playing the role of a heterosexual person while at work, including pretending to have heterosexual interests and partners. *Avoidance* does not require the person to appear entirely heterosexual; however, any references to same-sex partners or interests in the LGB community are omitted from their conversations, and these individuals are also likely to avoid work events that could reveal their sexuality to coworkers. The least safe strategy is *integration*, meaning the person is open about their sexuality and there is no question from others that they are homosexual. Understandably, the counterfeiting strategy is found to be associated with a higher degree of stress in LGB individuals who use it (Croteau et al., 2008). These individuals are living a double-life and maintaining that façade can be difficult. It also takes a toll on the home life when a partner disagrees with the chosen strategy.

The level of heterosexism in a workplace plays a central role in which sexual identity management strategy is adopted by LGB individuals. Heterosexism is defined as “an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, relationship, or community” (Herek, 1990). A recent study done by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation (HRC; 2019) found that industries such as banking, finance, insurance, and retail are the most LGB-friendly based on factors including non-discrimination policies, equal benefits, and accountability to these policies. These industries would be considered to have a low level of heterosexism throughout the organization. In contrast, the same study found that industries such

as aerospace, tech, fashion, and marketing were the least LGB-friendly based on the same criteria. These industries would be considered to have a high level of heterosexism throughout the organization. This is an important consideration for LGB individuals because only 21 states currently support anti-discrimination laws for sexual minorities while the other 29 states pose a higher risk for someone to be fired over their sexuality. It is reasonable that LGB individuals might experience higher stress in industries with high levels of heterosexism, especially in these states. Supporting this idea, a recent study found companies that have a social structure with a high degree of heterosexism leads to more stress for sexual minorities, indicating the decision to use a counterfeiting sexual identity management strategy may be more stressful (Velez, Moradi, & Brewster, 2013).

Problem Statement

Although current research has uncovered a lot of information about homosexuality in the workplace, telecommuting in industries with high degrees of heterosexism and how it may reduce the stress levels experienced by sexual minorities has not been explored. This study will examine an industry with high levels of heterosexism and an industry with low levels of heterosexism to compare levels of stress experienced by homosexuals who telecommute and by homosexuals who work in the office. It will also look at the same two industries and compare levels of stress experienced by homosexuals who telecommute and heterosexuals who telecommute. The sexual identity management strategy of an individual is expected to be the primary moderator of results, so this will be included in the study as an independent variable. Because of the variety of factors that can influence workplace stress differentially for women than men, this study will be limited to gay and straight men with the expectation that other groups will be investigated in a future study.

Hypotheses 1, 2, 2A, 2B, 3

There are three primary hypotheses tested in this research. The first hypothesis intends to confirm the relationship between levels of heterosexism and industry type. The expectation is that the score on the heterosexism scale will be positively correlated with the type of industry (high scores correlated with the tech industry and low scores correlated with the banking industry). Hypothesis 2 will compare the levels of work-related stress experienced by telecommuting gay men and office-working gay men. I predict that gay men who telecommute will report less work-related stress than gay men who work in the office. Hypothesis 2A predicts that significantly less work-related stress will be reported by telecommuting gay men in the tech industry when compared to telecommuting gay men in the banking industry. Hypothesis 2B predicts that significantly more work-related stress will be reported by gay men who work in-office in the tech industry when compared to gay men who work in-office in the banking industry. Hypothesis 3 will then compare the work-related stress reported by telecommuting gay men and telecommuting straight men. The prediction is that less work-related stress will be reported by telecommuting gay men, especially in the tech industry, when compared to straight men.

Methods

Participants will include gay and straight men from two industries: tech and banking. The tech industry serves as the highly heterosexist industry and the banking industry serves as the low heterosexist industry. These two industries were chosen based on their ranking in the study done by HRC (2019), which found that banking was among the safest industries to work for sexual minorities and that tech was among the least safe industries to work for sexual minorities. These two industries also have the highest likelihood of the ranked industries to offer

telecommuting as an option for employees, considering the nature of the work does not require full-time presence in an office. Region of participants will be limited to the United States but will not be limited further than that. The goal is to obtain participants from as many areas of the United States as possible to ensure the sample is representative of states that have anti-discrimination laws for sexual minorities in place, as well as states that do not have such laws. To do this, recruitment will be done using an online survey link, distributed by researchers to the appropriate departments in each applicable business around the country. The ideal number of participants recruited will be 240 men. This is based on a similar study that sampled 237 people and achieved an effect size of .61 (Carter, Mollen, & Smith, 2014). Important demographic information (such as race) will be collected at the end of the study, and for the purpose of this study, demographic information outside of sexuality (gay vs. straight) is not expected to be representative of the population. However, I will collect an equal number of gay and straight participants to ensure the sample is representative of these sexualities in each industry. The expectation is that the sample will likely be primarily white men since race adds a layer of complexity to participation from gay men.

Instruments

Three scales will be utilized in this study. A 23-item Identity Management Strategies Scale (Button, 2004) will be used to identify the type of sexual identity management strategy each participant uses at work. This scale has three subscales for counterfeiting, avoidance, and integration and responses are based on a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree). This scale was selected based on a high reliability of each subscale (Cronbach's alpha = .80 for counterfeiting, .87 for avoidance, and .90 for integrating) (Button, 2001). Workplace heterosexism levels will also be measured to ensure alignment of the current understanding that

tech is a highly heterosexist industry and banking is an industry low in heterosexism. This will be measured by The Workplace Heterosexist Experiences Questionnaire (WHEQ; Waldo, 1999). This is a 22-item inventory designed to measure sexual orientation-based harassment experiences and responses are based on a 5-point Likert scale (0=never, 4=most of the time). Responses are summed and a final score is created (ranging in 0 to 88), with higher scores indicating a higher frequency of heterosexist acts in the workplace. This questionnaire was chosen because of a high reliability (Cronbach's alpha =.93) (Carter et al., 2014).

Stress levels will be measured by the Hopkins Symptom Checklist (Derogatis, Lipman, Rickels, Uhlenhuth, & Covi, 1974). This is a 58-item questionnaire that assesses overall psychological distress using a 4-point Likert scale (1=not at all, 4=extremely), with an overall mean score of the responses calculated, ranging from one to four. Higher scores indicate a higher level of psychological distress. A previous study on sexual minorities omitted one question related to comfort levels with the opposite sex due to irrelevance and found no significant change to the overall properties of the questionnaire (Cronbach's alpha =.96)(Carter et al., 2014); therefore, I will also be omitting that question for the gay men. For straight male participants, the Sexual Identity Management Strategy Scale and Workplace Heterosexism Experience Questionnaire will have adjusted language in the questions to make them applicable to straight men. Any questions that directly reference being homosexual will be adjusted to reference being heterosexual instead. A reliability and validity analysis will be conducted on the adjusted questions to ensure Cronbach's alpha is still high enough for the instruments to be used for comparison. Demographic information, including region, economic status, race, religion, age, job title, and number of years in the current role will be collected as well.

Procedure

Participants will receive a study link and will be offered two hours of paid time off in return for completion of the survey. Participants will include lower level employees through upper management. They will be encouraged to take the survey by themselves and without the help of others. The consent form will confirm that participants are comfortable discussing their sexuality and will indicate that the study is interested in exploring workplace dynamics between minorities. Once the consent form is completed, participants will be asked to complete all three questionnaires. Presentation of the questionnaires will be counterbalanced to control for validity issues that may arise from boredom or exhaustion. Once all three questionnaires are completed, the participants will be thanked for their time and will receive a certificate confirming they are allotted two extra paid hours off to use at their discretion.

Analysis

A correlation analysis of the relationship between heterosexism scores and industry type will be conducted to confirm the prior study results reported by HRC (2019). Once that relationship is confirmed, further analysis of the study results will be done using an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). The dependent variable is work-related stress levels, and the independent variables are sexuality (gay vs. straight) and type of workplace (telecommuting vs. in-office). Industry (tech vs. banking), sexual identity management strategy (counterfeiting vs. avoidance vs. integration), and level of heterosexism in the workplace will all be analyzed as covariates. The analysis will investigate relationships between type of workplace and sexuality to determine any significant differences in the work-related stress levels among the groups (telecommuting gay men, telecommuting straight men, and in-office gay men). It will also investigate the potential moderating relationship between sexual identity management strategy type, sexuality, and type of workplace on work-related stress levels.

Limitations

The largest and most difficult limitation to overcome in this study is recruitment. Because of the sensitivity of sexuality, many potential participants may opt out of the study if they are not comfortable discussing the topic. This could lead to selection bias, as men who practice the *integration* sexual identity management strategy may be more likely to opt into the study, whereas men who practice the *avoidance* strategy may avoid the study altogether. Men who practice *counterfeiting* may just provide false answers. Strict confidentiality will need to be enforced to ensure men not only feel comfortable participating, but also feel comfortable being honest. The other glaring limitation is the length of the study. Each questionnaire is important; however, they do not currently have shortened versions available, causing the total number of questions asked to be about 100. This provides opportunity for men to rush through questions at the end because they are bored or tired of answering the questions, which would negatively impact the validity of the study. To limit the impact of this, I will counterbalance the presentation of each questionnaire. Finally, this study is not generalizable to the entire homosexual community. Lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, and other individuals with differing sexual identities have very different experiences in the workplace than gay men have, and because of this variability I have chosen to limit this study to gay and straight men. This will ensure the results are more representative of gay men without possible confounds from other subgroups in the homosexual population. That said, future studies will need to look at the other subgroups individually as well as consider comparing across subgroups to better understand these differences in experiences.

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