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# **The impact of demographic factors on the way lesbian and gay employees manage their sexual orientation at work: An intersectional perspective**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore the influence demographic factors have on the way lesbians and gay men manage their sexual orientation at work.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Based on data taken from a cross-sectional survey of 1308 gay and lesbian employees working in Germany, four regression models are proposed. The means of managing one's homosexuality at work was measured by the 31 items containing WSIMM from Anderson et al. (2001).

**Findings** – Results indicate that being in a relationship is related to increased openness about one's homosexuality at work. Furthermore, it appears that the older and the more religious lesbian and gay employees are, the more open (and therefore less hidden) about their sexuality they are. Having a migratory background is related to being more guarded about one's sexual orientation, whereas personal mobility within the country is not related to the way one manages one's sexual orientation at work. Lesbians tend to be a little more open and less guarded about their homosexuality compared to gay men.

**Research limitations/implications** – The focus of this research (and the related limitations) offers several starting and connecting points for more intersectional research on workforce diversity and diversity management.

**Practical implications** – The study's findings indicate the need for an intersectional approach to organizational diversity management strategies. Exemplified by the dimension "sexual orientation" it can be shown that the impact each dimension has for an employee's everyday workplace experiences and behavior in terms of a certain manifestation of one dimension of diversity, can only be understood in terms of its interplay with other dimensions of diversity.

**Theoretical implications** – The intersectional perspective on employees' stigma-related minority stress allows a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of individuals in workplace settings. This theoretical framework proposed in this article can

therefore be a connecting point for theoretically framing future studies on workforce diversity and diversity management.

**Originality/value** – It is shown that manifestations of demographic factors that tend to broaden the individual's coping resources for stigma-relevant stressors, lead to more openness about one's homosexuality in the workplace.

**Keywords** – Coping resources, Minority stress, Diversity management, Intersectionality, Homosexuality, Gay men and lesbians, Sexual orientation

**Paper type** – Research paper

# **The impact of demographic factors on the way lesbian and gay employees manage their sexual orientation at work: An intersectional perspective**

## **Introduction**

Compared to other demographics the demographic of “sexual orientation” remains the most overlooked dimension of workforce diversity in business and management research as well as in practice (Priola *et al.*, 2014). That said, during recent years an increasing number of studies have been conducted to more fully understand the unique workplace situation and experiences of gay and lesbian employees, and to analyze starting points for inclusive management practices to ameliorate their situation (Anteby and Anderson, Forthcoming).

In almost all societies homosexuality, as a minority status, is regarded, at least by trend, as some kind of deficit or stigma (Goffman, 1963), being related to different layers and intensities of stereotype-based prejudices and mechanisms of exclusion (Breen and Karpinski, 2013; Frost, 2011). These mechanisms also appear in the workplace, and, as one’s sexual orientation is a demographic that is not directly visible, gay and lesbian employees are faced with the decision of how to manage their sexual orientation in the workplace (Croteau, 1996; Waldo, 1999). Previous research shows that being more open about one’s homosexuality on the individual level can be associated with predominantly positive psychological and economical consequences (DeJordy, 2008; Friskopp and Silverstein, 1995). Furthermore, on the organizational level, increased openness on the part of lesbian and gay employees would seem to have a positive impact on the organization’s performance (Barreto *et al.*, 2006). To date, very few studies have been conducted that examine why lesbians and gay men manage their sexual orientation in the workplace in the way that they do. One stream of research found that an affirmative organizational climate for gay men and lesbians contributes to a more open managing of their sexual orientation at work (Brenner *et al.*, 2010; Chrobot-Mason

*et al.*, 2001). Another stream of research has begun to apply an intersectional perspective to the experiences and workplace behavior of gay men and lesbians. Intersectionality takes into account the fact that every individual always represents at least one manifestation of every demographic, and thus embodies different minority statuses and majority statuses at the same time. From this perspective, managing one's minority status in terms of being gay or lesbian has to be understood in the context of one's other demographics, besides that of sexual orientation alone. Research that has been conducted on this interrelation to date remains selective, and indicates that being of a higher social class (McDermott, 2006) and being white (Ragins *et al.*, 2003) is associated with a higher degree of openness about one's homosexuality in the workplace. In order to develop further diversity management initiatives aimed at creating an inclusive and supportive work environment that encourages gay and lesbian employees not to hide their sexual orientation, these intersectional interrelations have to be understood in more depth. In this respect, the study outlined in this paper aims to contribute to deepening insights into the intersectional aspects of lesbians and gays managing their sexual orientation at the workplace.

Theoretically, the intersectional path of analysis of this study builds on the different degrees and intensities of "minority stress" which gay and lesbian employees often experience in the workplace, due to the potentially stigmatizing effect of their sexual orientation (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Lewis *et al.*, 2003). Homosexual individuals perceive and respond to this stress in different ways, and these ways are partially shaped by the coping resources available to the individual for coping with potentially marginalizing, discriminating or excluding workplace-situations (DiPlacido, 1998; Meyer, 1995; Meyer, 2003). Having fewer coping resources often leads to attempts to avoid situations which are perceived as being stressful (Taylor and Stanton, 2007; Wheaton, 1985). Being more covert about their homosexuality, or pretending to be heterosexual, can be interpreted as strategies that aim to

avoid these anticipated stressful situations for lesbians and gays with low levels of coping resources,. This article shows that the level of coping resources available to an individual for coping with stigma-related minority stress at work due to the individual's homosexuality (Major and O'Brien, 2005) is also determined by that individual's additional demographic characteristics, as they can reduce or enhance the coping resources available. Based on quantitative data from 1308 lesbian and gay employees working in Germany, the article will outline how an employee's age, gender, migratory background, mobility and religious belief have an impact on the coping resources available to the employee, and thus on the way in which the individual manages his or her sexual orientation at work. These findings are then discussed with the objective of developing further organizational diversity management approaches, in terms of a more comprehensive inclusion of gay and lesbian employees. Bisexual employees are not considered in this study, as their workplace situation differs significantly from that of gay and lesbian employees, for example, in that they may experience "biphobia" from within the lesbian and gay community, or from homosexual colleagues, as well as from the heterosexual workforce. (Köllen, 2013; Mulick and Wright, 2002).

### **The stigmatizing impact of homosexuality in the workplace**

In general, individuals are stigmatized when they "possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute or characteristic that conveys a social identity that is devalued in some particular context" (Crocker *et al.*, 1998: 505, in Ragins *et. al.*, 2007: 1104). Therefore, stigmas can discredit individuals, or (in the case of invisible stigmas) can make them discreditable (Goffman, 1963). Although, workplace settings can be imagined where the majority of employees are homosexual or where, due to societal or individual conditions, homosexuality is less of a stigma, in most workplaces homosexuality still functions as a

stigma (Waldo, 1999). Therefore, in everyday life, as well as in their working lives (Gates, 2014), gay men and lesbians face different layers and intensities of stigma-related, stereotype-based marginalization, devaluation and discrimination, especially when they have disclosed their sexual orientation (Jones and King, 2014). One class of societal stereotypes is based on the reverse attribution of gender stereotypes to lesbians and gays, ascribing more male characteristics to lesbians, and more female ones to gay men (Allen and Smith, 2011; Kite and Deaux, 1987). Another class of stereotypes is related to the tendency to “over-sexualize” gays and lesbians, assuming sexuality to be a more predominant “purpose” in life for them than it is for heterosexuals (Buba and Vaskovics, 2001). This can be augmented by the still prevalent treatment of sexuality as a taboo topic in occupational life (Riach and Wilson, 2007), and by the fiction of asexuality as a crucial characteristic of a productive workplace (cf. Burrell, 1984; Rastetter, 1999). For openly gay or lesbian employees this can cause a struggle in integrating “professionalism” and sexuality into their occupational identities (Rumens and Kerfoot, 2009). Mizzi (2013) introduces the expression “heteroprofessionalism” for naming this phenomenon.

The societal phenomenon of groundless negativity related to the stigmatizing impact of homosexuality can be framed with the terms “heterosexism” or “homophobia” (Hudson and Ricketts, 1980). Heterosexism describes the general societal tendency to view homosexuality as some kind of deficit, and thus to attach a lower value to it than to heterosexuality. This devaluation is very often the legitimizing basis for specific discriminations against individuals perceived to be homosexual (Swim *et al.*, 2007; Walls, 2008). Homophobia is the psychological representation of heterosexism on the individual level, as it comprises “the responses of fear, disgust, anger, discomfort, and aversion that individuals experience in dealing with gay [and lesbian] people” (Hudson and Ricketts, 1980, p. 358). The related dread of being close to gay or lesbian individuals then can lead to



discriminatory behavior against them. In working life this can manifest itself, for example, in application processes (Tilcsik, 2011), in decisions about job promotion (Ueno *et al.*, 2013), in an exclusion from the flow of information, a general social isolation and bullying, up to and including the use, or threat, of violence in the workplace (Bilgehan Ozturk, 2011; Hollis and McCalla, 2013; Willis, 2012). Workplace discrimination “does not always manifest in overtly hostile behaviors. Discriminatory behaviors are often enacted through subtle behaviors that are ambiguous in their intent to harm, and through microaggression” (Shih *et al.*, 2013, p. 146). These “microaggressive” behaviors may include work peers telling offensive jokes about lesbians or gays, making homophobic remarks (whether intentional or unintentional), asking uncomfortable personal questions, or pointing out the necessity of “straight acting” in a certain situation (Gates and Mitchell, 2013; Nadal *et al.*, 2011). Besides its negative impact on the individual’s career indicators, workplace discrimination also occasions psychological and health costs on the part of the stigmatized individual (Shih, *et al.*, 2013). This opens up the questions of how and whether the gay or lesbian individual manages his or her sexual orientation in the workplace, in order to respond to potentially anticipated or experienced “microaggressions” or discrimination.

### **Managing one’s homosexuality in the workplace**

As homosexuality is an invisible, discreditable stigma, an individual has several options, in terms of managing his or her sexual orientation in the workplace (Clair *et al.*, 2005; King *et al.*, 2008). In literature this “managing” is often referred to as “social identity management” (Madera *et al.*, 2012) or “stigma management” (Goffman, 1963) - In this connection, this paper also elects to refer to employees "managing" their sexual orientation in the workplace. On the one hand, these options of “management” are determined by the type and degree of openness one adopts towards one’s colleagues in everyday life in the workplace. On the other

hand, options are also influenced by the way stereotypic presuppositions are internalized and integrated into one's self-concept (Jones *et al.*, 1984; Lingardi *et al.*, 2012), or by the way ascribed stereotypes are instrumentalized (Maas, 1998) or "reassociated" (Shih, *et al.*, 2013) in terms of the position an individual is permitted to hold in the workplace, or in terms of the limits placed on an individual's vocational career path. Whatever management "strategy" is applied, this is, by its very nature, always a modifiable process that can never be considered as finished. A "coming out", for example, as well as every other "strategy", has to be carried out again and again, in new and future situations, and especially when new colleagues or customers appear (Ward and Winstanley, 2005). Clair *et al.* (2005) distinguish between the main strategies of "covering" and "disclosing" one's homosexuality. Griffin (1992) broadens this approach by distinguishing between the four strategies of dealing with one's sexuality in the workplace that are positioned alongside a continuum: passing (i.e. pretending to be heterosexual), covering, being "implicitly out", and being "explicitly out". Most employees apply multiple strategies in different contexts and situations, and are not consistent in acting in the range of one strategy (Griffin, 1992).

The way one manages one's lesbian or gay sexual orientation in the workplace can have consequences for both the individual-psychological level, such as the personal well-being (Halpin and Allen, 2004; Vincke *et al.*, 1999) and the economic-organizational level, such as the organizational performance (Day and Greene, 2008; Johnston and Malina, 2008; Wang and Schwarz, 2010). Research indicates the prevalence of negative as well as of positive impacts of disclosure (Ragins, 2004), though positive consequences seem to outweigh the negative ones. Disclosing one's homosexuality at work was found to be positively related to one's perceived job satisfaction and emotional connection to the employing organization (Day and Schoenrade, 1997), to one's job effectiveness (Tsai *et al.*, 2014), and to a more friendly relationship with colleagues and supervisors, as a potential precondition for professional

progress (Friskopp and Silverstein, 1995). It furthermore positively impacts an employee's "helping behavior" as part of their "organizational citizenship behavior" (Brenner, *et al.*, 2010). Pretending to be heterosexual is associated with a decrease in the "stigmatized" homosexual employee's performance-linked self-confidence, and a subsequent decrease in workplace performance itself (Barreto, *et al.*, 2006). Pretence and "covering" can furthermore be associated with negative outcomes, such as alienation, isolation, ego-depletion, intensified cognitive dissonance, and the undermining of the individual's capability for self-affirmation and self-assurance. A consistent adherence to these strategies takes a high level of mental concentration, and thus consumes energy that is then no longer available for professional performance (DeJordy, 2008).

In summation, it can be stated that there are several points of reference for the assumption that when an individual applies more open strategies of stigma management to his or her homosexuality, this positively affects both his or her own wellbeing, and organizational performance. This leads to the question of possible influencing factors on the way gays and lesbians manage their sexual orientation in the workplace.

According to self-verification theory, lesbian and gay employees tend to disclose their sexual orientation in the workplace in order to bring their private and workplace-related public identity into harmony with one another (Swann Jr, 1983). However, this need "is tempered and balanced by the fear of negative consequences of full disclosure and the support received from coworkers who share and do not share the stigma" (Ragins *et al.*, 2007, p. 1105). This support can be interpreted as an affirmative organizational climate that encourages gay men and lesbians to apply more open identity management strategies in the workplace (Brenner, *et al.*, 2010; Chrobot-Mason, *et al.*, 2001). Though relatively little research has been undertaken on this topic, the already outlined research of McDermott (2006) and Ragins, *et al.* (2003) indicates that besides these contextual factors there are

factors that are immanent to the individual which affect the way he or she manages one's sexual orientation in the workplace. This can be framed with an intersectional perspective.

### **Sexual Orientation and Intersectionality**

In a broader context, Shih, et al. (2013) discuss how employees proactively manage their stigmatized identities in terms of coping with potential stigma-related discrimination. They distinguish between two main strategies: "identity switching" and "identity redefinition". In terms of being homosexual, "identity redefinition" would comprise actions that aim at emphasizing positive stereotypes related to homosexuality; for example the idea that gay men are "creative" and "artistic". "Identity switching" would comprise actions that put an emphasis on one's other social identities that seem, stereotypically, to be more positively connoted, (and therefore less stigmatized), in a certain work context, such as, for example, being male, or being of the majority nationality. Negative side effects of the latter strategy are decreasing cognitive resources and a potential worsening of one's psychological and physiological conditions (Shih, *et al.*, 2013). This strategy does, however, show that there are interdependencies between one's different demographics or social identities, and thus there can indeed be intersectional aspects of managing one's lesbian or gay sexual orientation (Bowleg *et al.*, 2003).

This concept of intersectionality has emerged from feminist studies and critical gender studies (Crenshaw, 1991; Jordan-Zachery, 2007; Taylor, 1998). An intersectional perspective takes into account that every employee embodies at least one manifestation of every demographic or social category. Within each of these social categories these manifestations have hierarchies that legitimize certain allocations of status, resources and other kinds of social standing and privileges (Ferrall, 1997; Tsui *et al.*, 1992). Thus, individuals frequently hold positions of subordination and dominance at the same time. An individual's management

strategies in terms of one stigmatized social identity, are often a simultaneous management in terms of more than one social identity (Talwar, 2010; Weber, 2001).

### **Demographics and Coming Out**

Currently, very little research has been carried out on the interrelation of sexual orientation with other social identities in terms of managing one's homosexual identity in the workplace. McDermott (2006) points out the importance of social classes in the way gay and lesbian employees deal with their sexual orientation in the workplace. The regulatory constraint to be heterosexual seems to be much higher in the working class and this hinders the embodiment of "being different". Ragins et al. (2003) show that non-white employees are less likely to be "out" at work than white employees. Beyond these findings, no research has been done into other social identities that might influence employees' stigma management strategies, and ways to manage one's lesbian or gay sexual orientation in the workplace. With the objective of narrowing the gap in the current research, the study underlying this article attempts to approach this interrelation in a more comprehensive way.

As outlined above, in contrast to heterosexual employees, many lesbian and gay employees tend to be confronted with different layers and intensities of "minority stress", due to the stigmatizing effect of their sexual orientation. In terms of the workplace, this stress is principally founded in an individual's experience of prejudice events, as well as mechanisms of discrimination related to these prejudices, the expectation of rejection, internalized homophobia, and, in consequence, the processes of amelioration employed by the individual in order to cope with these situations (Link and Phelan, 2001; Meyer, 2003). These stigma-based processes which occur in the workplace can lead to a wholesale threatening and destabilizing of the employee's social and personal identity. Although members of stigmatized groups often utilize certain self-protective mechanisms, stigmatization generally

has the potential to undermine the self-esteem of stigmatized individuals (Crocker and Major, 1989). The “identity threat model of stigma” from Major and O’Brien (2005) proposes that “identity threat results when stigma-relevant stressors are appraised as potentially harmful to one’s social identity and as exceeding one’s coping resources. Identity threat [...] motivates attempts at threat reduction through coping strategies.” (Major and O’Brien, 2005: 393). It follows, then that the coping strategy utilized by gay and lesbian employees is influenced by how intense they perceive this “identity threat” to be on the individual level. This perceived identity threat is dependent on two factors: the individual’s personal estimation of the harmfulness of the stressors being experienced; and the coping resources available to the individual. Both factors can be seen as interrelated to other demographic characteristics besides the individual’s sexual orientation.

One possible demographic characteristic can be found in the relationship status of gay or lesbian employees. Having a stable and fulfilling partnership positively influences personal stability in general. (Finn, 2012; Lehnart and Neyer, 2006). Furthermore, the social environment of employees matters for their recovery from work related fatigue and thus makes them more relaxed in extant hostile workplace environments (Hahn *et al.*, 2012). The persons closest to them are especially meaningful in terms of their emotional well-being and stability (Abbey *et al.*, 1985; Siewert *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, it can be assumed that having a partner broadens the individual’s coping resources, and removes some of the perceived harmfulness of potential workplace stressors. In doing so, it has an impact on gay and lesbian employees’ coping strategy applied in the workplace. Thus, the following hypothesis is made:

*Hypothesis 1: Having a partner is positively related to a more open way of managing one’s own lesbian or gay sexual orientation at work*

Another demographic characteristic that might be related to an individual employee’s coping strategy is his or her religious belief. On the one hand, higher levels of internalized

homophobia can be attached to religious beliefs and participation in non-affirmatory religious settings (Barnes and Meyer, 2012; Rowen and Malcolm, 2003; Shilo and Savaya, 2012), as most religions have restrictions on homosexual behavior (Kubicek *et al.*, 2009). Thus, identity conflicts are frequently experienced when religious lesbians and gay men attempt to integrate their sexual identities with their religious ones (Anderton *et al.*, 2011; Ginicola and Smith, 2011; Tozer and Hayes, 2004). Conversely, religious faith can provide a source of strength (Bozard and Sanders, 2011), since religious individuals seem, by and large, to be more satisfied and happy with life, in comparison with non-religious individuals, and thus this religious belief can positively affect the individual's subjective well-being (Chamberlain and Zika, 1988; Lewis and Cruise, 2006), at least in religious environments (Eichhorn, 2012; Stavrova *et al.*, 2013). These two directions might compensate for each other to a certain degree in terms of providing coping resources and composure to religious lesbian and gay employees in the workplace. Gay and lesbian employees that are strongly related to a religious community might manage their sexual orientation a little more openly than non-religious employees:

*Hypothesis 2: Gay men and lesbians that belong to a faith community apply a more openness in managing their own sexual orientation at work than do non-religious employees*

A third influential demographic characteristic that might be related to an employee's coping strategy is age. Grossmann *et al.* (2010) show that conflict situations are more easily coped with by older individuals. One reason cited for this is that these older individuals are more able to keep some distance from conflicts, and therefore are more often able to remain emotionally detached from them (Grossmann, *et al.*, 2010). In general, when compared with younger adults, it would appear that older adults "solve emotionally salient and interpersonal problems in more effective ways" (Blanchard-Fields, 2007: 26) In addition, older individuals tend to have a more stable personality (Worthy *et al.*, 2011). It might then, therefore, be

assumed that, as older individuals have more coping resources available, possible stigma-relevant stressors might be considered as being of less harm to them. Thus older people might be able to apply more open coping strategies in terms of their homosexuality in the workplace, a tendency that might, however, be weakened a little by their socialization background in a more conservative past, in terms of the whole issue of homosexuality (Baunach, 2011, 2012; Keleher and Smith, 2012).

*Hypothesis 3: Older gay men and lesbians are a more open about their sexual orientation at work than younger gay and lesbian employees.*

The fourth demographic characteristic analyzed in this study is the factor of a migratory background. On account of the destabilizing impact of leaving familiar surroundings in general, added to the potential stigmatizing effect of being non-domestic in new surroundings, it can be assumed that having a migratory background by tendency weakens the coping resources for lesbian and gay employees in the workplace (Beirens and Fontaine, 2011; Bengi-Arslan *et al.*, 2002; Bimrose and McNair, 2011; Sieberer *et al.*, 2012). Thus the following hypothesis is proposed.

*Hypothesis 4: Gay and lesbian employees with a migratory background from outside Germany manage their sexual orientation in the workplace more covertly than employees without any migratory background.*

The fifth factor that is analyzed is the mobility of lesbian and gay employees. This factor can be seen as related to migration background, but contrary to hypothesis 4, mobility in this context primarily means intra-national mobility and is not related to the parent's nationality. Trying to escape the sexual and social constraints of their homes and family background that often traditionally exclude the possibility of homosexuality as a viable lifestyle choice, gay men and lesbians often move to other places or cities (Aldrich, 2004), at least for the time of their coming out (Annes and Redlin, 2012). Against this background of "coming-out



journeys” (Lewis, 2012), it can be assumed that gay men and lesbians who do not work in the same place where they grew up and where their family resides, are also more open about their sexual orientation in the workplace.

*Hypothesis 5: The bigger the distance between the actual place of living and the place where they grew up, the more openly gay men and lesbians manage their sexual orientation.*

As a sixth demographic characteristic, the gender of homosexual employees is considered. In terms of analyzing attitudes and prejudices toward homosexual individuals, several studies show that both the gender and sexual orientation of the target of prejudice, *and* the gender and sexual orientation of the prejudice holder are important constructs (Worthen, 2013). In society in general, there seem to be greater reservations towards gay men than there are towards lesbians (e. g. Swank and Raiz, 2010), leading to more negative attitudes towards gay men than towards lesbians (LaMar and Kite, 1998). Although women tend to make less distinction in terms of gender (Herek, 2000), Breen and Karpinski (2013) indicate that heterosexual women, as well as men, have more positive implicit associations about lesbians than they have about gay men. Herek (1988) finds that heterosexual males in general express more hostile attitudes toward homosexual individuals than heterosexual women do. This gender difference seems to be especially marked towards gay men (Herek, 1991). These findings are in line with other studies that confirm that men seemingly have more negative attitudes toward homosexuals than women (LaMar and Kite, 1998). It can thus be assumed that gay men experience workplace-related stressors in terms of their sexual orientation more harmfully than lesbians do, and that they therefore might manage their sexual orientation in a less open way. As a consequence Hypothesis 6 is proposed.

*Hypothesis 6: Lesbians manage their sexual orientation at work more openly than gay men.*

In the following, the methodical way of testing these hypotheses is described. The empirical basis of this analysis is a sample of lesbian and gay employees in Germany. In this context, Germany can be seen as an adequate example of a European state which, because of its dualistic religious structure, unites elements from both the predominantly Protestant Northern Europe, and the predominantly Catholic Southern Europe. Furthermore, Germany unites elements of both Eastern and Western European cultures because of the former coexistence of two divided German states, prior to reunification.

### **Data Collection and Sample**

To reach a large number of gay men and lesbians and to avoid a regional bias within Germany, five heads of different LGBT-organizations from different regions of Germany were asked to list lesbian and gay web forums, associations, and representations of interest. Furthermore, individual-related contact data of all German regional and nationwide lesbian and gay journals, newspapers, radio shows and their websites were selected. Utilizing these contacts, 71 letters of inquiry containing the link to the online questionnaire and a short presentation of the study background were sent to the representatives. They were asked for a broad distribution of the call and most of them supported the study by integrating the call into their newsletters, websites or printed journals. The target groups of this survey were exclusively lesbian and gay employees, as this study focuses on how they manage their sexual orientation at work. Thus, participants who identified as heterosexual were filtered out in the beginning of the questionnaire. There were 88 participants who self-identified as bisexual. As their situation fundamentally differs from the situation lesbian and gay employees face at the workplace (Köllen, 2013; Mulick and Wright, 2002), they were not integrated into this study, in order to keep this paper more focused. The online-questionnaire was activated in February and March 2008 and, by the end of March, 1412 participants completed the questionnaire, and

data from 1308 of them could be used for further analyses. Of these participants, 63% identified themselves as lesbians, and 37% as gay; 34% of the respondents were aged 30 years or younger, 36% were between 31 and 40 years old 24% were aged between 41 and 50 years. About 6% of the participants were older than 50. In terms of the length of time they had already been working at their current workplace, 30% indicated they had worked there for two years or less, 25% between 2 and 5 years, 21% between 5 and 10 years, and about 24% for more than 10 years. About half of the participants have managerial responsibilities, and of that half, 14% work in upper management positions. The size of the companies the lesbian and gay employees work for, and the size of the cities they work in can be categorized as equally divided between the different size groups.

## **Materials and Material Development**

*Sexual orientation:* Participants were asked to identify their sexual orientation with the question: “How would you describe your sexual orientation?”, with the response choices of “lesbian/gay”, “more lesbian/more gay”, “bisexual”, “more heterosexual” and “heterosexual”. Only self-identified gays and lesbians were included in the analyses; “more lesbian/more gay” and “lesbian/gay” were taken together.

*Workplace-related self-conceptualizations:* The way gay and lesbian employees manage their sexuality in the workplace was measured by use of the “Workplace Sexual Identity Management Measure” (WSIMM) from Anderson et al. (2001). The WSIMM is currently the most comprehensive catalogue available on this issue. It comprises 31 items, with each item being assigned to one “self-concept” or strategy out of four concepts and quantifies the intensity of its application. The concepts are “passing” (measured by eight items), “covering” (eight items), “implicitly out” (seven items), and “explicitly out” (eight items). Each item was

a statement about the individual's everyday behavior at the workplace that was related to his or her sexuality. It could be responded to by quantifying the intensity of its application through a four-point response-scale ranging from 1="never/seldom" to 4="almost always/always". For each concept a mean-value of its constituent items was calculated that could range from 1 to 4. The higher the value, the higher the intensity to which the particular strategy is applied. Also, for this item catalogue, the translation/back-translation method was applied. Using the translation/back-translation method (Harkness, 2003), the item catalogue was transferred into German. The internal consistency of the German catalogue for each construct is checked by its Cronbachs alpha values that for all constructs had a value of higher than 0.9 and thus were similar to the English catalogues.

In addition demographic data were collected. A participant's *age* was measured with 6 10-year-intervals ranging from 1 = "20 years or younger" to 6 = "61 years or older". A participant's *religion* was assessed with the item "Do you belong to a religious denomination?" that could be responded to with 1 = no, 2 = yes, and 3 = "not specified" as a missing value. A participant's *gender* was assessed as 1 = male and 2 = female. A participant's *migratory background* was measured by the item "Are both of your parents from Germany?" that could be answered with 1 = "yes", 2 = "no, only one of them", 3 = "no, both are not from Germany", and 4 = "not specified" as a missing value. Furthermore participants were asked if they were currently in a *relationship*, coded with 0 = "yes" and 1 = "no". As another demographic item, the survey asked "How far away from your workplace is the place where you spend most of your school years?". The six-point response-scale ranged from 1 = "it is the same place" to 6 = "more than 400km away".

At the beginning of January 2008 a pre-test was conducted by presenting the research project to the participants of an event organized by the German lesbian and gay association LSVD in Frankfurt-am-Main, and they were invited to fill out and to appraise the online

questionnaire. The online address of the questionnaire was distributed among the audience. Furthermore the LGBT network group “homoSAPiens” of the software-company SAP was invited by e-mail to fill out the online questionnaire. 34 gay men and lesbians that were invited at the LSVD event completed and commented upon the questionnaire, and 19 members of “homoSAPiens” completed it and additionally made useful comments on it. After discussing the suggestions for improvements with the three heads of the SAP network and considering the feedback, some small adjustments were made and the wording of the questionnaire was modified in some respects. For example, because the questions focused on gay men and lesbians and did not reflect the situation of transsexual employees, the “T” was deleted from LGBT.

Four regression analyses were conducted for analyzing the relationship of the demographic factors and the workplace-related self-conceptualizations of homosexual employees. Additionally, a correlation analysis gives some indication of the interrelations.

## **Findings**

As already mentioned above, regression analyses and correlation analyses were used to test our hypotheses. The following table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations of the data.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

The six demographic factors were regressed step-wise on each “self-concept” and it appears that gender, age, relationship status, religion and migratory background are most strongly associated with the way gay men and lesbians manage their sexual orientation in the workplace (see table 2). The distance of the workplace from the place where one spent most of his or her school years does not seem to be related to the individual self-conceptualizations.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

It appears that the individual employee's relationship status is most closely linked to the way in which gay men and lesbians manage their sexual orientation in the workplace. Compared to the other influencing variables of the regression models, relationship status explains the largest part of the total variation of "passing", "covering" and "explicitly out". Employees who are in a relationship tend to be more explicitly out, and have lower intensities in passing or covering. This shows that the personal stability (Finn, 2012) and well-being (Abbey, *et al.*, 1985) provided by a fulfilling partnership tends to broaden one's coping resources and it takes away the harmfulness of potential workplace-stressors being related to disclosing one's sexual orientation. Employees' age has the next strongest interrelation with the same three identity management constructs as "relationship-status", though with a much lower explanatory power. Older employees tend to be more explicitly out, and to adopt covering or passing strategies less frequently. This indicates that an age-related increased personal stability (Worthy, *et al.*, 2011) and capability to deal with conflicts (Grossmann, *et al.*, 2010) is positively related with higher amount of coping resources available, and it seems to outweigh a negative impact of one's potentially more conservative socialization background. Gender is the only variable that has a significant impact on all four of the strategy-constructs. Lesbians seem to be a little more explicitly and implicitly out, and a little less prone to covering and passing than gay men. This can be interpreted as a consequence of the higher degree of societal reservations and hostilities towards gay men compared to lesbian women, that can make a disclosure for gay men more harmful (Swank and Raiz, 2010). The coping resources being provided by one's religion (Bozard and Sanders, 2011) manifest themselves in the lower intensity of covering, and a higher intensity of being explicitly out of employees belonging to a faith community, compared to non-religious employees. Having a migratory

background, to a small extent at least, is linked to a lower degree of being explicitly out at work, and a higher degree of covering and passing. This confirms, at least by trend, the weakening impact of one's migratory background on one's coping resources for dealing with minority stress (Sieberer, *et al.*, 2012).

## **Discussion and theoretical implications**

Generally, these findings are in line with previously conducted research, showing that demographic factors have a certain interrelation with the way gay and lesbian employees manage their sexual orientation in the workplace. Since it had previously only been shown that an individual's race (Ragins, *et al.*, 2003) and social status (McDermott, 2006) impacts upon his or her social identity management, the results of this study broaden the understanding of these interrelations by adding the demographics of religion, age, gender, migratory background, mobility, and relationship status. The results also build on the literature on the coping resources available to individuals, and the way in which they deal with stigma-related workplace stressors (Crocker and Major, 1989; Major and O'Brien, 2005; Miller and Kaiser, 2001), whilst extending this approach by several facets. Given that homosexuality still has a stigmatizing effect, it is partially shown here that manifestations of demographic factors that tend to stabilize the individual lead to a more open way of dealing with one's homosexuality, as one type of discreditable stigma, in the workplace. On the one hand, this stabilizing effect can be due to the concrete manifestation not being an additive stigma in a specific workplace setting (e.g. Boyce *et al.*, 2007; Deitch *et al.*, 2003; Stuart, 2006) and thus being at least non-destabilizing. An example for this would be that of an individual's background of migration from outside the country, which can also work as a stigma (Bimrose and McNair, 2011), and therefore leads to a higher intensity of applying covering, and a lower degree of applying more open ways in managing one's homosexuality at work. On the other hand, the stabilizing

effect that enhances an individual's coping resources in terms of that individual's homosexuality can be due to mechanisms that work within the concrete manifestations of demographic factors themselves. Examples for this are the manifestation of "being in a relationship" of the demographic "relationship status" and the manifestation of "belonging to a religious community" of the demographic "religion (Bozard and Sanders, 2011). A stable relationship, and/or being part of a religious community, can give sufficient security to lesbian and gay employees to enable them to be more open about their sexual orientation in the workplace, because they perceive potential hostilities as less grave, and have more coping resources available for dealing with challenging workplace situations. The fact that some religious communities deprecate homosexuality itself seems to be over-compensated by the strengthening feeling of having a religious affiliation. For Germany, as a country with a predominantly Roman Catholic and Lutheran population, these findings are in line with Wilkerson et al. (2012) who found that, compared to Evangelical Protestants, religiosity is less associated with internalized homophobia among Catholics and Mainline Protestants. Age has the same positive effect: the older the lesbian or gay employee, the more likely they are to disclose their sexual orientation at work. Here, age-induced personal stability seems to compensate for the more traditional world-view (in terms of homosexuality) with which one might have grown up. Societal changes in terms of a growing public acceptance of gay men and lesbians (Keleher and Smith, 2012) might be the reason why personal mobility within the country is not related to more open ways of dealing with one's sexual orientation at work. Thus, escaping from societal and familiar constraints at home is not the prime motivation for lesbians and gays moving away from the place where they grew up. In contrast, it seems as if families have a supportive function for gay men and lesbians, and thus they enhance their coping resources at work. In Germany, as well as in the whole of Western Europe and North America, the stigmatizing power of homosexuality is indeed shrinking, but still exists



(Baunach, 2011, 2012; Keleher and Smith, 2012) and still confronts lesbian and gay employees questioning terms of how to deal with it in the workplace.

Theoretically this study draws on and combines stigma theory (Goffman, 1963), minority stress approaches (Waldo, 1999) and intersectionality (Cole, 2009; McCall, 2005). An intersectional perspective on employees' stigma-related minority stress allows a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of individuals in workplace settings. This theoretical framework proposed in this study can therefore be a connecting point for theoretically framing future studies on workforce diversity and diversity management

Applying an intersectional perspective to lesbian and gay employees, the present findings demonstrate that they are far from being a homogenous group of employees. For organizations wishing to proactively implement actions regarding sexual orientation – for example, as part of a broader diversity management approach – several implications can be derived from these findings.

### **Practical Implications**

Previous research indicates that applying more open identity management strategies in the workplace positively impacts the psychological and physiological wellbeing of individuals (DeJordy, 2008) as well as their career indicators (Friskopp and Silverstein, 1995).

Furthermore, having lesbian and gay employees who are more open about their sexuality can also have positive economic consequences for the employing organization (Barreto, *et al.*, 2006; Brenner, *et al.*, 2010). On the organizational level, the organizational climate is an important parameter that has an impact on the way lesbians and gays manage their sexual orientation in the workplace (Ragins and Cornwell, 2001). A supportive and affirming climate is related to more open identity management strategies (Clair, *et al.*, 2005). However, previous research has focused exclusively on the specific climate for gay and lesbians, and

how organizational initiatives can ameliorate it (Anteby and Anderson, Forthcoming). The intersectional perspective developed in this paper shows that this understanding falls short of the actual situation. Organizational measures that aim at affirming and integrating gay men and lesbians should consider the differences within that group, alongside other dimensions of workforce diversity, when implementing concrete initiatives. As employees often have to cope with minority-stress that is related to more than only one demographic, for gay and lesbian individuals it can be strengthening and supporting to experience affirmation not only in terms of his or her sexual orientation, but also in terms of other dimensions of diversity, such as religion, gender, age or nationality. This can stabilize the individual, and might contribute to more openness regarding his or her sexual orientation in the workplace. For management practice this encourages an intersectional perspective on organizational diversity management initiatives. Taking into account the numerous and various intersections of different manifestations of any demographic (or dimension of diversity) within the members of the workforce, organizations should aim towards implementing a very broad diversity management approach that does not focus merely on a few dimensions of diversity. Conversely, an intersectional perspective also supports an integrative approach to the development of the single diversity measures targeting “sexual orientation”. For example, if organizations decide to launch in-house campaigns that proclaim issues of equalization and organizational commitment to gay and lesbian employees, attention should be paid covering, in addition, the whole spectrum of manifestations of other dimensions of diversity. In concrete terms, this means that pictures and texts utilized should not create the impression (for example) that all gay men are young, good looking and atheistic, and all lesbians are, say, of the majority nationality, white and in long-term relationships. In the same way the category of “sexual orientation” should itself be addressed in a broader, more pluralistic spectrum, the same approach should be followed when implementing other diversity management measures,

such as network groups, lesbian and gay marketing campaigns, or management training. As a consequence the individual potential of more openly gay and lesbian employees might be unlocked, which will help both the individual, as well as organizational performance and wellbeing as a whole.

Furthermore, companies that succeed in creating such an inclusive and pluralistic working climate for their gay and lesbian employees might additionally benefit from an overspill to other minority groups that might feel empowered as well. In terms of organizational policy-making, the demographic of sexual orientation represents one of the least recognized demographics (or dimension of workforce diversity) and, if addressed at all, is usually approached very gingerly. As a consequence therefore, an inclusive workplace environment for lesbian and gay employees can indicate to employees or applicants from other minority groups that they are welcome as a minority as well, or that they can be more open about their minority status (Florida, 2002).

### **Limitations and future research**

Although important insights about interrelations of the workplace behavior of gay and lesbian employees and its implications could be derived from this study, several limitations have to be considered.

One limitation is linked to the non-representative nature of the Germany-wide cross-sectional sample. The way the participants were invited to take part was chosen primarily in order to address gay men and lesbians all over Germany and not only in the bigger cities. However, by using an online questionnaire, lesbians and gay men who are less familiar with the Internet are systematically excluded. Furthermore, the distribution of the invitation to take part in the survey was carried out mainly via gay and lesbian communication channels, and might not therefore have reached gay men and lesbians that identify themselves less closely

with the lesbian and gay “community”, or generally absent themselves from it. The analyzed sample, therefore, may in general tend towards being more open than the average homosexual employee in Germany. Thus, this study does not claim the sample to be representative for a wider LGB community.

Although the data was collected via a questionnaire as self-reports, the danger of common-method variance (CMV) can be ignored, as only the criterion variables were constructs that could be susceptible for a potential CMV (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). All predictors are not subjective constructs but factual data which rarely, if at all, suffer from any effects which could lead to shared variance of predictors and criterion variable due to method (see, e.g. Podsakoff and Organ, 1986), as only demographics that were exclusively measured with a single item each were utilized as predictor variables.

One possible connecting point for future research is the finding of this study that being older correlates positively with being more open and less covert in the workplace. This finding would seem to be quite surprising when consideration is given to the fact that being older implies having grown up, and having become socialized, in a more conservative milieu, in terms of perceptions of homosexuality in Germany in the past. An explanation for this may be found in future research, which can take a more in-depth look at certain branches or hierarchy levels. A qualitative study of the personal situations of older gay and lesbian employees might also provide important insights. It may be possible that being only a few years or months away from retirement can change an individual’s personal estimation of the potential harm inherent in being more open at work. As this study focuses on Germany as a whole, and does not distinguish between being born and socialized in East or West Germany, future research in Germany could place an emphasis on this. Furthermore, comparative studies between different cultural backgrounds and nations might develop further the understanding of different societal intensities, directions and mechanisms of stigmatization.

Comparative surveys in other countries could strengthen or contrast the arguments proposed in this paper. It would be interesting to compare countries that are less pluralistic in religious terms, such as Italy, the Scandinavian countries, or Turkey, and to analyze possible differences and similarities. As the approach of this article can also be classified as an intersectional approach in terms of the interaction of different demographic factors within the individual, future research generally should not ignore the dimension of “sexual orientation” when focusing on other demographic factors in relation to respective issues analyzed.

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