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Accelerating gender and sexuality inclusion in organisations

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Published in:
 Australian Journal of Management

DOI:
[10.1177/03128962231181427](https://doi.org/10.1177/03128962231181427)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
 Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
 2023

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Sojo, V. E., Wheeler, M. A., & Ryan, M. K. (2023). Accelerating gender and sexuality inclusion in organisations: Introduction to the special issue and academic agenda. *Australian Journal of Management*, 48(4), 683-692. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03128962231181427>

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Accelerating gender and sexuality inclusion in organisations: Introduction to the special issue and academic agenda

Australian Journal of Management

2023, Vol. 48(4) 683–692

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DOI: 10.1177/03128962231181427

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Abstract

Gender identity, sexual characteristics and sexual orientation are fundamental dimensions of human life, and we must understand how they relate to organisational and work processes to address workplace inclusion. This special issue was conceived to showcase contemporary research about approaches to accelerate gender and sexuality inclusion in organisations. Here, we introduce the five papers included in this special issue – outlining their logic, variety of methods and contributions. Then we present an agenda of academic work across research, teaching and leadership to further our knowledge of what works and facilitate the translation of that knowledge into inclusive organisational practice.

JEL Classification: M14, M12, J16, D23, O15

Keywords

Diversity management, gender diversity, gender identity, LGBTIQ, sexual characteristics, sexual orientation

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Final transcript accepted on 21 May 2023 by Andrew Jackson (Editor-in-Chief).

I. Introduction to the special issue

Interest among academics, practitioners and the broader society in the way gender identity, sexual characteristics and sexual orientation intersect with our work lives and organisational processes continues to grow (Byington et al., 2021; Sojo et al., 2022b). Organisational stakeholders have practical and ethical reasons to focus on workplace inclusion (Fine et al., 2020; Ozturk and Tatli, 2016). Among many other reasons, the specific concern with gender and sexuality inclusion is sparked by (a) the ubiquity and complexity of these topics; (b) the need to create approaches to reduce the prevalence and mitigate the impact of misconceptions, prejudice and discrimination; and (c) the potential of gender and sexuality inclusion to help improve organisational processes.

The participation of all individuals who are available to work in employment, and their full inclusion in organisational life, is both a moral and practical imperative. Workplace abuse and discrimination cannot be tolerated. These experiences can harm workers' health, limit their capacity to enjoy a full life and represent threats to their human right to just and favourable conditions at work (Sojo et al., 2016; United Nations General Assembly, 1948). At the same time, the participation and meaningful inclusion of all workers has the potential to bring the benefits of different perspectives to the solutions to organisational problems and the development of new products and services, including entering and effectively servicing new and complex markets (Bunderson and Van der Vegt, 2018; Cannella et al., 2008; Van Dijk et al., 2012). Importantly, preventing the exclusion of workers based on their gender identity, sexual characteristics or sexual orientation also has the potential to reduce the risk of litigation against organisations (Deakin et al., 2015; Hart, 2007).

Accelerating gender and sexuality inclusion is even more salient in the current socio-economic and political environment. The continuing gender gap in economic participation and opportunity might take up to 132 years to close based on current trends, which represents a step backward compared to the pre-COVID-19 trend when the gender gap was expected to close within 100 years (World Economic Forum, 2022). The continued exclusion of gender identity, sexual characteristics and sexual orientation minorities from public life (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019, 2021; McGee, 2020; Stephenson and Hayes, 2021) and work life (Hill et al., 2021; Jones, 2023), particularly for individuals who belong to multiple marginalised groups, indicates that progress towards inclusion is complex, non-linear and can be suppressed by passive and active resistance.

Fortunately, decades of research have shed light on the differences in work experiences between men and women (Fine et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2011), strategies that can be effective for the inclusion of women in organisations (Berdahl et al., 2018; Bohnet, 2016) and methods to increase the participation of men in traditionally female-dominated industries (Meeussen et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the similarities and differences in work experiences between social categories based on gender identity, sexual orientation and sexual characteristics remain poorly understood and have only in recent decades received academic attention (Byington et al., 2021; Ozturk and Tatli, 2016), as do the approaches to accelerate the inclusion of minoritised groups in these categories. *Minoritised* refers to groups and individuals who are treated as different from and less important and worthy of consideration than dominant groups in the population (Selvarajah et al., 2020).

The aim of this special issue is to provide a multidisciplinary showcase of cutting-edge research and insights to improve theory development, research translation and education about the factors that facilitate and hinder the organisational inclusion of groups based on gender identity, sexual characteristics and sexual orientation. While largely applying theories from the social sciences, psychology and management, the authors of the papers showcased in this special issue come from a range of disciplines, including fine arts, gender studies, design, psychology, engineering, computer science, astrophysics and management, highlighting the breadth of interest in these topics

across academia. We hope that this set of articles motivates further interdisciplinary research about gender and sexuality inclusion in organisations.

The first two papers from this special issue focus on organisational and managerial approaches to enhance the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender diverse, intersex and queer) workers. Management scholarship has only recently started to explore the complexities faced by transgender and gender-diverse workers (*gender-diverse* is a term used to encompass individuals whose gender identities, including their gender expressions, do not conform to gender norms in a specific context and at a point in time; Madrigal-Borloz, 2018) as they navigate transitioning, disclosures and full participation in the labour force. What we know, from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018) data, is that workers who identify themselves as sex and/or gender-diverse are less likely to be in the labour force and less likely to be employed, than workers who identify as male or female, throughout their working lives, except for female workers between 35 and 44 years of age (typical child-rearing years for women).

To help us understand better what could be behind this apparent exclusion, in the first paper of the special issue, Robin Ladwig uses a grounded theory approach to explore the experiences of transgender and gender-diverse workers in Australia and the ways in which managers can make workplaces more inclusive for them. In their multi-method study, Ladwig first conducted in-depth interviews with transgender and gender-diverse workers from a range of identities and industry sectors to map out core experiences. They used this information to produce a set of photos representing areas these workers must navigate to participate in regular organisational life. In particular, bathroom infrastructure, rigid paperwork, dress codes, relationships with colleagues and managers, and expressions of gender fit presented complex challenges for this sample. These images were then used in open-ended photo-elicitation questionnaires to ascertain the level of awareness and approaches to inclusion taken by organisational managers. Ladwig uses their findings to propose managerial approaches to build inclusive infrastructures, foster psychological safety and support impression-fit management for transgender and gender-diverse workers.

In their article, Pradeepa Dahanayake, Christopher Selvarajah and Diana Rajendran present three case studies from multiple industry sectors to showcase how organisations can help LGBTI employees feel heard and valued. Despite their status as sexual and gender minorities, LGBTI workers often face invisibility and stigma, leaving them voiceless (Johnson et al., 2021; Sabharwal et al., 2019). The authors examine the social and structural factors that contribute to this phenomenon and identify three types of organisational interventions that can make a difference: voice-enabling practices, channels for employee expression and organisational expressions. Drawing on in-depth interviews and an analysis of organisational documents, the authors offer a roadmap for organisations seeking to empower their LGBTI staff and other marginalised workers while also expanding the field's understanding of employee voice.

Highlighting the ubiquity of discrimination and abuse towards gender and sexuality minorities at work, Bronwyn Coate, Ben Eltham and Deb Verhoeven focus on audio-visual camera professionals in Australia. The authors deployed a mixed-methods, engaged-research approach. They worked with survey data provided by the Australian Cinematographers Society to intersectionally analyse industry norms, practices and experiences by specifically considering gender identity, sexual orientation and ethnicity. The authors supplement this quantitative analysis with a qualitative thematic evaluation of questions related to bullying, harassment and discrimination to understand how and why power and devaluation are used and experienced among audio-visual camera professionals. Their findings underscore the importance of addressing job precarity in the industry as a driver of discrimination and abuse towards minoritised groups, particularly those experiencing intersectional disadvantages, and the need for the industry guilds, policymakers and trade unions

to work collaboratively to set, promote and, when necessary and possible, enforce standards of workplace equality and respect.

Taking an inward look, the last two papers of the special issue focus on the experiences of, and approaches to, inclusion of women in academia. Women remain underrepresented in academia worldwide, with the situation being more critical in historically male-dominated disciplines and in positions of academic leadership (Ryan, 2022; The UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019). This situation represents both a problem of justice and a potential risk for blind spots in scientific advancements (Fine and Sojo, 2019).

Jane Phuong, Ann Lawless and Pia Rowe respond to recent calls for more management and organisational research outside the global north to consider developing economies worldwide (Joshi et al., 2015; Sojo and Wheeler, in press). In their qualitative study, the authors relied on photo-elicitation interviews to explore the metaphors women use to make sense of their lived experiences as academic leaders. They applied interpretative phenomenological analysis to these rich narrations and identified *navigating a river* as a dominant metaphor that helps elucidate how women become leaders, the way they exercise leadership, the contextual factors impacting their leadership and the personal consequences of their leadership approaches. Their findings point towards equalising opportunities for career development to enable women to ‘go to the big ocean’ and prevent being ‘stuck in the little pond’.

The last paper of the special issue focuses on an ecosystem of support for women’s career development in academia. Christine Thong, Melissa Wheeler, Jessica Mackelprang, Mahnaz Shafiei, Helana Scheepers and Virginia Kilborn prepare a teaching case and teaching notes. The case traces back to the early experiences of three Associate Professors, realising that something needed to be done to address the disparities women experience in academia, which they knew too well. The authors describe the grassroots approach taken to develop a set of mutually reinforcing interventions at small network and organisational levels to foster women’s career progression. This case study exemplifies a bottom-up perspective to gender diversity management that can be used to motivate other academics to demonstrate and teach management and leadership students about active minoritised individuals within organisations, influence approaches in diversity management and organisational change, evaluation of organisational intervention effects and ethical concerns that can emerge when staff attempt to address social equity issues in organisations.

2. Looking ahead: an academic agenda

Understanding how we can accelerate organisational participation and inclusion of all workers, and on the flipside prevent disenfranchisement and exclusion, is a crucial step in fostering social cohesion and economic prosperity of communities worldwide. Below, we attempt to outline pathways in research, teaching and leadership, considering content and methods, to accelerate gender and sexuality inclusion in organisations.

2.1. Research

Decades of social science research dedicated to understanding how gender identity, sexual characteristics and sexual orientation intersect with work experiences have provided us with theories and applications we can use to address workplace bias, discrimination and abuse and to create respectful and healthier organisational cultures (Dollard and Bakker, 2010; Morgenroth and Ryan, 2021; Roberson, 2019). Nevertheless, many research challenges still exist as we attempt to accelerate inclusion.

More research is needed to understand what works and what is perceived as fair in the design and implementation of workplace inclusion initiatives (Sojo et al., 2022a). The last few decades have seen a proliferation of inclusion interventions in organisations, facilitated in part by consulting work in people and culture and human resource management. As Dahanayake and colleagues found, organisations have implemented a range of inclusion strategies, such as sponsoring community events, educating all staff to reduce stigmatisation or introducing peer support programmes, to enhance the sense of inclusion among LGBTIQ+ staff. However, a few questions remain on whether these interventions achieve their intended objectives, whether they are perceived as fair by all staff and, crucially if we want to create change, whether and how they trigger passive resistance or active backlash.

To address these gaps in research, there are several important considerations. First, interventions should be based on theory and evidence from previous research about their effectiveness. Given the urgency to remedy disadvantages in organisations, it is imperative to ensure our planned interventions are based on decades of existing research about prejudice and discrimination, human behaviour in organisations, organisational change and development, and programme evaluation. Importantly, we must be careful when extrapolating findings about one dimension of gender and sexuality and applying those findings to another. For instance, there might be similarities and differences in the kinds and mechanisms used to discriminate against cisgender heterosexual women, transgender heterosexual women and cisgender homosexual women. Exploring the intersections of gender identity, sexual characteristics, sexual orientation and other dimensions of human life (e.g. ethnicity, disability status, age) will be necessary to inform organisational research on inclusion effectiveness. Deploying inclusion interventions without sound evidence behind them can be unethical, ineffective and wasteful, and may even increase the likelihood of unintended consequences, such as backlash.

Second, accelerating gender and sexuality at work is a complex task that will require boundary-spanning research. Academics must work with the affected staff (e.g. women in male-dominated environments, intersex workers) to make sure the objectives and approaches of our interventions match the expressed needs of the relevant workers. Co-design can be espoused, yet is unfortunately sometimes neglected, as an approach to ensure relevant groups are included in the definition of objectives, approaches, delivery and evaluation of interventions (Green et al., 2023; Lam and Pitsaki, 2018; Salmi and Mattelmäki, 2021). Such research methods require that organisational scholars engage in the development of long-term and substantive partnerships with research participants and the organisations they are part of. This comes with the need to identify and address ethical considerations that might be different from those observed in other forms of organisational research.

Another necessary form of boundary-spanning work is conducting more cross-disciplinary research. Accelerating gender and sexuality inclusion requires integrated insights about the complex and multifaceted nature of organisational life. Academics from different disciplines can work together to develop this area of research by using perspectives and methods and creating theoretical models that integrate concepts from multiple disciplines. For instance, designing, implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of workplace strategies to address the occupational well-being of men can benefit from academics integrating research perspectives from psychology, management, sociology and public health, as all these disciplines contribute to our understanding of well-being.

Cross-disciplinarity can also lead to a much-needed form of boundary-spanning academic work: multi-method research. As illustrated by the studies in this special issue, research about what works to accelerate gender and sexuality inclusion in organisations can benefit from utilising multiple methods. Organisational issues are multi-level and include multi-stage processes (Sojo and Wheeler, in press). For research conclusions to be valid, our designs and data collection tools and

approaches first need to be valid, that is, tools need to be effectively used to gather information about organisational process as they unfold. This means that academics might need to combine different forms of qualitative and quantitative approaches that best help them reflect the nature of the process under study (Broadfoot et al., 2004; Kiessling and Harvey, 2005).

Third, intervention objectives must be clear. Diversity management practices and interventions can have many aims; they may aim to remedy disadvantages, foster equal access, guarantee equitable treatment, reduce prejudice or enhance a sense of belonging among minoritised groups. While these objectives might seem similar, and working towards one might facilitate progress towards the others, these are not the same objectives. Articulating from the start the intended, and potentially unintended, consequences of our inclusion efforts is central to our capacity to evaluate whether these interventions are having the expected effects without creating unexpected negative consequences.

Finally, we must design our inclusion interventions in ways that consider, reduce and evaluate the emergence and impact of backlash. Research in management and psychology has contributed significantly to our understanding of resistance to change (Kotter and Schlesinger, 2008). Past research has also shown that workplace inclusion interventions can generate negative reactions among the workers we try to include and other staff (Hamilton, 2022; Sherbin and Rashid, 2017; Vican, 2013). Disadvantaged groups might feel the interventions are tokenistic and do not consider their perspectives. In this case, co-designing interventions might be a mitigating strategy.

Other staff might feel their opportunities and social status are hindered by interventions to include gender and sexuality disadvantaged groups. For example, universalist approaches to equalise current opportunities might mitigate backlash, but we must ascertain whether they are in fact effective at remedying existing disadvantages. Comparing interventions in relation to whether they are remedial versus non-remedial, direct versus indirect, and facilitative versus distribute (Khaitan, 2015; Sojo et al., 2022a), and the intersections of these dimensions, can be an effective approach to uncover what kinds of interventions generate backlash and the kind of backlash observed. This knowledge is essential to prevent and manage backlash.

2.2. Teaching

Many university textbooks and courses on organisational behaviour and human resource management have a section dedicated to diversity and diversity management. In some undergraduate and post-graduate programmes, universities offer entire diversity management subjects, focused on helping students to acquire a set of knowledge and skills considered important to work effectively in diverse workplaces (Day and Glick, 2000). It is now imperative we move towards mainstreaming curriculum about gender and sexuality inclusion across organisational behaviour, leadership and human resource management subjects, through both specialised units and woven throughout a degree. If we want the next generation of managers and organisational leaders to understand and be ready to effectively prevent and manage sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination, and create positive psycho-social climates for inclusion, we need to start using the evidence we have developed thus far to inform our teaching.

We can make our teaching curricula more inclusive by presenting theories and examples from the literature across topics that are not often associated with gender and sexuality inclusion. For instance, we have sufficient evidence to use examples relevant to gender and sexuality at work when we teach leadership, team dynamics, conflict and negotiation, power and influence, or organisational culture. The reader has likely noted that we are presenting examples of topics that are at the team and organisational levels. This is intentional; diversity management education can benefit from expanding its focus from individuals' awareness and actions into analyses of social and

structural powers within institutions, how they impact belonging and ways to enact organisational change for inclusion (Day and Glick, 2000; Gallos and Ramsey, 1996). These efforts will also benefit from the development and use of complex case studies about organisational change to accelerate inclusion, such the one by Thong and collaborators in this special issue.

When we are invited to give talks and teach in industry about issues of gender and sexuality inclusion, it might be useful to consider what the objective of the engagement is from the point of view of the organisation. Was the engagement intended to increase individual awareness of bias or to shine light on the systemic issues that may be present in that organisation? Moving beyond the individual level, we need to ensure our industry teaching helps facilitate system change. Training and education on the job can be about awareness, but it should also be about preparing staff to initiate changes within the organisation that enhance the inclusion of all workers.

2.3. Leadership

One of the most important levers we have as academics to accelerate gender and sexuality inclusion at work is our own leadership behaviours (Bourke and Espedido, 2020). The decisions we make about the topics we research, our methods, and the way we engage with students, staff and the community help set the tone for our research teams, departments, faculties, universities and the sector more broadly. Considering fairness, equity and respect as core values underpinning our actions can help us serve as inclusive role models. These values are particularly important in the current social environment with polarised and contested views about gender and sexuality issues and how to best manage these forms of workplace diversity (Fine et al., 2020; Morgenroth and Ryan, 2021; Poushter and Kent, 2020).

More structurally, it might be necessary to champion the review and refresh of university policies and practices to make sure we prevent direct and indirect discrimination as well as enhance equity and inclusion for staff, students and other university stakeholders. This effort will require allocating resources and time, which is an effective way for leaders to make their commitment to inclusion visible (Bourke and Espedido, 2020). Importantly, universities are in a prime position and are often expected to be model institutions. Our espoused values, allocation of resources, day-to-day practices and interpersonal treatment of others are some of the best tools we have to help accelerate gender and sexuality inclusion in academic institutions and beyond.

3. Final considerations

As academics, accelerating gender and sexuality inclusion at work will require an effort to use the research, teaching and leadership tools we have to activate the communities in which we operate and to guide them towards change. However, there are still disagreements about the most effective ways to motivate people for change towards social inclusion in organisations. While the business case for inclusion is often embraced by the corporate sector, the evidence about the relationship between diversity and organisational outcomes is mixed, pointing towards a complex relationship moderated by information elaboration, social processes and organisational resources (Ali et al., 2023; Capezio and Mavisakalyan, 2016; Dollard and Bakker, 2010; Ruiz-Jiménez et al., 2016; Williams and O'Reilly, 1998). Similarly, the use of a business rationale to promote gender and sexuality inclusion, in part, runs contrary to research on influence tactics. Previous research has shown that inspirational appeals based on shared human values and consultations are more effective than rational appeals to gain people's commitment and prevent resistance to change (Falbe and Yukl, 1992; Yukl et al., 1995). This is just one example of the potential disconnect between what is common practice in organisations and what works to mobilise staff for change. Now, more than

ever, we need to continue testing and theorising mechanisms for gender and sexuality inclusion in organisations and work towards translating robust findings into organisational practices.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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