The Role of Supervisor and Coworker Support on Transgender Employees’ Workplace Disclosure and Satisfaction

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While organizational researchers have been studying the experiences of LGBT+ employees for at least two decades (see Chrobot-Mason, Button, & DiClementi, 2001; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001 for early examples of empirical studies of LGBT+ employees), until quite recently, this research has been limited to examinations of gay, lesbian, and bisexual workers. Although transgender employees fall under the same umbrella, the concept of identity management is quite different for transgender employees than it is for sexual minorities. Rosopa, Fynes, D’Souza, and Xoxakos (in press) note that we often refer to “LGBT-related workplace issues” as a monolithic concern because of the overlap in barriers faced by sexual orientation minorities and transgender minorities; however, there are important distinctions in the work experiences of gay and lesbian employees versus transgender employees. In particular, unlike sexual orientation, trans identities are not necessarily concealable, socially invisible identities (Sawyer, Thai, Martinez, Smith, & Discont, 2017). While a transgender person’s physical characteristics may prompt them to feel a need to disclose before and/or during their transition (Budge, Tebbe, & Howard, 2010), employees who possess physical features that would signal their gender identity (as opposed to their biological sex), would have little reason to disclose. Indeed, Brewster, Velez, DeBlaere, and Moradi (2012) observed that modifying measures aimed at tapping the experiences of sexual minorities to study transgender employees resulted in a different factor structure than that which had been observed by LGB researchers. Thus, research that seeks to classify transgender employees as a subcategory of the wider LGBT+ community may be misrepresenting their experiences.

Adding to our misunderstanding of the experiences of transgender employees is the fact that even when scholars seek to examine the experiences of transgender employees as distinct from those of sexual minorities, inadequate attention has been paid to one’s stage in the transition process (Budge, Tebbe, & Howard, 2010). Indeed, these researchers note that post-transition, participants felt as though they were no longer living with a secret. Thus, in contrast to LGB employees who may grapple with concerns about disclosure on an ongoing basis, to the extent that a transgender employee presents as their identified gender, their gender should have decreased salience[[1]](#footnote-1).

In recognition of the fact that one’s interest in disclosure (and its antecedents) is to some degree, tied to anticipated reactions by others, in the current study, we limit our focus to transgender employees who have not transitioned. It is within this subset of individuals, that we expect the influence of supportive coworkers and supervisors to have the greatest influence on transgender employees’ disclosure, and consequently, their work-related attitudes.

The Current Study

Sexual and gender minorities are stigmatized identities. Because individuals with stigmatized identities are often rejected socially, reactions or anticipated reactions by others is a key determinant of disclosure (c.f., Griffeth & Hebl, 2002; Pichler & Holmes, 2017; Trau & Härtel, 2007; Trau, 2015). Focusing specifically on transgender employees, researchers have found that others’ reactions influence perceptions of discrimination (Ruggs, Martinez, Hebl, & Law, 2015) and mediate the relationship between disclosure and work attitudes such as satisfaction and commitment (Law, Martinez, Ruggs, Hebl, & Akers, 2011).

In keeping with this stream of research, we offer a general proposition that support is related to disclosure, which in turn, is related to job satisfaction. However, consistent with meta-analytic research on organizational support which demonstrates that support from organizations, supervisors, and coworkers have distinct correlates (Kurtessis, Eisenberger, Ford, Buffardi, Stewart, & Addis, 2017), we refine our general proposition to hypothesize that disclosure to specific referents (e.g., supervisors, coworkers) is contingent on the supportiveness of those referents. Further, consistent with the notion that perceived support invokes a norm of reciprocity, it stands to reason that the satisfaction resulting from disclosure would be specific to the other party of that social exchange – i.e., the individual or group that demonstrated support.

LGBT+ employees who disclose their gender identity at work generally do so incrementally (Trau, O’Leary, & Brown, 2018). Thus, rather than being an all-or-nothing proposition, transgender employees may be selectively “come out” to different people in their workplace. This is likely a function of the different levels of support they experience from these different sources. Moreover, the influence of coming out to those referents on satisfaction is likely limited to satisfaction with those particular referents. That is, we hypothesize that perceived coworker support will be associated with disclosing one’s gender identity to their coworkers and that such disclosure will be associated with coworker satisfaction. In addition, we hypothesize that perceived supervisor support will be associated with disclosing one’s gender identity to their supervisor and that such disclosure will be associated with supervisor satisfaction. While conceptually, our reasoning suggests that disclosure mediates the relationship between support and satisfaction, we pose these mediational hypotheses with caution, given the cross-sectional nature of our data collection.

*H1: Disclosure to one’s coworkers will mediate the relationship between perceived coworker support and coworker satisfaction.*

*H2: Disclosure to one’s supervisor will mediate the relationship between perceived supervisor support and supervisor satisfaction.*

Finally, given that the desire to disclose and the concomitant relief from freeing oneself of the burden of concealment are likely a function of the centrality of one’s transgender identity, we expect the centrality of one’s transgender identity to moderate the aforementioned relationships, as hypothesized below:

*H3: The mediating effect of coworker disclosure on the relationship between coworker support and coworker satisfaction will be stronger among high-identification transgender employees than among low-identification transgender employees.*

*H4: The mediating effect of supervisor disclosure on the relationship between supervisor support and supervisor satisfaction will be stronger among high-identification transgender employees than among low-identification transgender employees.*

Method

Data Collection

The second author will post a link to an online survey to members of the r/trans subreddit, an online community with 47,569 members, requesting participation from individuals who identify as transgender, but who have not yet completed a gender transition.

Measures

Coworker and supervisor satisfaction will be assessed with Seashore, et al’s (1982) three-item facet satisfaction measures. We assessed coworker and supervisor support using the items reported in Baruch-Feldman, Brondolo, Ben-Dayan, and Schwartz’s (2002) study. Identification with one’s gender identity will be assessed using a modified version of Luthanen and Crocker’s (1992) measure.

Analyses

Given that we hypothesize moderated mediation, our analyses are well suited to Template Model 4 in PROCESS (Hayes, 2013). Because it relies on bootstrapping, PROCESS yields more stable estimates. While we again note that interpretation of mediated effects in a cross-sectional sample should be made with caution, in light of the ample theoretical support for the directionality of our proposed effects, we deemed such analyses appropriate in the current study.

Results and Implications

Although at this juncture, we do not know if our hypotheses will be supported, there is no reason not to encourage organizations to provide coworkers and supervisors with the skills necessary to support transgender employees.

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1. A key exception to this is bathroom discrimination. In particular, the state of North Carolina since-repealed “Bathroom Bill” required people to use the bathroom that is consistent with their biological sex. Such legislation deprives transgender employees of discretion in their identity management, by effectively precluding them from engaging in a stealth (choosing to be known only as their presented gender) strategy. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)