***Studying dyadic social relationships to understand selective disclosure at work among lesbian, gay, and bisexual employees***

(Developmental paper)

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***Abstract***

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual employees (LGBs) face an increased risk of being the target of discrimination or social exclusion at work, compared to their heterosexual co-workers, because of their sexuality. To that end, they have to decide how they will manage their sexual identity in the workplace; the overarching strategies of concealing (i.e., hiding one’s identity) and disclosing(i.e., sharing one’s identity) consist of multiple dimensions, each incurring different kinds of costs and benefits. Importantly, identity management may be selective, meaning that one may choose to adopt different strategies, and thus be more or less open about one’s sexual identity, in different social situations. Whereas studies generally focus on the interplay between intrapersonal and organizational antecedents to understand identity management, we highlight the potentially powerful role that social relations may play herein. Social relations, we propose, may facilitate identity management processes in multiple ways, for example because they form a source of emotional and social support, break down disclosure barriers through interpersonal trust, as well as offer possibilities to satisfy the needs for authenticity and belonging. We adopt a qualitative approach, by collecting semi-structured interview data on LGBs’ considerations behind and experiences of using different identity management strategies at work, as well as network data on the various dyadic social relationships in the workplace wherein the use of these strategies is embedded. In doing so, we aim to provide more detailed insights into the intricacies of LGBs’ sexual identity disclosure and management in the workplace.

***Introduction***

Within organizations, lesbian women, gay men, and bisexual people (LGBs) run an increased risk of being socially excluded, harassed, or discriminated against, compared to their heterosexual co-workers (e.g., Ng & Rumens, 2017; Webster, Adams, Maranto, Sawyer, & Thoroughgood, 2017). They therefore have to deliberate whether they want to share their sexual identity with others in the workplace. Doing so may generate costs (e.g., hamper career opportunities) as well as benefits (e.g., receive social support), which have to be carefully weighed against one another (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Spiegel, Wittek, & Steverink, 2016). They thus face what has been termed a ‘disclosure dilemma’ (cf. Griffith & Hebl, 2002), i.e. the decision of whether or not, and if so, to what extent, to whom, when, and how, to disclose one’s (in principle concealable) identity in a given situation (Goffman, 1963; Ragins, 2008). The disclosure dilemma has been proposed to reappear in each new social interaction or social context (Clair, Beatty, & McLean, 2005; Goffman, 1959, 1963; King, Mohr, Peddie, Jones, & Kendra, 2017), meaning that disclosure decisions constitute a continuous, lifelong process (Legate & Ryan, 2014; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000).

Whereas the label ‘disclosure dilemma’ suggests that it entails a dichotomous choice between *concealing* (i.e., not telling others) or *disclosing* (i.e., telling others), it actually refers to a continuum, ranging from fully concealed to fully disclosed (e.g., Berkley, Beard, & Daus, 2019; Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007). LGBs may choose to manage their sexual identity *selectively* (cf. Legate, Ryan, & Weinstein, 2012; see also Seidman, 2002). Given the continuous, lifelong process of disclosure, it is unlikely that LGBs are completely “in” or “out” of “the closet” at all times and in all situations (cf. Ragins, 2008). Subsequently, LGB employees may differ in how “out” they are to different people at work (cf. Legate et al., 2012), a notion backed by ample empirical support (e.g., European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2013; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Kuyper, 2013; Ragins et al., 2007). Yet, however common it may be in practice, selective disclosure is often not studied in detail empirically due to, for example, methodological or analytical difficulties.

This study aims to contribute to filling this gap by providing a more detailed understanding of LGB employees’ decisions regarding ‘selective disclosure’ (Legate et al., 2012) in the workplace. In order to do so satisfactorily, we argue it is necessary to go beyond the prevailing explanations that focus on the complex interplay between two sets of *between-person* level antecedents (Berkley et al., 2019; Jones & King, 2014), namely intrapersonal characteristics and the organizational environment (see also Clair et al., 2005; Ragins, 2008). Instead, we propose to adopt a relational perspective, required to study selective disclosure at the *within-person* level, thereby aiming to understand how the same person may manage their sexual identity differently as a function of particular characteristics of the social context (Jones & King, 2014, see also King et al., 2017). More specifically, we focus on LGB employees’ dyadic (i.e., one-on-one) social relations at work, within which identity management processes are embedded. We study *how* and *which* characteristics of their social relations at work (for example in terms of type or quality) play a role in selective disclosure decisions, in order to better understand why an LGB employee may fully disclose to one colleague, whilst avoiding the conversation with another colleague (Clair et al., 2005; Legate et al., 2012).

Collins and Miller (1994, p. 457) define disclosure as “the act of revealing personal information about oneself *to another*” [emphasis added]. Taking this as our point of departure, it is a logical step to adopt a relational perspective when studying disclosure decisions, and identity management more broadly. Nevertheless, social relations are an undertheorized and understudied dimension in empirical research on disclosure (for exceptions see King et al., 2017; Wax et al., 2018), despite the well-documented and widely acknowledged importance of social support to, for example, physical and mental health outcomes (e.g., Sarason, Sarason, & Gurung, 2001). The research question we aim to answer in this study, is: *How do lesbian, gay, and bisexual employees manage their sexual identity across different social relationships at work?*

To that end, we conduct semi-structured interviews with LGB employees regarding their experiences with sexual identity management in the workplace, as well as their considerations regarding decisions about selective disclosure. Within the interviews, we also collect network data on LGBs’ dyadic social relationships at work, to assess how, and which, elements of these relations may help further understand selective disclosure dynamics.

***Theoretical background***

In this paper, we follow the distinction proposed by Jones and King (2014, p. 1471-1472) to study identity management processes at work. They assert that identity management can be studied at a *between*-person and a *within-*personlevel. The between-person level of identity management is mostly concerned with studying behavioral tendencies and averages, and looks for accumulation of strategy use over time. Hence, this concerns the question of how someone will manage their sexual identity on *average*.In order to study this, previous research has mostly looked at a combination of two sets of antecedents that may explain behavioral averages or accumulations, namely 1) individual differences in intrapersonal (e.g., psychological) characteristics, and 2) contextual, organizational characteristics (Clair et al., 2005; Croteau, Anderson, & VanderWal, 2008; Jones & King, 2014; Ragins, 2008).

The within-person level of identity management, however, is concerned with how the *same* person may manage their identity *differently* in accordance with situational characteristics of a specific social interaction (see also Clair et al., 2005; King et al., 2017; Legate & Ryan, 2014; Legate et al., 2012; Seidman, 2002). Hence, this concerns the question of which situational characteristics play a role in identity management, within specificsituations: that is, what makes an LGB employee adopt strategy X to person A, and strategy Y to person B? In this study, we are interested in this within-person level of identity management, because of our focus on trying to better understand selective disclosure. Herein, we specifically emphasize the role of dyadic social relations, and how characteristics of these may play a role in selective disclosure.

In order to truly appreciate the difference between existing foci, as well as their relative drawbacks in fully understanding identity management, we first describe in more detail the antecedents to (between-person) identity management that are commonly studied. After having done so, we will turn to the promise that interpersonal characteristics may hold in deepening our understanding of (within-person) identity management processes, and how these may help explain selective disclosure (see Legate et al., 2012). After that, we introduce our methodological approach.

***Intrapersonal and organizational antecedents to identity management at work***

Several scholars have proposed the importance of intrapersonal, psychological characteristics that precede identity management processes in a conceptual model (see Clair et al., 2005 and Ragins, 2008). Clair and colleagues (2005) highlight four of these intrapersonal characteristics: 1) individuals’ propensity toward risk taking; 2) their level of self-monitoring; 3) the (identity) development stage they are in; and 4) personal motives they may hold. For example, they propose that LGB employees who score high on self-monitoring tendencies will be more attentive to how they are seen within social interactions, and can therefore more easily behave in socially acceptable ways (Snyder, 1987) – they will have a wider range of identity management strategies at their disposal. Alternatively, low self-monitors pay less attention to situational demands, as they are less concerned about social appropriateness, and will therefore be more likely to bring “their true selves” to work (cf. Ragins, 2008), by revealing more consistently. Ragins (2008) adds two internal psychological factors that predict identity management, namely self-verification processes and the centrality of one’s sexual identity to one’s self-concept. For example, the degree to which an LGB employee scores high in identity centrality, their sexual identity will be more important to their self-concept (Settles, 2004). As a result, the more likely it is that they will employ disclosing strategies, rather than concealing strategies (Clair et al., 2005; Ragins, 2008).

These conceptual models also bring to the fore important contextual, organizational characteristics that will likely affect identity management processes. Clair and colleagues (2005) propose that an organizational diversity climate, professional and industry norms, legal protections, as well as relationships with and characteristics of the target of disclosure will play a role in identity management. For example, organizations in which LGB employees perceive a more supportive diversity climate, will make disclosing strategies more favorable than concealing strategies. Ragins (2008) further contributes to this model, by explaining how similar others, supportive relationships, and institutional support facilitate identity management processes. For example, to the extent that there are more openly “out” colleagues within an organization, LGB employees may be more likely to disclose as well, since there are others who have “paved the way”, and who may be able to provide social support.

***Interpersonal antecedents to identity management at work***

As is evident from the previous paragraph, both Clair and colleagues (2005) as well as Ragins (2008) respectively refer to the “target relationships and characteristics” and the “importance of supportive relationships”. Clair and colleagues (2005, p. 86) describe the extent to which a discloser perceives a relationship to be characterized by a high level of emotional closeness and interpersonal trust as important interpersonal antecedents. More specifically, they propose that three dispositional characteristics of an interaction partner affect identity management, namely 1) those who demonstrate having knowledge about, 2) are sympathetic towards, 3) or similar to (i.e., also identify as LGB) LGB employees are more likely to prompt a disclosing strategy. Relatedly, Ragins (2008, p. 204) mentions the importance of supportive and ally relationships, because they provide a source of acceptance, social and institutional support, and trust – which all facilitate disclosing behaviors.

Hence, in their conceptual models, these scholars recognize that processes and characteristics related to the interpersonal level may play an important role as well. However, to the best of our knowledge, there is very little previous empirical work that examines within-person level antecedents of identity management processes (for an exception, see King et al., 2017). Similarly, little attention is paid to the role of social relations in sexual identity disclosure and identity management processes, especially selective disclosure. We propose that studying social relations holds a promising prospect for better understanding selective disclosure.

***Workplace social relations and its relations to selective disclosure***

As stated previously, we study selective disclosure at the *within-person* level, focusing on understanding how the same person may manage their sexual identity differently, as a function of the particular characteristics of the current social context (Jones & King, 2014). Herein, we are particularly interested in how, and which, characteristics of social relations at work may play a role in sexual identity management of LGB employees. We define a social relation as a relationship between two people that both consider subjectively indispensable, pleasurable, and significant (Boer, Van Baalen, & Kumar, 2004; see also Fiske, 1991, 1992).

We envision several characteristics of social relations that may play a role in selective disclosure decisions. First, social relations may offer *emotional support* to deal with the emotional process of disclosure. Indeed, Berkley and colleagues (2019) posit that disclosure decisions have a strong emotional dimension as well. The degree to which an LGB employee feels emotional closeness to another is likely to incur a disclosing strategy, since this person may be able and willing to offer emotional support. A lack of emotional closeness, in contrast, may prompt the use of a concealing strategy.

Second, social relations offer *company* and *affection*. Company, for example in the form of spending free time together, and affection, for example by showing that you care about each other, may together facilitate disclosure. By spending time together, or by showing mutual affection for one another, one’s relationship may strengthen. This, in turn, may facilitate sharing more sensitive, personal information with one another. In a similar vein, social relations may offer *support for autonomy* (Deci & Ryan, 2000; see Legate et al., 2012). When individuals experience autonomy support in interpersonal relationships, they feel supported to be themselves, and to be able to express themselves authentically (Legate et al., 2012). This is likely to facilitate disclosure.

Third, social relations may facilitate disclosure through the presence of *interpersonal* *trust*. If there is a stronger trust relationship between the LGB employee and the interaction partner, which may manifest itself in terms of a basic level of comfort and intimacy, this may facilitate the disclosure of personal information (Reis & Shaver, 1988), including concerning one’s sexual identity, which subsequently may have a self-inflating effect (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Jourard, 1971). Moreover, trust may be an essential component for the LGB employee to experience a sense of safety that sensitive information will not be shared with others. Since their sexual identity may be the source of discrimination, the LGB needs to be certain that the other will not share this with third parties.

Fourth, having strong and positive social relations with others may offer *social* *support*, for example in the form of acceptance and security (Ragins, 2008), and may be an important source of LGBs’ self-esteem, which, in turn, predicts an increased likelihood of disclosing (Luhtanen, 2003). Another instance of social support could pertain counteracting against a discriminatory act towards LGBs (cf. Ragins, 2008), for example by notifying a superior who can impose a formal punishment, or by playing an advocacy role, for example by taking part in an organizational employee resource group. Hence, the presence of social support is another likely predictor of disclosure at work (Ragins et al., 2007).

To the extent that LGB employees perceive the above mentioned factors to be more strongly present within a social relation, the more likely it is that a disclosing strategy, rather than a concealing strategy will be used, we argue. Importantly, we do not see the presence of these factors as a sine qua non for disclosure to occur. Indeed, LGBs may choose to disclose to others without their relationship being typified by e.g. a high degree of interpersonal trust or emotional closeness, for example because they want to educate the other or because they want to advocate on behalf of their group (see Creed & Scully, 2000). Alternatively, even in social relations characterized by e.g. a high degree of emotional closeness and interpersonal trust, LGBs may choose not to disclose to the other, for example because of strong religious convictions held by the other. Hence, these factors provide a general overview of characteristics that make disclosing, rather than concealing, strategies more likely, but do not offer an absolute requirement for disclosure to take place.

Taken together, we propose that social relations may help better understand how LGB employees make decisions regarding selective disclosure, which is a widespread, yet understudied phenomenon. Therefore, we argue that social relations need to be more explicitly drawn into the realm of studying identity management (cf. King et al., 2017), which is what we aim to do with this study.

***Methodology***

This study adopts a qualitative approach. It will do so by combining qualitative data on decisions and considerations that were made regarding selective disclosure (e.g., which strategy to use, why), with qualitative data on interviewees’ social relationships (i.e., ‘alters’ in social network terminology; Robins, 2015). In doing so, we aim to provide insights into 1) LGB employees’ selective disclosure decisions at work, and 2) *why*, and *how*, characteristics of dyadic social relationships play a role in selective disclosure decisions. We claim that a combination of multiple approaches is necessary to get a firm grasp on how exactly employees’ workplace social relations relate to their identity management processes.

Qualitative methods provide an excellent opportunity for interviewees to describe their personal experiences and reflect on their behaviors, while at the same time allowing rapport (i.e., mutual trust) to develop between interviewer and interviewee (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011), which is important given the potentially sensitive nature of the research topic. In studying disclosure decisions in the context of specific social relationships at work, we will invite interviewees to reflect on and narrate the various decisions they made, the experiences they went through, and several aspects (e.g., quality, meaning, valence, type) of their social relationships. By conducting semi-structured interviews, we aim to understand the differences interviewees attach to the various ways in which they manage their identity around different colleagues at work. Herein, we are able to capture the (presumably different) thinking and reasoning processes that led to various disclosure decisions, thereby creating a certain degree of selective disclosure at work.

We will complement this by collecting qualitative personal network data, in text form, which can be quantified as well (e.g., the number of relationships, the composition of the network). Herein, we are interested in interviewees’ reflection on certain strategies they used or decisions they made vis-à-vis other persons in their network (Hollstein, 2014). Generally, social network methods are excellent for studying the interplay between individual outcomes and the social structure within which these individuals are embedded (Robins, 2015). In our particular study, the individual outcomes we are interested in concern selective disclosure decisions, and the social structure wherein these are embedded involve dyadic social relationships.[[1]](#footnote-0)

*Participants and recruitment*

We aim to sample around 30 to 40 employed, self-identified lesbian, gay, or bisexual participants for this research project, working for one large Dutch organization. Our main aim is to capture within-person level differences that may explain selective disclosure decisions. As explained before, organizational characteristics, such as diversity policies and climate, play a role in disclosure decisions (Ragins, 2008; Wax et al., 2018). Therefore, we prefer the organizational context to remain as constant as possible, and thus recruit participants within the same organization.

The most important variation we aim to encounter in our participant pool is the extent to which they are open about their sexual identity with others at work. Capturing such variation among our participants is crucial to be able to contribute to our understanding of selective disclosure, since we are interested in *how* characteristics of social relations play a role in disclosure decisions, and *why* that is the case. We combine a number of sampling methods. First, we make use of the ‘gatekeeper strategy’ (Hennink et al., 2011). Hereby, we will establish contact with stakeholders within the community we aim to study, and ask them to approach potential candidates for our research project. Second, we use the so-called respondent-driven sampling method (RDS; Heckathorn, 1997), a method that is very similar to snowball sampling, which will help us reach participants who are less ‘out’ at work.

***Findings***

Data collection started in January 2020 and is currently ongoing.

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1. This study is part of a larger data collection wherein we also investigate the relation between network structures beyond the dyadic level and identity management at work. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)