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Career anchors and paths: The case of Gay, Lesbian, & Bisexual workers

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops a framework for understanding the career experiences and decisions of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual (GLB) workers. An important conceptual contribution of this paper is the focus on the self-disclosure of someone's GLB identity as an antecedent rather than an outcome in regard to that person's career. Specifically, the decision of a GLB worker to be visible/*out* of the closet or invisible/*closeted* promotes the development of need-based career anchors (security and stability, lifestyle, and autonomy and independence) and these direct their subsequent career paths. Understanding the role of stigma in the lives of GLB workers help to explains how an individual may be boundaryless but not protean and vice versa. In addition to developing propositions for understanding the careers of GLB workers, the paper also discusses implications for organizations and individuals with other diversity characteristics.

1. Introduction

In a perfect world, one free of discrimination and stigma, Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual (GLB)[1] workers would be expected to pursue careers no differently than anyone else. Unfortunately, this is not a perfect world and GLB workers must make career decisions in an environment characterized by the potential for discrimination (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2007; Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007; Tejeda, 2006) and stigmatization (Beatty & Kirby, 2006; Croteau, Anderson, & VanderWal, 2008; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Shore et al., 2009). Tangible aspects of this include a vulnerability to harassment and being fired (House, 2004; Snyder, 2003), lower pay rates (Shore et al., 2009), and lack of benefits coverage for dependents. Even when not the target of harassment or discrimination, they can still be negatively affected simply by witnessing such behavior (Giacalone & Promislo, 2010; Glomb et al., 1997; O'Leary-Kelly, Tiedt, & Bowes-Sperry, 2004; Ragins, 2008). Therefore, GLB workers are expected to make career decisions that minimize this potential, because similar to other stigmatized groups identity management is a central concern for them (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005).

By attempting to mitigate or eliminate the potential for negative outcomes, GLB workers will find their career options limited. Having limited options does not mean that someone will not find all types of careers among members of the GLB community. But on an individual basis, the options for individuals will be constrained. Specifically, this paper will explain that how individuals manage their sexual identity impacts their careers. An examination of factors that direct and constrain the careers of GLB workers provides an opportunity to better understand why people develop specific career anchors (Schein, 1990) and pursue a boundaryless (Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), protean (Briscoe & Hall, 2006) or traditional career path. This extends existing research which has considered the role of other demographic factors (i.e., age and gender) in regard to the pursuit of a particular career path (Segers, Inceoglu, Vloeberghs, Bartram, & Henderickx, 2008; Sullivan, Carden, & Martin, 1998). By focusing on the careers of GLB workers, this paper addresses the need to further expand our understanding of diversity issues in career theory and also explores why individuals

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[1] Transgendered individuals are not included here with GLB employees because of differences in the legal environment and additional concerns specific to them. However, implications are included in the discussion.

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pursue a protean, boundaryless, or even a traditional one (Baruch, 2006; Creed, 2004; Gedro, 2009; Hall, 2008). In doing so, this paper develops a framework for understanding why GLB workers make the career decisions they do and in the process outlines the relationships between career anchors and boundaryless, protean, and traditional careers.

2. Types of careers

The introduction of this paper focuses on three career theories that are particularly relevant to the lives of GLB workers: boundaryless, protean, and career anchors. The oldest of these is the theory of career anchors developed by Schein (1978) during the era of the traditional career. The traditional career is one focused around an organization where the psychological contract is based on loyalty and security, and success is measured through extrinsic rewards. (Granrose & Baccili, 2006). Although many people still pursue traditional careers (Dowd & Kaplan, 2005; Sullivan et al., 1998), boundaryless and protean career theories reflect changes in the employment relationship and how individuals perceive and manage their careers.

Careers are identified as protean based on the degree they are self-directed or values-driven (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Hall, D.T. and Associates, 1996; Segers et al., 2008). Each dimension is distinct and one does not require the presence of the other. A self-directed career is one that is proactively managed by the individual rather than relying on a particular employer for direction and development. A values-driven career is one where a person intentionally makes career decisions such that employment opportunities align with personal values. Individuals who are neither self-directed nor values-driven are considered to be pursuing a traditional career.

Similarly, there are multiple dimensions to boundaryless careers (Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Segers et al., 2008). A career can be either physically or psychologically boundaryless. A physically boundaryless career manifests itself through voluntary mobility with the boundaryless individual pursuing the prospect for growth wherever it may lead. Yet even if a person never changes employers he or she can still be psychologically boundaryless. That is because being boundaryless represents an orientation/openness to change and growth which for some can be satisfied even if they never engage in turnover (Inkson, 2006; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). Individuals who prefer security and stability in their careers are considered to have more boundaried/traditional careers.

Although there are similarities between protean and boundaryless careers, they do represent distinct constructs (Baruch, 2006; Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Inkson, 2006). The cases of GLB careers help make these distinctions salient. This results in large part from the threat of discrimination and harassment. One way that GLB workers can adapt to these threats is to be boundaryless which affords them a safety-valve in the case of discrimination and harassment. Another option is for them to focus on finding a safe haven free of these threats which is consistent with a more protean orientation. Further, the case of GLB workers will show how someone can be boundaryless but not protean and vice versa (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Briscoe, Hall, & Frautschy DeMuth, 2006).

The inclusion of career anchors is useful for understanding the relationship between the disclosure of one's GLB identity and his or her career path. Career anchors refers to a person's self-concept and encompasses his or her talents, needs, and values (Schein, 1990). It takes time for a career anchor to develop, but once it does a career anchor is relatively stable and people seek congruence between them and their employment situation (Schein, 1990). Although Schein (1990) usually talks about people having a single anchor, it has been argued that some individuals may exhibit more than one career anchor (Feldman & Bolino, 1996) or experience a shift in relation to a major life change (Derr, 1988). Schein (1996) further notes, that as times and people change, new anchors may emerge. Currently, eight career anchors are commonly identified: autonomy and independence, security and stability, lifestyle, technical and functional competence, managerial competence, entrepreneurship and creativity, service and dedication, and pure challenge (Feldman & Bolino, 1996; Schein, 1990; Wils, Wils, & Tremblay, 2010). Further, these can be categorized into talent-based, need-based, and value-based anchors (Feldman & Bolino, 1996; Wils et al., 2010).

Autonomy and independence, security and stability, and lifestyle are all examples of need-based anchors (Feldman & Bolino, 1996; Wils et al., 2010). Individuals with a security and stability anchor desire an employment situation that provides a sense of safety and is consistent with what most people would describe as a traditional career. Individuals with a lifestyle anchor are motivated to find an organization with the right attitude that allows them to integrate the needs of their personal lives with their career. The values-driven dimension of protean careers is most congruent with this anchor. The final need-based anchor is autonomy and independence. The relevant aspects of this anchor, which will be discussed in the paper, are consistent with individuals who pursue boundaryless careers.

The main reason that this paper is focusing on the need-based career anchors is that the life experiences of GLB individuals, both personal and professional, are such that they are expected to develop need-based anchors over talent-based and value-based anchors. Specifically, the development of a security and stability, lifestyle, or autonomy and independence anchor will be related to whether someone manages his or her sexual identity and this choice will impact the subsequent pursuit of a boundaryless, protean, or traditional career.

3. Being GLB and stigma

The proposition that how GLB workers manage their careers is impacted by how they manage their sexual identity is the product of two key factors, stigma and visibility. Regarding stigma, Goffman (1963) repeatedly used homosexuality as an example of a stigmatized group in his seminal work. At the time, homosexual acts were criminal in much of country and homosexuality was considered a psychiatric disorder. Additionally, homosexuals were the focus of religious condemnation. Consequently, being GLB represented a blemish of character and as such was a discreditable characteristic that if known would stigmatize the individual (Goffman, 1963). This is similar to what Jones et al. (1984) refer to as a markable person (Stone, Stone, & Dipboye, 1992). Certainly things have improved today, being GLB is no longer considered a psychiatric disorder and adult consensual relations are no longer illegal. Further, there is also growing acceptance and inclusion within the religious community.