LGB Employees and their experiences of Fly in Fly Out (FIFO) employment in Western Australia

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Key Words

Implications of the Study

The ability to disclose sexuality at work was influenced by the level of organisational support and inclusive workplace cultures that discourage discriminatory behaviour. Due to the uniqueness of each FIFO employee, it is recommended that organisations strive to develop and adopt transformative policies and practices which recognise a range of minorities based not only on sexuality, but also age, ethnicity, and class if they wish to be inclusive and address inequality across the entirety of the organisation (Dickens, 2005).

If organisations in the mining industry were to adopt formal support networks, such as LGB (lesbian, gay, bi sexual) group networks, they could potentially provide a voice for sexual minorities. Networks can act as a collective mechanism in which greater visibility and community for members can be established (Colgan & McKearney, 2012), and promote change in a positive manner. By bringing together sexual minority employees, networks can provide social support in the organisation (Colgan & McKearney, 2012), which has been positively linked to coping strategies and the management of various difficulties faced by these minorities (Willis, 2010). Essentially, a network offers employees an antidote to loneliness in the organisation, and a community where they can be open about their sexuality (Colgan & McKearney, 2012); however, some employees might avoid voicing their concerns as they believe it could lead to further mistreatment or they feel they will be looked at differently by other co-workers (McFadden & Crowley-Henry, 2017). As such, a more nuanced approach to LGB support in such mining organisations is necessary.

Research Field Tips

When conducting fieldwork that involves sexual minorities that work in workplaces that are heavily gendered and stereotyped it is difficult to access minority workers and to engage with them about their experiences at work. In this case the difficulties are exacerbated by the remote workplaces and the fly in and fly out work arrangements that means it is difficult to physically access the worksites. In a male dominated workplace such

as mining, LGB employees are reluctant to identify themselves and are reluctant to detail their experiences at work. In this research access was gained via support groups, using snowball techniques, and all interviews were conducted away from the workplace.

Useful Web Resources

Glassdoor (2020), Ten Ways to Support LGBT Employees.

https://www.glassdoor.co.uk/employers/blog/10-ways-support-lgbt-employees/

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia. (2013). Cancer of the bush or salvation for our cities. Canberra, ACT.

www.aphref.aph.gov.au_house_committee_ra_fifodido_report_fullreport.pdf

Western Australian Legislative Assembly Health and Education Committee. (2015). Inquiry into mental illness and suicides of FIFO workers. Perth, WA.

https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/luInquiryPublicSubmissions/D7C40A4EDD68043E48257D8100196864/$file/23%20FIFO%20Australian%20Community%20of%20Excellence%20COM.pdf

Introduction to the Research

The challenges associated with working in the mining industry are both physically and psychologically demanding, impacting work and life satisfaction, job performance, relationships, and general daily life. While there have been studies dedicated to analysing the growth and impact of FIFO employment across various disciplines, from psychology to social sciences (Rainnie, Fitzgerald, Ellem, & Goods, 2014), and public inquiries that have addressed fly-in/fly-out (FIFO) practices on workers, their families and local communities (House of Representatives, 2013; Western Australian Legislative Assembly, 2015), these have solely focused on detailing the experiences of traditional two-parent hetrosexual FIFO families (Clifford, 2009). There has been an absence of research on the experiences and well-being of FIFO employees from minority sexuality groups, such as those from LGB backgrounds. Employee sexual orientation in the mining industry has generally been an area overlooked in academic literature due in part to the implied assumption that mining is primarily based around heterosexual male employment. This paper addresses the views and experiences of these individuals and provides an additional layer to previous literature by examining an area of research that is in need of further examination. It highlights the role of sexual orientation in employees' experiences of working in the mining industry under FIFO employment, where employees spend a fixed number of days working in geographically isolated environments followed by a fixed number of days at home (Shrimpton & Storey, 1989). The research reported here is based on a larger study of FIFO work experiences across self-identified LGB and heterosexual

workers (Bahtic, 2018).

The typical Australian household is no longer the traditional two-parent family with census data indicating that a more non-traditional family structure is becoming prevalent across the nation (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2011). In recognizing this diversity, the inclusive definition of family in this paper, based on definitions used by the ABS (ABS, 2007), includes traditional two-parent households where both parents either share a child/children biologically or the child/children are step or adopted into the family, single parent families, lesbian, gay and bisexual families, couples without children and single people. Due to such diversity, there is a need for further research on FIFO employment that acknowledges this changing household structure. The following addresses this gap by discussing the contextual factors, associated with FIFO employment, impacting employees from these different family types, and in particular focusing on those from sexual minority backgrounds, working in the WA mining industry. As such, the purpose of this study was to answer the question: *how does sexual orientation influence the experiences of FIFO employment?*

Sexual orientation relates to heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality. Heterosexual individuals have a sexual orientation towards people of the opposite sex, also known as straight persons. Homosexual individuals are those with a sexual orientation towards people of the same sex, also known as gay men or lesbian women. Bisexual individuals have a sexual orientation towards people from both same and opposite sex. Although these categories remain the most widely used across research, some academics suggest that sexual orientation is not always as clearly defined within the three categories mentioned, but instead occurs on a continuum. In this paper, it relates to how a person identifies their sexual orientation, regardless of the sex they were assigned at birth, and as such it encompasses the level of masculinity, femininity, or androgyny of a person. By detailing sexual orientation in relation to the mining industry, and specifically to FIFO employment, this study provides an additional layer to previous literature addressing lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) employees in the workplace.

Literature Analysis

Previous literature on lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) employees in the workplace has been extensive, with studies exploring the different challenges faced by LGB employees at the workplace. In one of the largest Australian studies, Irwin (1999) found that 59 per cent of people sampled felt that they were either victims or witnesses of heterosexism or heterosexist behaviours, 50 per cent were publicly ridiculed by other co-workers and 97 per cent claimed to be the direct or in-direct target of verbal or physical harassment. Heterosexism, unlike homophobia, encompasses the broader issues associated with social inequality at the workplace through interpersonal relationships that are typically reflective of cultural values and norms (Waldo, 1999). As a result of heterosexism, numerous participants identified issues pertaining to stress and depression, and according to Meyer (1995) when stress is combined with an unsupportive and discriminatory work environment, psychological well-being deteriorates, thus increasing the chances of employee mental illness. This form of hostility towards non-heterosexual individuals in the workplace often correlates with hegemonically masculine gender performances (Pascoe,

2012). Emergent research suggests that such negative behaviour towards sexual minorities is true in arenas that are culturally dominated by masculine-type behavioural norms and interaction styles that devalue femininity (Cech & Waidzunas, 2011). These environments harbour hetersoexism against sexual minorities in the form of marginalisation, harassment and bullying, discrimination, and denial of resources, as the culture promotes what is essentially a male/female sex binary, designating heterosexuality as the only norm (Herek, 2007). In the US, findings have indicated that between 15 and 66 per cent of gay, lesbian, and bisexual employees have experienced sexual orientation discrimination (Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2012). This is a cause for concern, as research has also shown a link between discriminatory behaviour and suicide, with further research by the Department of Health and Human Services of Tasmania (DHHS, 2003) showing that suicide, alcohol and substance abuse were considerably higher among the LGBT population when compared to the heterosexual population, thus indicating a flow-on effect of heterosexism that goes beyond the workplace and impacts the physical and mental well-being of these individuals.

Discrimination based on sexual orientation is a widespread concern in the workplace (Kuyper, 2015). Barrett, Lewis and Dwyer (2011), in their examination of sexuality disclosure while at work, found that 36 per cent of participants experienced discrimination due to their sexual orientation at one place of work and 34 per cent at two different places of work. The main types of discrimination, similar to research by Willis (2009), included remarks (27%), ridicule (27%) and humour (25%). Additionally, 80 per cent received death threats, 67 per cent were verbally harassed, 33 per cent had their workplace property damaged and 30 per cent were threatened by sexual abuse. Guiffre, Dellinger, & Williams (2008) also found that discrimination is developed in three main areas that include stereotyping, gender, and sexual harassment, with lesbians and bisexual women in particular being affected by these forms of workplace discrimination. LGB employees have invisible stigmas and therefore they can choose whether to disclose or hide their sexual identity from other workers. The anticipated discrimination that is often associated with disclosure may have an even greater impact on individual experiences while at work (Raggins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007). These findings suggest that because sexual orientation is not readily observable, discrimination requires knowledge of employee orientation, thus potential to discriminate is presumed to be higher when employees disclose their sexuality to others in the workplace.

These studies indicate that heterosexism is still an issue in today's society and has the potential to damage relationships LGB individuals have with their workplace. Daily experiences of discrimination have been linked to poor psychosocial health (King, Semlyen, Tai, Killaspy, Osborn, Popelyuk, & Nazareth, 2008), physical health (Denton, Rostosly, & Danner, 2014) and overall well-being (Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014). However, research has also illustrated the positive benefits, in terms of economic benefits, associated with organisational commitment and support of LGB employees. For example, Day and Schoenrade (2000) found that organisational support and anti-discrimination policies correlated with higher levels of job satisfaction. These studies represent a sample of the vast amount of literature exploring sexual orientation in the workplace. Disclosure or concealment of sexual identity can influence employee job and life satisfaction and mental health, with many participants across the aforementioned

studies reporting heterosexism as being the main cause of negative job attitudes and absenteeism (Day & Schoenrade, 2000). However, research studies have been standardised, mainly exploring white and blue-collar business environments. Further research into more male dominated workplaces, such as those from the mining industry where research indicates that disclosure or concealment of sexuality can impact on individual well- being (Cain, 1991), could lead to a greater understanding of the impact high heterosexual work environments can have on employees from LGB backgrounds.

Literature on fly-in/fly-out (FIFO) employment has been addressed from different backgrounds and perspectives, that have examined the impact of extended work schedules on employee and family well-being (Clifford, 2009), health behaviours associated with working in geographically isolated areas for extended periods (Joyce, Tomlin, Somerford, & Weeramanthri, 2013), and the experiences of women working in FIFO employment have also been studied (Pirotta, 2009). However, all these studies have explored FIFO employment from a traditional two-parent family perspective, with no academic research to highlight the impact such working conditions and environments are having on minority groups and employees from non-traditional FIFO backgrounds. Although previous research is vital in understanding the experiences of working in the mining industry in general, it is evident that a gap exists in the literature that requires further research to address the changing Australian household structure.

There is a growing body of research and public inquiry into understanding FIFO employment and how it impacts on employee lives (WA Government, 2015). However, there is limited to no research on sexual minorities involved in the Australian mining industry and therefore the present study addressed this gap by detailing the influence of FIFO employment on LGB FIFO employees. These individuals are not only prone to the heterosexual work environment found across mine sites, but they are also more likely to struggle with discrimination and prejudice as a result of their sexual orientation. Although this research is exploratory it could be vital in the development of better workplace programmes that address the diversity of the mining industry and the needs of LGB workers; it could help detail ways to mitigate issues and stressors, faced by minority groups, resulting from FIFO working; and it may help enhance awareness to more specific employee and family support initiatives that consider all FIFO employees.

Research Process

The research process was exploratory, attempting to understand the factors contributing to the well being of FIFO workers, and the role played by their sexuality in this experience. The research was interpretive and involved qualitative methods of data collection, largely through semi structured interviews. The target population of this study consisted of WA FIFO employees residing in the Perth metropolitan area but working in the northern WA mining industry. The commuting distance is around 2,000 kilometres each way. In this research, data triangulation was used to collect information from participants in the same field of FIFO employment, at various life and work stages, and from different gender and family types. Due to constrained resources, purposeful sampling was employed to enhance variability of data and participants were selected based on the study objectives. Participants were recruited through email directly by the researcher or indirectly via industry contacts.

Support, community, and stakeholder groups were also approached to provide access to different participants. To avoid the study interfering with participants work, the interviews were conducted mainly through email but also via Skype, video chat, telephone, and face-to-face discussions, as highlighted in step four. Due to limited resources, purposeful sampling was employed to achieve variability and richness of data, thus leading to a greater understanding of FIFO working and living experience (Charmaz, 2000). Person triangulation was used in this study as data was collected from more than one type of person. Participants included construction and white-collar employees, stay at home partners, mothers and fathers all involved in the resources sector, thus leading to greater insight into a variety of FIFO related contextual factors that covered everything from support services available to employees and their families to workplace practices addressing discrimination and prejudice. Such data was used to support and validate information from the research findings. The sample of participants was separated into two groups that included ten FIFO employees from LGB backgrounds and ten FIFO employees from heterosexual family backgrounds across four different mine sites. The research was subject to an ethics review and clearance before commencing. This chapter reports only on the experiences of LGB employees.

As the study focused on a small sample, a combination of convenience and snowball sampling techniques were implemented to help gather participants. The study adopted convenience sampling during the initial pre-testing of the interview questions with a small group of three FIFO employees. The pilot sample allowed for additional feedback and comments to be made regarding the interview questions and helped modify the final set of questions. Based on this feedback, some questions were edited to express greater clarity and a more refined set of questions was developed for the final interviews. Snowball sampling helped gather a few participants from the target population who recommended others within their work group. The interviews were recorded and transcripts were subsequently generated. After initial and focused coding was conducted, all codes were reviewed to combine codes into themes. Themes were created based on the clustering of similar codes that helped identify links and interrelationships between codes. A code structure and hierarchy emerged that detailed the same themes and phenomena.
The research was subject to a formal ethics review and participants were assured that their identities would not be revealed in the reporting of the research.

Findings

The study revealed several contextual factors impacting on the experiences of LGB FIFO employees as a result of their sexual orientation. Following the analysis of the interviews, a number of key themes were identified as being important contextual factors that impacted on the employment experience. Each of these factors: workplace culture, support services, bullying, and the demands of FIFO employment, are discussed in the following sections. For FIFO workers they are away from home and communities, and support networks, for long periods of time; they work and live in proximity with co workers in an industry that is masculine and heterosexual; and they are isolated. Proclaiming LGB sexuality in this context and reporting incidents of harassment only results in further isolation and harassment.

7.1 Organisational culture

Organisational culture was recognised as a driving factor in the way employee attitude and behaviour was shaped. Not only did it impact employee perceptions of organisational support, but it also influenced how individuals interpreted their work environment, with a number of participants detailing a hesitation towards their interaction with co-workers while on-site. Across the interviewees it was found that the organisational culture from one mine to the next also differed. Some participants felt that their culture was supportive of employees, while others perceived their culture did not recognise the uniqueness of each individual. *I'm a girl...in a man's world...everything here is shaped around a man's life, women don't get much say and that's because their* (male) *notion of employment has been embedded in the culture for decades*, said one lesbian employee. As a result, similar to research by Ozeren (2014), many sexual minorities often chose to conceal their sexual identities around other employees to avoid confrontation and upsetting cultural norms. However, such self-regulating behaviour has been linked to negative outcomes that impact employees' well-being, *we don't really have any policies that recognise our sexual identities...it can get emotionally draining when your voice cannot be heard* (lesbian employee). Frank (2001) observed difficulties faced by lesbians in hostile workplace cultures, especially in terms of their proclaiming their sexual identity. When men dominate organisational culture, lesbian participants noted that they felt at a greater disadvantage and were more prone to discrimination on account of their gender. As a result, sexual minorities tried to be accepted by other employees by conforming to the norms of the heterosexual environment through concealing their sexual identities.

Culture can instil a level of fear among employees in which they might feel that by expressing their concerns around bullying and harassment with their employer they will be treated differently by other workers, hence their lack of desire to seek formal support. The mining industry, due to the male-dominated work environment, is typically built on a culture of not discussing personal issues around as this is not regarded as being manly (Henry, Hamilton, Watson, & McDonald, 2013).

7.2 Support services

When discussing formal organisational support services, participants' claimed that they did not know about the availability of support through their employer, and those that did were hesitant in using such services for reasons indicated above, instead preferring informal support through family and friends. Participants felt that if they were seen taking advantage of support, they would be judged by other workers: *we do have support services...I have rarely seen anyone use them,* said one lesbian employee, and another lesbian employee adds: *if I did go to my supervisor for assistance with a work matter or non-work problem, I feel I would be treated differently or looked at differently.* McFadden and Crowley-Henry (2017) found that silence was a typical strategy used by LGB employees to avoid getting labelled as trouble makers, participants in this study described having to keep their feelings to themselves, as they feared being isolated and harassed by other employees.

Formal support can potentially improve employee experience of FIFO employment while at work and at home, as the majority of participants claimed that if their employer offered

some form of employee or family support, they would be more motivated while on-site. Participants claimed that having strong support, such as through a group network, could help lower the demands associated with work and home life, thus reducing individual stress, lowering work-home conflict, and improving overall well-being. However, LGB employees were hesitant in seeking support from their employer and often preferred to rely on their family and friends when they felt down or couldn't talk to their employer. They were physically isolated from their loved ones while on-site, but also felt mentally isolated from other co-workers, claiming that it was difficult to be open around others in their work group, especially around their sexuality.

7.3 Bullying

Despite the changing social and political climate in developed economies, sexual minorities still experience harassment and bullying at work (Guiffre, Dellinger, & Williams, 2008). The participants from this study chose not to report being bullied to their supervisor or manager, as they felt this could exacerbate the potential for further harassment. *Complaining about bullying or any form of harassment is not worth it in the long run...the formal process in lodging a complaint can be long and people fall victim to this process...you're named and shamed*, said a lesbian employee. Another lesbian employee claimed that *people don't want to associate with complainers*, thus detailing a reluctance from employees to formally complain. Reluctance to report issues formally can also potentially create further hostility in the workplace, as grievances against colleagues may lead to further problems (Wright, 2013), thus many choose to cope with the bullying in silence.

Workplace attitudes and fear of repercussions embedded in organisational culture might be preventing management from addressing bullying and harassment on site. Employees would rather keep to themselves instead of making a formal complaint, and therefore management is unaware of any bullying experienced by their employees.

The experience of FIFO employment by sexual minorities is hindered via bullying when they openly express their sexuality around others. In a highly heterosexual male dominate environment issues of bullying generally tend to get overlooked but can have a drastic effect on employee motivation, morale and productivity. Bullying is a considerably more severe issue in the mining industry, as it is more likely to occur due to distance between the worksite and corporate headquarters where there are formal procedures in place for reporting and addressing bullying behaviour. The problem of distance and isolation is that it easy for formal policies and processes to be ignored, and for management to remain in ignorance of what transpires at remote workplaces (Paap, 2006).

7.4 Physical and Mental Demands of FIFO employment

The participants claimed that the demands associated with FIFO employment affected them physically and mentally, impacting on their daily routines at work and home. While many of the LGB employees were able to cope with these issues, those new to FIFO employment found that they struggled more than they initially expected, as one lesbian employee who had been working FIFO employment for less than a year said: *I cannot be*

myself...this place [mine site] *changes people...I'm already noticing myself acting differently towards others here and at home.* She claimed that she has to keep her emotions to herself, as she has seen how others in similar positions get treated. There is an *"underbelly"* that exists when you first start working in FIFO employment where *you are looked at through a different lens because you are new*, said another employee.

While most employees struggled to cope with the physical and mental demands associated with FIFO employment, there were a number of individuals that found the demands actually helped strengthen their mental attitude and ability to cope with difficult situations. *My confidence has improved since I started working* [in FIFO employment]...*my emotions don't zig-zag...my ability to see the bigger picture has become clearer,* said a gay FIFO employee. The ability to properly manage all the demands of FIFO employment is not easily achievable but managing such demands can improve individual work satisfaction.

Conclusions

Due to their sexuality, and that they work in a highly heterosexual environment, LGB employees struggle to express their true feelings as a fear of being judged and stereotyped means that they choose to conceal their sexual identities from other workers. LGB employees will often choose to remain silent at work because they feel that by being open about their sexuality they will be exposed to social isolation, bullying and prejudicial reactions and discrimination (Ozeren, Ucar, & Duygulu, 2016). However, all the participants from this study were able to cope with the challenges associated with FIFO employment and chose to remain in the mining industry because they felt that the difficulties of FIFO working were not severe enough for them to seek employment elsewhere.

Sexual minorities involved in the mining industry differ in terms of their organisational integration and their willingness to be open about their sexuality. Similar to findings from Ozeren, Ucar and Duygulu (2016), we find that some FIFO employees purposefully choose to avoid disclosing their sexuality to others or voicing their concerns formally, as they believe that it could lead to further discrimination or mistreatment. The ability to disclose sexuality at work was influenced by the level of organisational support and inclusive workplace cultures that discourage discriminatory behaviour. Due to the uniqueness of each FIFO employee, it is recommended that organisations strive to develop and adopt transformative policies and practices which recognise a range of minorities based not only on sexuality, but also age and ethnicity if they wish to be inclusive and address inequality across the entirety of the organisation (Dickens, 2005). However, experiences of FIFO employment varied across participant responses, and therefore a potential implementation gap between equality and diversity policies exists across the different mine site locations. Therefore, organisational change in terms of greater equality may not guarantee a working environment that embraces sexual minorities or lowers prejudice or discrimination across the board.

In addressing the issues faced by sexual minorities from this study, managers should aim to voice and encourage the use of formal support services and enforce policies and practices that address equality. They could implement support networks to help sexual minorities

voice their concerns and encourage greater visibility as a community that strives to promote change (Colgan & McKearney, 2012). Managers should also reinforce networks, as research has found that top managerial support is essential to the enhancement of employee commitment to the organisation (Day & Schoenrade, 2000). Managerial support should be translated into equality policies that address diversity and implemented across the entire organisation. Colgan and Wright (2011) argue that commitment from the top level might be poorly communicated throughout the organisation, thus lower-level managers might be unwilling to address issues faced by sexual minorities. Our findings suggest that distance between the location of the mine site and the location of the headquarters could also hinder communication and the successful translation of formal policies that are inclusive of sexual minorities in male dominant workplaces.

Many of the participants noted issues while on-site due to daily difficulties they face with discrimination exhibited, either directly or indirectly, by other co-workers that lead to higher levels of stress: *when I have too much stuff on my mind it gets hard to get things done…there are days when this builds up and trying to complete my duties can get tiresome"* said one gay employee. In addition, each participant differed in terms of their personal and social resources, thus influencing their reaction to various difficulties associated with working in the mining industry. For example, some participants were better at coping with harassment or discriminatory behaviour due to them having access to greater levels of support from family and friends. A number of participants felt that having formal social support would offer them a voice in male-dominated work domains, which have positively been linked to promoting change and bringing together sexual minorities (Colgan & McKearney, 2012). Due to the exploratory nature of the study, these results are speculative at best and further research with a more diverse sample is necessary. Moreover, due to the small sample size the findings were difficult to generalise to the wider mining population and therefore the study does not provide an adequate representation of the target population. The study was also limited in that it mainly focused on participants that were open about their sexuality, and further research that addresses employees who actively avoid disclosing such information may provide another perspective on the FIFO environment.

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