Inactionable/unspeakable: bisexuality in the workplace

Abstract:

In this paper I argue that inclusion of bisexual employees in workplace contexts is hindered by the interaction of two key factors. On the one hand, bisexuality is frequently "invisible" diversity based predominantly around identity, while workplaces are action-oriented environments. On the other hand, where bisexuality becomes "actionable" in a workplace context (e.g. in its intersections with polyamory), it is insufficiently conformist or respectable for most employers to be able to account for and be inclusive of it in their institutional structures. I base my findings on interviews conducted for an activist book on bisexuality in the UK as well as autoethnographic reflection of my decade-long employment in the private sector, which included roles in LGBT diversity and inclusion in a multinational corporation.

Invisible, inactionable, unspeakable

While lesbian, gay, bisexual, and to an extent transgender (LGBt) workplace issues in general have received a significant amount of attention both from workplace diversity and inclusion practitioners (Guasp & Balfour, 2008; Stonewall, 2012; Hunt & Ashok, 2014) and from researchers across disciplines and geographies (e.g. Monro, 2007; Colgan, Creegan, McKearney, & Wright, 2007; Colgan, Wright, Creegan, & McKearney, 2009; Githens & Aragon, 2009; Githens, 2009; Richardson & Monro, 2013), bisexual people's specific workplace needs have been rather less prominent. This has had a marked negative impact on bisexual people's experiences at work. One Stonewall survey found that 55% of bisexual employees were not out at work, compared to 8% of gay men and 6% of lesbians (See & Hunt, 2011), while Monro (2015) finds that bisexual people in both the UK and the US continue to be subjected to biphobia in the workplace in a number of ways. Research has suggested some ways forward for addressing bisexual workplace issues. Köllen (2013) identifies the specific thematization of bisexuality in workplace diversity training and communication as a key factor in improving bisexual employees' satisfaction. Green, Payne

and Green (2011) suggest that workplaces where anti-discrimination policies include gender identity and expression are also perceived as safer by bisexual employees. Towle (2011) outlines the importance of educating lesbian and gay colleagues within LGBT employee resource groups about bisexual colleagues' specific needs. Finally, Monro (2015) argues that bisexual employees themselves strategically use their agency to navigate and challenge biphobic workplace environments.

This paper contributes to existing scholarship by seeking to understand why bisexual workplace issues have proven particularly difficult for LGBT employee resource groups, HR professionals, and others to tackle. It uses data from seven qualitative interviews with bisexual people from the UK, as well as autoethnographic analysis of my own ten-year experience as an LGBT diversity and inclusion practitioner working in the UK for a large multi-national company. It examines two sets of pressures on bisexual people and issues within a workplace setting: the drive to actionability in the face of a social difference which is invisible (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005), intersecting with the absence of an acceptable social discourse about the parts of the bisexual experience which would potentially be more actionable. I argue that these twin pressures ultimately pose significant limits to bisexual employees' use of strategic agency (Monro, 2015) in the workplace environment.

The only bisexual in the village: An (Auto)Ethnography

Participants

This paper builds on two sets of data. The first is a set of qualitative interviews I conducted with UK-based bisexual activists, originally for an activist book on bisexuality in the UK (Harrad, 2016). The group was self-selecting in that it consisted of individuals who had volunteered to contribute to the book and who chose to respond to a general set of questions about their workplace experiences which I posted to the book mailing list. Of the seven respondents, one was a man, four were women, one was agender and one genderqueer. All were white, six were British and one was British/Irish, and their ages

ranged from 28 to 48. Participants' workplaces ranged in size from small and medium-sized organisations to large multinationals, as well as across the private, public, and third sectors. Participants were asked whether they were out at work and how they had made that decision; whether they had experienced biphobia from colleagues or their employer; what their workplaces did or what they felt their workplaces should do towards better inclusion of bisexual employees; and to what extent they were worried about being openly bisexual negatively impacting their career. Consent for reuse of the interview data for academic research was subsequently obtained from participants.

Research Method

The second data set is autoethnographic and based on my own experience of being a member of and later leading the UK and Western Europe LGBT employee resource group of a large multinational company over the course of ten years. While there are a variety approaches to autoethnography, mine is two-fold: my "field" was at the time my "home" and I was a complete member (Adler & Adler, 1994) of the group I am researching. I am also adopting the dual role of informant and researcher (Voloder, 2008) and using my own experiences of bisexual issues in the workplace to inform my analysis while situating these experiences firmly "within a story of the social context in which [they occur]" (Reed-Danahay, 1997). It is therefore worth briefly outlining my own history as an LGBT workplace activist.

The company's LGBT network group was formed shortly after I was hired in 2004, and I joined the group at its second meeting. Shortly after that, I volunteered to be part of the network leadership team. The group took what Githens and Aragon (2009) term a "conventional approach" to its organisation, seeking formal support from the company by appealing to both legislative changes within the UK and the business case for diversity and equality (Colgan et al., 2009). This eventually led to the group being responsible for LGBT diversity and equality strategy in the UK. A significant proportion of group activity was driven by external benchmarking such as the Stonewall Workplace Equality Index (Hunt and Ashok, 2014). Bisexual issues were formally recognised as distinct for the first time in the Workplace

Equality Index in 2012 (Stonewall, 2012) which gave the group an impetus to address them separately to those of gay men and gay/lesbian women. As LGBT diversity and equality became more prominent within the company, I received HR support to convene a Western European LGBT network group, as well as support a similar group in the CEEMEA region (Central and Eastern Europe, Middle East and Africa) and liaise with the US network. My work for this loosely connected network of employee resource groups ranged from HR policy audits and interventions, to strategy development, training development and delivery, and representing the company at industry conferences, both on general LGBT topics and on bisexual-specific workplace issues. In addition to personal notes and reflections from this time, I have also included a number of my outputs on behalf of the employee resource group, such as training materials and conference speeches, in my data set.

Identity politics and inactionability

Being out at work has become a key measure for the success of LGBT workplace initiatives, partly because research has shown links between being out and an increase in productivity (e.g. Guasp & Balfour, 2008). This in turn is one of the key arguments used in the business case for addressing LGBT diversity and inclusion in many workplaces. Bisexual-specific research also indicates a correlation between being out at work and overall happiness and satisfaction (e.g. Green et al., 2011). Yet bisexual people are still significantly less likely to be out as bisexual at work than lesbian and gay colleagues: one Stonewall survey found that 55% of bisexual employees were not out at work, compared to 8% of gay men and 6% of lesbians; and that bisexual people used a range of approaches to being out in the workplace, including identifying as lesbian or gay when they were in same-gender relationships (See & Hunt, 2011). Monro (2015) partially links the low levels of openness about sexuality among bisexual employees their employing organisations' general anxieties about non-heterosexualities. However, this does not explain the striking differences in openness about sexuality between gay and lesbian employees on the one hand and bisexual employees on the other. While coming out may be challenging for most lesbian, gay

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and bisexual people (Clair et al., 2005; Marrs & Staton, 2016), there appears to be a particular issue around coming out as bisexual. This is borne out both in the interviews I conducted and in my work as an LGBT diversity and inclusion practitioner, and in this section I trace this issue to a mismatch in expectations between action-driven workplace environments and an identity-based social difference such as bisexuality.

One common barrier to coming out discussed by several interview participants was the tendency of colleagues, managers, and the wider organisation to conflate the gender of a person's current partner with their sexual orientation:

"I have a husband, so it's easy not to be out as bi" (Linda)[1]

This was true both for participants in relationships with someone of a different gender to their own, and those in same-gender relationships. Clair et al. (2005) discuss three key strategies employees with invisible social identities use to disclose information about themselves. *Signalling* involves using subtle and sometimes ambiguous hints to indicate one's identity; *normalising* involves talking about one's identity in ways which minimise the differences, while *differentiating* highlights them. Linda's comment shows how use of the three strategies differs for bisexual people on the one hand and lesbian and gay people on the other. Gay and lesbian employees may leverage the gender of their partner in all three strategies. For instance, using the correct pronouns for one's partner can be seen as a signalling behaviour, and correcting colleagues' use of incorrect pronouns is an act of differentiation; conversely, displaying a photo on one's partner and family on one's desk in the same way as heterosexual colleagues do can be seen as a normalising act. For bisexual employees, the same actions do not necessarily translate to the same strategies. In Linda's case, as she in a relationship with someone of a different gender, any conversation about her partner is likely to lead colleagues to the assumption that Linda is straight; similarly for a bisexual person in a same-gender relationship, the assumptions is likely to be that they are gay. Because the conflation of gender of partner and sexual orientation does not apply for bisexual people, "outing" oneself generally cannot be done in a subtle way, without referring

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[1] All participants' names have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

specifically to one's identity. Interview participants nonetheless employed each of the three strategies in different contexts. They also found, however, that each had costs and downsides associated with it. Normalising in particular risks putting the individual back in the closet as differences about the bisexual identity and experience are downplayed and the individual is perceived as either gay or straight, depending on context or current partner. Equally, several participants felt that actions congruent with both signaling and differentiating could not be subtle to be truly effective. Such actions then risked making their sexuality into an "issue" and thereby potentially attracting negative attention.

Furthermore, as with many gay men and lesbians, coming out as bisexual is not a one-off event but something that is repeated in different contexts and with different people. Colgan et al. (2009) comment on this within the particular context of organisational restructuring in public sector workplaces in the UK, arguing that this type of disruption is particularly stressful for LGB employees who may have been out in a previous team and are faced with the decision as to whether to come out to new colleagues or pass (DeJordy, 2008). Similar concerns were raised by participants in my research across both the public and the private sector:

> "There was a high staff turnover rate in the company, and eventually I grew tired of coming out to each newly hired set of colleagues, so I sort of drifted back into the closet at work." (Connor)

For bisexual employees in particular, the challenge of coming out is compounded by the challenge of *remaining* out, not just to new colleagues, but existing team members too. Even those who were out as "queer" had to proactively find strategies to out themselves again and again as specifically bisexual:

> "I think it also helps that I 'look like one': my presentation's visually very queer so people aren't likely to forget I'm queer when I don't mention it, and I mention male partners often enough that they won't forget I'm not lesbian." (Harper)

Harper's reference to "forgetting" clearly highlights the issue of *remaining* out even within the same team or peer group, an issue specific to bisexual people's experience in the

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workplace. A key factor here is that "sexuality equalities work is associated with the private sphere" (Monro, 2010, p. 1000) and so raising issues of sexuality and particularly sexual identity in a workplace setting implicitly requires a reason for removing the subject from the private sphere and bringing it into the public one. Lesbians and gay men have historically addressed this through clear demands for action by their employers, driven either by a business case argument or the requirement for legislative compliance (Colgan et al. 2009), with occasional uses of social justice arguments (Colgan et al. 2007). The actions called for take a number of different forms (often depending on the specific legislative and cultural context), such as changes to workplace anti-discrimination policy (Green et al. 2011), extending certain employee partner benefits such as health and life insurance or parental and family leave (Shrader, 2016), or broader diversity awareness training designed to normalise non-straight sexual orientations within the organisation (Githens, 2009; Köllen, 2013). Such normalisation activities in particular tend to refer to employees in same-gender relationships and focus on everyday interactions such as being able to display pictures of one's family on one's desk, discuss one's same-gender partner, or bring them to work social events. While these activities do address some issues for bisexual employees in same-gender relationships, the impression created is often that they meet the full extent of bisexual people's workplace needs. This view is common among both organisational leadership and within the lesbian and gay membership of LGBT employee resource groups, as documented for instance by Towle (2011). What is missing is a discourse in which the bisexual *identity* is seen as valuable and actionable in its own right.

A particular concern which emerged both from my own LGBT diversity and inclusion work and in the interviews was coming out to managers. One participant recounted an incident where their lesbian manager proactively reached out to offer support but became awkward when the employee came out as bisexual and not in a same-gender relationship. Heterosexual managers are equally uncomfortable. Here, too, the key barrier is the workplace orientation towards action, as I put it in a session on bisexual workplace issues I gave at a Stonewall Workplace Equality Conference:

"For me my bisexuality is about who I am, not necessarily what I do – who I have dated or had sex with in the last 10 years for instance. Work, on the other hand, is very much about doing things. We're all about the actionable insight, delivering results, getting stuff done. So when someone shares a piece of information – 'This is me, I am bisexual' – our first instinct in a workplace context is to ask 'Okay, how is that actionable? What do you do about it? What do you want *me* to do about it?' It's almost as if we're having two different conversations." (Milena)

Where coming out as gay or lesbian can often lead to an actionable request for the manager such as normalisation activities (Githens, 2009; Köllen, 2013) or better understanding of partner benefits (Shrader, 2016), coming out as bisexual does not necessarily carry the same call to action. Alternatively, when it does, it is seen as the same as coming out as gay or lesbian. Bisexual employees' specific need for having their identity recognised regardless of their relationship status is therefore frequently overlooked, leading to feelings of isolation and alienation. This is true for bisexual people in same-gender and different-gender relationships, as well as those who are single.

"It feels quite lonely sometimes. It's funny as I generally maintain quite a strong line between work and personal life, and so sometimes I wonder why it's important to me to connect with other queer colleagues. Then I realise that I want to bring my authentic whole self to work, and sexuality is an important part of who I fundamentally am and not something I can switch on and off depending on my context." (Jane)

In the absence of a clear call to action for organisations as well as for individual colleagues and managers, there is a gap which shapes possible reactions to bisexual employees' coming out. Coming out as bisexual in the workplace takes on different meanings which may in turn be shaped by other resources individuals have for meaning-making, notably stereotypes, prejudice, and biphobia:

Interviewer: "What worries you about coming out?"

Jane: "That people will think I'm making an 'issue' or propositioning them." (Jane)

Here, Jane worries that her colleagues may project their own meanings on her coming out in two different ways. Firstly, "making an 'issue'" can refer to drawing negative attention to oneself through behaviour considered inappropriate to the workplace context. One lens through which coming out as bisexual may be seen as inappropriate in this way is by constructing sexuality as a largely private matter. Coming out specifically as bisxual then brings this private matter into the workplace without the mitigating factor of a workplace-relevant call to action which accompanies lesbian and gay issues. As campaigns for LGBT rights have progressed, alternative constructions of sexuality have emerged, and rather than (or often as well as) as a private matter, it can also be seen as a social and political issue. Many workplaces, particularly in the private sector, also consider such issues inappropriate to the workplace context, posing further difficulties to bisexual employees wishing to come out. A second way in which different meanings can be projected on bisexual employees' coming out is expressed in Jane's worry about colleagues assuming they are being propositioned. Monro (2015) shows how bisexual people are frequently hypersexualised and bisexuality commodified in media representation, and how industries such as sex work and pornography capitalise on this commodification. The negative impact of such commodification, however, can be felt in workplaces outside these industries too. Jane's concern reflects this, as she is worried that colleagues may use such biphobic prejudice and stereotyping as a resource for meaning-making in reaction to her coming out.

In this section I have explored some of the barriers bisexual employees face in coming out and staying out in a workplace setting and traced them to a perceived "inactionability" of bisexual issues in the workplace, particularly compared to lesbian and gay issues. This inactionability alters how bisexual people are able to use strategies such as signalling, normalising and differentiating in managing their coming and staying out. As coming out is not accompanied by a call to action, it leaves a gap into which organisations, colleagues, and managers can project their own meanings onto a bisexual employee's disclosure of their identity. Such meanings are frequently shaped by structural expectations of what is and is not appropriate in a workplace setting, as well as biphobic prejudice and

stereotypes. This in turn reinforces bisexual employees' concerns and reluctance to come out. In the next section, I will examine how possible calls to actions bisexual employees could make in the workplace are restricted by available (and unavailable) discourses of sexuality and social justice.

Intersections and unspeakability

Of course not all bisexual workplace issues are purely a matter of identity, and many would potentially be actionable in much the same way as lesbian and gay issues have been over the years - through adjustments to workplace anti-harassment policies (Green et al. 2011), employee partner benefits (Shrader, 2016), or diversity awareness training and normalisation activities (Githens, 2009; Köllen, 2013). However, those areas where the clearest calls to action of this kind could be made also tend to intersect with other issues, particularly gender identity and polyamory. These are not specific to bisexual people, but the stigma and marginalisation associated with them intersects with and compounds biphobia and the marginalisation of bisexual people, leading to very tangible negative impacts in a workplace setting.

A number of authors have remarked on the importance of a legislative impetus to LGB workplace equality work. Köllen (2013) for instance acknowledges the importance of European Union directive 2000/78/EC and its implementations into national law in EU member states as a key driver behind the integration of sexual orientation in diversity and inclusion work in European workplaces. Colgan et al. (2007) investigate the role of the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Discrimination Regulations (2003) in LGB workplace equality and diversity initiatives in the UK, finding that while there are still gaps and potential for improvement, the introduction of this legislation had an overall positive impact on lesbian, gay, and bisexual employees' experiences. Colgan et al. (2009) find the legislative drive for equality plays as big a role as the business case for diversity in UK public sector organisations. Conversely, in jurisdictions such as large parts of the United States, where no or few legal protections are available to LGB employees (Sangha, 2015), sexual

orientation equality work tends to be driven predominantly by business case arguments such as recruitment and retention of diverse top talent (e.g. Shrader, 2016). Yet for some aspects of many bisexual people's experience there is neither a legal impetus for change nor a widely accepted business case argument.

One such case is the intersection between bisexuality and trans - and particularly non-binary - gender identities. Similarly to sexuality equalities work, work on trans issues has multiple drivers but is often decoupled from work on sexual orientation (Monro & Richardson, 2010). Moreover, any legal protection for trans people in the workplace tends to focus on those whose identities align with the male/female binary. This leaves bisexual people whose own gender identity or that of their partner falls under the non-binary umbrella in a potentially exposed position. Non-binary and agender interview participants remarked that they were less likely to be open about their gender than their sexuality in their workplace, and that they used reactions to revelations about their sexuality to make judgements about the safety of potentially revealing their gender identity. One participant whose partner was non-binary also used revelations about their partner's gender identity in a similar way. Another participant's workplace did proactive work to include non-binary employees, which had a positive impact on the employee.

> "Avoid making assumptions; avoid dividing people into groups by gender; provide all-gender toilets (this is a bonus rather than an essential for me, but it does make me happy). My employer does all these things and my line manager's very supportive in general and checks whether there's anything missing that would make life easier for me." (Harper)

However, in the absence of both specific legal protection or a more widely accepted discourse and business case argument around these issues, workplaces like Harper's are in the minority.

Non-traditional and particularly polyamorous relationship styles are another area which intersects with many bisexual people's workplace experiences in a negative way. Green et al. (2011) found 39% of their bisexual respondents reported that they engaged to

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some degree in polyamorous relationships. They also identified a theme of frustration among bisexual people with the common conflation of bisexuality and polyamory. Among my interview participants, both bisexual people in monogamous relationships and those in multiple relationships were confronted with difficulties because of this conflation:

"A colleague asked about my holidays, so I said that my wife and I went to BiCon, and of course I then had to say that we were bisexual. My colleague then asked if we had multiple partners, so it was clear that he associated bisexuality with non-monogamy. I told him we didn't have other partners, and he immediately boasted that he had two girlfriends, but neither one know of the existence of the other." (Connor)

Connor's experience shows not only how bisexuality and polyamory are frequently conflated but also how stigma is applied differently to bisexual and heterosexual people. Connor's colleague felt entitled to pry into Connor's private life. He also felt able to boast about his own relationships, which can arguably be seen as cheating or non-consensually polyamorous. At the same time, Connor himself was made to feel uncomfortable and exposed by this line of questioning.

Equally, several participants who were in multiple relationships struggled with managing their level of openness about their sexual orientation and relationship styles. One respondent cited being polyamorous as a key factor for why she was not out as bisexual in her workplace. Another found it easier to be out as polyamorous than as bisexual:

"I've had books, articles, and stories published in which I've been out as poly (in the bio or in the acknowledgements). I've also had that 'corrected' by someone in the editing process as 'partners' must be a typo (I was quite cross about that!). But as both of my current partners are male-identified that's not an obvious way of being out as bi either." (Rebecca)

Following the established model of sexualities equality work which includes normalisation activities as well as workplace policy changes, there are clear calls to action which could be made by and on behalf of polyamorous bisexual employees. These include amendments to anti-discriminations policies to include relationship styles, the addition of

polyamorous relationships to diversity and inclusion training, and even the extension of partner benefits to multiple partners. Such calls to action are, however, not being made. Raeburn (2004) argues that one of the key factors in the success of LGBT workplace equality movements in the US has been the contrast between the "professional" approaches of employee activists and more radical outside approaches. This can also be seen in LGBT networks groups' reaction to the conflation of bisexuality and polyamory, where in my experience as an LGBT diversity and inclusion practitioner the predominant response has been to seek to discursively decouple the two concepts. Like Raeburn's professionals, this creates an implicit distinction between "good" monogamous bisexual employees and "bad" polyamorous bisexual people none of whom work in this organisation. This in turn can contribute to the alienation, marginalisation and exclusion of a significant proportion of bisexual employees in a workplace.

In my work as an LGBT diversity and inclusion practitioner, this unspeakability of parts of the bisexual experience in a workplace setting was highlighted as I was preparing a speech for a Stonewall Workplace Conference. My wording was challenged as exclusionary and alienating by a polyamorous bisexual friend outside the corporate environment. Yet there were limits to what I could say in that environment, representing a global company which marketed itself as "family friendly". Input from activist friends, however, helped me alter the phrasing in subtle ways which allowed for polyamorous bisexual people to see themselves reflected in it without necessarily openly challenging the biphobic stereotype of the hypersexual, promiscuous bisexual. Once I was aware of this subtle signalling (Clair et al., 2005) strategy, I also began noticing other bisexual workplace activists using it. These exchanges demonstrate that more radical campaigners can have a powerful and positive influence on professional LGBT workplace activists (Raeburn, 2004). The incident also reflects what Monro (2015) terms strategic agency in addressing bisexual issues in the workplace. I was able to identify the external constraints to what I could and could not say within my particular workplace context, and then subtly open up a space where normally unspeakable facets of the bisexual identity and experience could be seen by those looking

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for them, while superficially still remaining within the boundaries of workplace appropriateness.

Monro's (2015) argument is that bisexual employees exercise agency vis a vis their workplaces in ways ranging from strategic closeting to openly challenging biphobia. Such agency, however, is often limited by a number of factors. The experiences of bisexual people in polyamorous relationships as well as non-binary bisexual people reflect some of these limits, which I term the "unspeakability" of facets of the bisexual identity and experience. Where there is neither the legal impetus for equality nor a vocal business case being made, even activists within the bisexual community may be tempted to appeal to professionalism and respectability, thereby alienating a part of the community. While strategic agency can be exercised, for example in choosing which parts of one's identity to reveal in the workplace or in challenging the conflation of bisexuality and polyamory, other options for agency - such as demanding employer action on issues such as different relationship styles - are less open and more difficult to access, making certain aspects of the bisexual experience unspeakable in a workplace setting. Furthermore, some strategic choices have the effect of foreclosing others. O*nly* decoupling bisexuality from polyamory, for instance, may make it more difficult for polyamorous bisexual people to challenge biphobic stereotypes. To be an effective strategy for all bisexual people in the workplace, such discursive decoupling would need to go hand in hand with a wider challenge to the stigma associated with both bisexuality and polyamory, and particularly the intersection of the two. As demonstrated by my own experience, such a more comprehensive strategy is possible: engaged LGBT network groups and diversity practitioners can exercise strategic agency in a way that opens rather than closes down discourses, even within the constraints of the workplace environment.

Becoming actionable, becoming speakable

Both the interview data and my own experience as an LGBT diversity and inclusion practitioner illustrate the twin impact of the drive to actionability and the unspeakability of parts of the bsiexual experience within a workplace context on bisexual employees'

perceptions and experiences of their workplaces. It is these two factors that make bisexual-specific issues particularly difficult to address in a work setting. The use of strategic agency (Monro, 2015) as well as established normalisation techniques (Köllen, 2013; Green et al. 2011) can ameliorate the effects of these factors. This is likely to be more effective if undertaken with an understanding of how inactionability and unspeakability intersect and operate, as well as with a view towards serving the whole bisexual community. The thematization of bisexual-specific issues and their inclusion in diversity training for managers as well as the wider employee population can in and of itself be an action LGBT employee resource groups can call for from their organisations. At the same time, where there is no legislative drive or clear business case for certain changes, diversity and inclusion practitioners need to be aware of the implications of certain strategic choices for parts of the community and seek to be as inclusive and supportive as possible within the constraints of the workplace setting. There is an opportunity for further focused research into the specific effects of inactionability and unspeakability, particularly across different legislative contexts, as they are likely to operate differently depending on the level of legal protection LGBT employees already enjoy.

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