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LGBT Career Development

Julie Gedro

The problem and the solution. Although the field of human resource development (HRD) has begun to focus on career development (CD) theories, there is a paucity of exploration of the particular and unique career considerations faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. This article explores issues uniquely related to LGBT career development. This article provides some insights about LGBT career development, analyzing the factors that distinguish LGBT career development from heterosexual career development, to sensitize HRD practitioners and to help them understand the career development considerations of LGBT people. By becoming aware of and sensitive to the issues faced by LGBT people, HRD practitioners can address their needs and help create inclusive and welcoming environments for them. Additionally, sensitive and educated HRD practitioners can help organizations identify the ways in which their practices reinforce LGBT invisibility, and disrupt heterosexist career development practices.

Keywords: *career development; mentoring; diversity; management; sexual orientation*

When it comes to career development, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people face a complex set of choices that are unique to them because of their sexual minority status. A career is “the pattern of work-related experiences that span the course of a person’s life” (Noe, 2008, p. 500). Career development is the

Process by which an individual becomes aware, explores, understands and makes a commitment toward various aspects of his/her career . . . The process of career development involves a number of behavioural actions including the giving and receiving of information, the experiencing of feelings, working through decisions, and selecting choices among alternatives. (Chakriris & Fornaciari, 1984, cited in Egan, Upton, & Lynham, 2006, pp. 462-463)

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This article will examine some career development literature and theories, and it will acknowledge some of the current literature within the human resource development (HRD) field, to provide insights and sensitivity for HRD practitioners around LGBT people and their unique career-related considerations. By incorporating career development theories from the field of career development and conjoining the work of career counseling with the work of HRD, HRD practitioners can expand their existing repertoires to include the considerations and the challenges faced by LGBT employees. The guiding principle of this article is that HRD practitioners have an opportunity to acquire more skill and more effectiveness as they help LGBT individuals perform at higher levels. Heterosexism and homophobia weigh down the performance of LGBT people, whose sexual minority status can limit them in reaching their potential and can limit organizational performance.

Career development has gained recent attention as a neglected component of HRD efforts (McDonald & Hite, 2005). Although “workforce empowerment has been a major HR policy objective for twenty years in the US” (Woodall, 2005, p. 399), there is little attention paid to the career concerns and specific challenges faced by persons in organizational settings. The field of HRD has neglected to examine the unique issues and challenges that face LGBT people with respect to career development, and the literature on LGBT career development in HRD is virtually nonexistent.

LGBT Career Development

Although sexual orientation is generally invisible to most people, sexual orientation is a *workplace* issue because organizational America is characterized by heterosexual ubiquitousness. Sexual orientation manifests any time a worker places a picture of his or her spouse or children on a desk, wears a wedding ring, or brings a spouse to a company function. LGBT people do not have this privilege and must negotiate the heterosexism of their organizational settings through a variety of strategies. Gedro, Cervero, and Johnson-Bailey (2004) conducted a national study of lesbians in executive, director, and managerial positions in Fortune 500 corporations. In that study, the authors identified those negotiation strategies, which included surveying the political landscape of the organization, deciding when and how to come out, and learning how to serve as change agents to help educate people about sexual orientation workplace issues. In Young, Cady, and Foxon’s (2006) article dealing with gender differences in mentoring, they noted that there is relatively little mentioned about sexual orientation and as such offered a research question framed around the issue. However, the lack of visibility and attention in the HRD field mirrors the lack of visibility that LGBT employees have traditionally and historically faced in society in general. In the main, gay individuals enter adulthood from a position of voicelessness—their experiences unheard and unwelcome in social institutions, including educational venues (Hill,

1995). Discrimination against LGBT people is pervasive in the workplace, with estimates between 25% and 66% noted in the career development literature (Alderson, 2003). There have been a relatively small number of published scholarly articles addressing this subject, which have all served the crucial function of defining gays and lesbians as a nonethnic cultural minority (Croteau & Bieschke, 1996). Gays and lesbians in organizational America are less obvious, but they find varying levels of acceptance, which may explain why many openly gay businesspeople either own businesses or are in professions where sexual orientation is less of an issue (Dodge, 1997). Because of the energy that integrating a positive gay or lesbian identity requires, career development for gay people can be delayed, stalled, or misdirected (Alderson, 2003).

Career Development Theories

Whereas the field of HRD has not yet begun to vigorously study the career development of LGBT people, there are other fields that have. Career counseling literature offers some models and theories of career development and LGBT people that are helpful and instructive for HRD research and practice. Career development theories provide a framework to describe and understand occupational entrance, maintenance, and exit. Different theories use different lenses through which to understand career development, and include such dimensions as time, age, life stage, interests, and aptitudes. For example, Super's (1990) life-span, life-space approach contained five stages: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement (cited in House, 2004). This model posited that "a person journeys through developing interests, skills, and values; exploring the world of work and trying tentative choices; developing greater commitment to a choice; adapting to changes in the world of work; and moving toward selective participation and retirement" (House, 2004, p. 246). For LGBT people, this life-span and life-stage model presents a valuable but incomplete representation. LGBT people oftentimes are not aware of their sexual orientation until later in life when they perhaps have already selected and entered their occupation. For LGBT people who self-identify as LGBT earlier in life, perhaps during the planning phases of career, their particular selections of occupations can be affected. Therefore, Super's model presented an organizational framework to understand in a linear and unidimensional fashion the stages of a career. However, it does not factor in or account for the variety of other types of complications brought about by an LGBT person's realization of his or her sexual minority identity.

Career choice for LGBT people is influenced by the extent to which LGBT people internalize the messages about gender roles and heterosexuality. As they establish and maintain their careers, LGBT people face the greatest amount of challenge because of the decisions about identity management that they continually face (Button, 2004; House, 2004). LGBT people respond to organizational

homophobia and heterosexism and the limitations that it places on their success by counterfeiting a false heterosexual identity, avoiding the issue of sexuality altogether, or either coming out explicitly and integrating their gay identity into the work context (Button, 2004). The Theory of Work Adjustment had four components: satisfaction, person–environment correspondence, reinforcement value, and ability (Degges-White & Shoffner, 2002). Satisfaction includes the ability to form and maintain relationships at work. This dimension of the theory reveals a tension: openness and authenticity are important factors in relationships, yet gay and lesbian people face a conundrum. On one hand, remaining closeted for fear of rejection, they are being inauthentic. On the other hand, coming out may result in rejection by coworkers. The person–environment correspondence dimension is the extent to which a person fits into his or her environment. For gays and lesbians, this fit may be hampered by overt harassment or subtle discrimination. Other dimensions of the Theory of Work Adjustment included reinforcement values, and abilities. Reinforcement values described the intensity of the desire to fulfill a psychological need (Degges-White & Shoffner). Being out on the job, for example, may have high reinforcement value for a gay or lesbian person despite the career limitations that being out may place.

Career Stereotypes for Lesbians and Gay Men

There is a common stereotype that lesbians and gay men are attracted to nontraditional career occupations for their gender (Chung, 1995). The career literature is limited in its exploration of career counseling with LGBT persons (Chojnacki & Gelberg, 1994). Career models have begun to evolve that specifically address the unique issues of gays and lesbians in the workplace. Lesbians and gays possess characteristics that distinguish them from other oppressed persons, including the fact that they must decide whether, when and to what degree to disclose their minority status (Chojnacki & Gelberg, 1994).

In the past 10 years there has been research addressing career issues with lesbians and gays (Pope et al., 2004). However, because there has not been a “concomitant increase in articles published on the career development of people who identify as bisexual, transgender, intersex, or questioning” (Pope et al., 2004, p. 159), this article reflects the greater amount of attention paid so far to career development issues with gays and lesbians than with bisexual and transgender people. Pope (1995) has done some work that delineates the appropriate interventions for career counselors working with lesbians and gays. These interventions include examining one’s own biases, becoming lesbian/gay affirmative, learning a model of gay/lesbian identity development, becoming familiar with the culture, supplying reading about “out” people, talking openly about employment discrimination, and helping clients overcome internalized negative stereotypes.

Lesbian and Gay Identity Development

Lesbian or gay identity development does not occur similarly to the identity development of heterosexuals. Because of the heterosexism of society, the feelings of same sex attraction that a young person experiences can be alienating and embarrassing. Familial and societal expectations and assumptions of heterosexuality, accompanied by repression of nonheterosexual behavior, contribute to a need for identity resolution because generally no permission exists for sexual experimentation outside the accepted heterosexual norm (Boatwright, Gilbert, Forrest, & Ketzenberger, 1996). Given that career decisions are often crystallized in late adolescence or young adulthood, on the average, sexual identity development follows a similar timeline, it seems reasonable to consider both of these processes when formulating career research with sexual minorities (Lonborg & Phillips, 1996). Although it would seem surprising for heterosexual people to question whether or not a career is appropriate given their sexual orientation, it is quite normal for gay and lesbian individuals to consider the wisdom of their career choices (Lonborg & Phillips, 1996). Lindley (2006) argued,

Beyond the direct negative consequences of discrimination, LGB individuals must devote considerable energy to issues not faced by heterosexuals, such as how to manage their sexual identity at work and how to react to societal messages regarding what are and are not "acceptable" occupations for lesbians or gay men. (p. 152)

A telling example of the complications of being gay and succeeding in one's career is provided by the *Harvard Business Review* case entitled "Is this the right time to come out?" (Williamson, 1993). In this case, the protagonist, Adam Lawson, decided to tell his senior manager that he is bringing his partner (a man) to his firm's silver anniversary dinner. George Campbell, Lawson's manager, responded with confusion as well as ambivalence about whether or not to be supportive of his subordinate's decision to come out at a company function. Lawson argued that was he bringing a wife, there would be no discussion over the appropriateness of his actions. However, because he is bringing his male partner (of 5 years), there is tension and unease. The case highlights the difficulties faced by managers who are not equipped to handle these sorts of workplace issues, and it is one that I used in my "Selected Topics in HRM: LGBT Issues" course offered through the State University of New York/Empire State College's Center for Distance Learning system.

Models presented by the field of psychotherapy can be useful for HRD professionals in understanding the differences between LGBT development and heterosexual development. Australian psychotherapist Vivienne Cass (1979) crafted such a model of homosexual identity development, which perhaps poses significant questions for our field. Cass's model posits six stages to forming a gay or lesbian identity: (a) identity confusion, in which individuals begin to question and experience a sense of confusion about their sexual orientation; (b) identity comparison, in which individuals begin to externally explore and

compare their thoughts and feelings about sexual orientation with others; (c) identity tolerance, in which individuals present themselves as being heterosexual in nongay environments while establishing increased contact with the lesbian and gay community; (d) identity acceptance, in which individuals develop and embrace positive attitudes toward their gay or lesbian identity; (e) identity pride, in which individuals feel proud of lesbian or gay identity; and (f) identity synthesis, in which individuals are willing to disclose their sexual orientation and can deal with the range of positive to negative reactions this may elicit from others (Mobley & Slaney, 1996). This model is useful for helping understand the disconnect between companies' inclusive policies and the problematic situations in which many LGBT employees find themselves.

The Cass model of homosexual identity development highlighted the *particular* challenges of LGBT people as they come to understand, identify, compare, tolerate, accept, embrace, and then synthesize their orientation. LGBT people do not, unlike racial or ethnic minorities, have the potential ability to gain strength or to seek refuge with family members as they are coming to terms with themselves. In other words, LGBT people, rather than find a source of comfort from their biological families, often face ostracism. In my own life, for example, I faced a litany of name-calling and other forms of "hate speech" and harassment within my own biological family as I was slowly coming to realize that my attraction to girls had an actual name—that of "lesbian." Additionally, because LGBT identity tends to be invisible, it is often difficult for newly emerging LGBT people to find compatriots. LGBT identity is not necessarily visibly discernible, to the extent that some other minority identities are. HRD can use identity models such as Cass's to help managers understand and appreciate the unique challenges of LGBT people. Rather than subsume LGBT issues into the broader category of "diversity"—during training sessions on diversity, or while coaching managers on performance appraisals, or while helping to identify high potential employees within the organization—HRD practitioners can help managers learn and understand that LGBT career concerns exist within a broad and complex framework for which there is little to no formal guidance.

Lesbian Career Development

Lesbians are often stereotyped as truck drivers, athletes, mechanics, and other male-dominated occupations (Pope et al., 2004). Lesbians are less likely to make vocational and life choices based on accommodating men or conforming to traditional gender roles (Fassinger, 1996). Therefore, lesbians are freer than heterosexual women to explore a wider variety of careers. Lesbians, however, face a paradigm of unique considerations as they develop their careers. Lesbians often avoid divulging their sexual orientation to avoid harassment, rejection, and violence (Caron & Ulin, 1997). Although many contemporary authors emphasize the similarities between lesbians and heterosexual women in appearance, interests, goals, and identities, lesbians face

more obstacles as they work to achieve their career goals, and they follow career paths that are more circuitous (Degges-White & Shoffner, 2002).

Lesbian career development is often more circuitous than for heterosexual women because lesbians face negative stereotypes not only because of their sex but also because of their sexual orientation (Hetherington & Orzek, 1989). Traditional male occupations, such as lawyer, doctor, and office manager are considered to be high in complexity, strength, and prestige and power; yet lesbians are stereotyped in occupations that are neither prestigious nor require a college degree (Hetherington & Orzek, 1989). Lesbians face challenges in career development that occur even before they begin careers. When examining the considerations of career counselors in working with lesbian clients, Degges-White and Shoffner (2002) noted that “lesbians who disclose their sexual identity may be steered away from positions in which they would work with children or from choosing a career that would reinforce typical lesbian stereotypes” (p. 91). Fassinger (1995) indicated,

It is a regrettable reality that, despite the ameliorating effects of liberal gender roles and high levels of career commitment in this population, lesbians (as are women in general) tend to be employed far beneath their skills and education, and to be severely underpaid relative to their male counterparts. (p. 153)

Gay Career Development

As part of the dominant male gender, gay men have gender privilege on which to draw. Nevertheless, gay men have unique challenges with respect to negotiating their careers. Gay men are often stereotyped as hairdressers, florists, dancers, actors, secretaries, nurses, flight attendants, and other female-dominated occupations (Pope et al., 2004). The business community defines and places value judgments on gender and sexual identity, attributing positive values toward masculinity and heterosexuality and negative values toward femininity and homosexuality (Miller, 1995). Gay men face gender role stigma, and they also face AIDS-related stigma (Ragins, Cornwell, & Miller, 2003). Many theories of career development are sexist and heterosexist, and they focus on “influences such as the nuclear family, children, organized religion, and finding the right woman” (Prince, 1995, p. 173). Male socialization is based on success and achievement, but for gay men, this socialization is often confounded by sexual identity development (Prince, 1995). That is, because gay men come out at different points in their lives—with some coming out early in life and others coming out in mid-life, career issues must be balanced with personal identity development. Trau and Härtel (2004) determined the factors that influence gay male career development are framed by sexual orientation identity, career identity salience, occupational choice, and sexual identity disclosure and coping strategies. Trau and Härtel argued that the early socialization of acceptable, gendered behavior steers gay men toward masculine types of occupations and away from feminine types of occupations. Once in a male-dominated masculine

career field, however, gay men face workplace harassment and prejudicial treatment because of their homosexuality.

Gay men have to deal with the expectations that society and the world of work place on them as part of the dominant gender, and they concurrently have to come to terms with their sexuality. Gay men often times “prematurely foreclose on career choices because of limited awareness or constriction of self-concept” (Prince, 1995, p. 169). Gay men may develop, as a result of homophobic messages, a sense of powerlessness and a feeling that they are unable to affect events in their lives (Schope, 2004). When a gay man comes out in his career he risks disrupting his potential for advancement. In the higher echelons of a corporation, heterosexuality is assumed and homosexuality remains controversial. Gay men face a unique kind of gender bias. Simoni (1996) observed that “heterosexual men have reported more negative attitudes toward gay men” (cited in Bowman, 2003, p. 65) and that negative attitudes about lesbians are easier to change than for gay men. Additionally, Bowman indicated that lesbians are less visible because their relationships are often assumed to be platonic, yet gay men are more visible and more “universally condemned” (p. 65). One of the most notable gay male executives, Alan Gilmour, kept his sexual orientation a secret at the Ford Corporation, and was passed over for the CEO position at Ford in the early 1990s. Gilmour noted that

As time has passed, business has become more accepting of homosexuality. But it is still a controversial subject. And businesses in general don't want their executives to be controversial. Some people think this is not fair; I think it is the reality of the world we live in. In the past 20 or 30 years, we have been moving away from the glamorous CEO and focusing more on products and services a company offers. And in doing that, a controversial executive—either because of his political beliefs or because he hasn't paid his income taxes or whatever—is a diversion. Companies don't want diversions. They don't want executive personality being discussed; they want the products to be discussed. (Taylor, 1997, p. 7)

Bisexual Career Development

Although the counseling and career development literature has been making some inroads with respect to lesbians and gays, there is very little to date written about bisexual career development. However, to not include a discussion, however brief, in this article about bisexual career development would reinforce and replicate the lack of attention paid to those populations. Bisexuality, which means attraction to persons of either sex, “can occur simultaneously or serially” (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000, cited in Bowman, 2003). Bisexuals are challenged by the expectations and demands of both the heterosexual as well as the homosexual community to “commit” to an orientation (Bowman, 2003). Witten (2001) proclaimed that

It is time to abandon the patriarchal linguistic constructions imposed on us and see new ways to express the truths of our beliefs. The linear thinking of Male (M) and Female (F) has forced us to think of a connect-the-dots continuum that still buys into the social constructions of dyadic sex and gender and the subsequent emergent sexualities from that construct. (p. 3)

Because there is so little career development research on bisexual identity and career, this suggests a future direction for HRD research.

Transgender Career Development

“Transgender” refers to a broad term used to encompass all manifestations of crossing gender barriers. It includes all who cross-dress or otherwise transgress gender norms. The Minnesota Human Rights Act included transgender people and defines them as “having or being perceived as having a self-image or identity not traditionally associated with one’s biological maleness or femaleness” (Davis, 2006). Although there is an emergent curiosity of transgender issues in workplace policy discussions, there is virtually no evidence of research in HRD dealing with this population in any respect. So while there is little to say in a specific manner about career development and transgender issues, it bears mention as a subset of the LGBT population to which attention should be paid. Transgender people face transphobia, which means fear, hatred, disgust, and discrimination (Carroll & Gilroy, 2002, p. 234). There are resources available to assist managers and human resource managers with employees who transition on the job. The term *transitioning* “refers to the process through which a person modifies his or her personal characteristics and/or manner of gender expression to be consistent with his or her gender identity” (Human Rights Campaign, 2006). However, there are limited resources to help transgender people make career development decisions other than the process of transition. There remains a vast terrain for exploration and research dealing with the intersection of transgender identity and career development.

Implications and Challenges for HRD

I have provided an overview of the issues and challenges for LGBT people with respect to their career development. Organizational heterosexism and homophobia are stubborn phenomena that continue to pervade the workplace, and LGBT people have to navigate a complex mix of personal, sexual, social, interpersonal, and intrapersonal issues as they establish, develop and maintain their careers. HRD professionals must become educated and aware of the challenges faced by LGBT people in the organization. Hatcher (2006) identified the importance of continuing to redefine HRD and to understand that HRD has responsibilities and consequences beyond the obvious. HRD should evaluate how heterosexism and homophobia affect HRD initiatives, and then develop strategies in both research as well as practice to interrupt the inequities created by intolerance and invisibility of LGBT people.

The dearth of scholarship within the field regarding LGBT career development reflects and reinforces the homophobia and heterosexism of the larger society. Exploration of LGBT issues within the field of HRD does not abound, although we can learn from our sister fields of adult education, psychology,

management, sociology, and career counseling. Unaided by research to help them understand the issues that LGBT people face within an organization, HRD practitioners lack information to help them structure activities and interventions to create inclusive and welcoming environments within which LGBT people are free to develop and progress.

LGBT people continue to face developmental challenges caused by workplace hostility, harassment, and less access to promotional and developmental programs than heterosexuals (Bierema, 2002). There is a “disclosure dilemma” that LGBT people face, because deciding how and when to disclose one’s sexual orientation is “one of the toughest issues that gay men and lesbians face because it involves a considerable amount of turmoil and a fear of retaliation or rejection” (Griffith & Hebl, 2002, p. 1192). Button (2004) suggested that “human resource professionals, career counselors, and other practitioners who work with lesbian and gay individuals need to be aware that there are different strategies by which disclosure outcomes are reached and these have important outcomes for the individual” (p. 491).

McDonald and Hite (2005) suggested that HRD can support supervisors in career development of employees by “helping supervisors develop a greater awareness of the multiple ways they affect issues of fairness and equity” (p. 426). There are several levers that the field of HRD can push to remove the obstacles that LGBT people face. There is a critical need for research on the career development and related concerns of LGBT people, as evidenced by the dearth of literature within the field. The career counseling field has begun the work of sensitizing career counselors to these issues, and HRD has the opportunity and an obligation to follow suit. Just as career counselors can successfully work with LGBT clients by understanding the challenges, actively demonstrating support and affirmation, understanding how to guide and coach clients about occupation selection and career advancement, HRD professionals can and should develop these same competencies.

HRD practitioners who are knowledgeable about the choices that LGBT people face—that of occupational selection, organizational selection, and career negotiation—are better able to help individuals make those choices and help them negotiate organizational policies, and procedures that may be permeated by heterosexist assumptions. On an organizational level, HRD practitioners who are knowledgeable about LGBT issues can serve as change agents of inquiry about organizational policies, procedures, and dynamics that keep LGBT people from realizing their highest potential.

As HRD researchers and practitioners, we can help illuminate the terrain for managers who are likely to be well-intended and fair-minded, yet lack the skill set to deal with LGBT employees and the issues that arise. HRD research holds a bright promise to provide some insights about career stage and sexual identity development. By adding the dimension of sexual identity development to existing models, HRD could develop precise frameworks, theories, and even perhaps tools for practitioners that help LGBT people select, develop, manage, and exit their vocational lives.

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