How do Gender Minorities Navigate the IS Workplace?

Voices of Lesbian and Bisexual Women

Completed Research Paper

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, research on human capital in the information systems (IS) field that focuses on the gender imbalance has begun to move beyond group level analyses that tend to focus on all women as a single category. Attention has turned to within-gender variation by investigating the intersectionality of identity characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and socio-economic class in explaining factors that both facilitate and inhibit participation in the IS field. One under researched aspect of gender intersectionality is the experiences of lesbian and bisexual women: non-normative gender minorities in the IS field. The voices of nine women in the USA who were willing to discuss their identities as gender minorities are used to examine within-gender variation in women’s exposure to, experience of and response to gender norms about the IS field.

KEYWORDS

Bisexual, Female, Feminine, Gay, Gender, Gender Norms, IS Profession, IT Profession, Lesbian, Gender Stereotype

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, research on human capital in the information systems (IS) field that focuses on the gender imbalance has begun to move beyond group level analyses that tend to focus on all women as a single category. Some have advocated for studying women’s under representation in the IS workforce through within-gender variation in influential factors (e.g. Trauth, 2002). This approach is typically represented in terms of intersectionality (e.g. Kvasny, Trauth and Morgan, 2009), which opens up new opportunities for investigation of gender issues. One under researched aspect of gender intersectionality is the experiences of lesbian and bisexual women in the IS field. The question explored in this paper is how individuals who are gender minorities navigate the IS workplace. The voices of nine women in the USA who were willing to discuss their identities as gender minorities in the IS profession are part of a larger study of women working in the contemporary U.S.A. workforce. The individual differences theory of gender and IT is used to examine within-gender variation in these women’s exposure to, experience of and response to gender norms about the IS field.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The human capital in IS literature about underrepresented groups has focused largely on the topic of the low numbers of women in the IS field. (For a summary of current research see Trauth, Adya, Armstrong, Joshi, Kvasny, Quesenberry and Riemenschneider, 2010). A significantly under researched area of gender and IS research is the topic of non-normative gender minorities: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) individuals. “Non-normative” gender refers to gender expressions that do not conform to the “norms” of heteronormative expression and/or male-identified persons enacting hegemonically masculine behaviors and female-identified persons enacting hegemonically feminine behavior. Light (2010) points to a lack of IS literature that sufficiently explores the relationship between sexuality and IS in his proposal for a minitrack for social inclusion at the AMCIS Conference in 2010. Elsewhere, he observes that looking at one subgroup (such as gay men) does not allow for a thorough understanding of the intricacies that each type of gender minority affords (Light, Fletcher and Adam, 2008). He also calls for broadening our conceptualization of gender to investigate different kinds of masculinities and the mutual shaping relationship between masculinity and technology (Light, 2007).

Most of the extant literature surrounding gender minorities (i.e. LGBTQ individuals) and IS focuses on users of information technology (IT) (e.g. Albert and Bettez, 2012; Kreps, 2009). Much of the research explores how LGBTQ individuals use IT to shape and perform their identities, engage in e-commerce, and navigate access to resources otherwise unavailable to them. The landscape of the literature portrays the ways in which the Internet both liberates these gender minorities from societal oppression and perpetuates the subjugation they experience in “real life” as minorities. While some of the research examines
how design can fuel this virtual subjugation, there is a viewpoint that the creators of websites geared towards LGBTQ users are unaware of their impact on their targeted population.

The smaller literature that examines LGBTQ IS professionals investigates the barriers and challenges these individuals face as a result of their sexual orientation / gender identity. Participants in Catalyst’s two open-ended surveys of LGBTQ-inclusive workplaces in Canada indicated that legislation wasn’t enough to protect LGBTQ workers from non-inclusive workplaces. They reported exclusion from connections within and outside of the company, having to endure harassment and crude humor, and the absence of role models. The women reported more barriers than their male counterparts. Seventy-six percent of the female respondents said their bosses were comfortable interacting with them, compared to 85% of LGBTQ men. Similarly, 70% of women said their managers evaluated them fairly, compared to 80% of the males. In addition, only 50% of the women were “out” at work about their sexuality as opposed to 72% of men. Respondents also indicated that their workers were uninformed about LGBTQ issues (Klie, 2009). Liddle, Luzzo, Hauenstein and Schuck, (2004) created the LGBT Climate Inventory to measure perceptions of workplace climate held by LGBT employees with regard to employee comfort at work, perception of openness to their sexual orientation, hostility / harassment experience, and support experienced.

With respect to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), in general, and IT, in particular, the news is mixed. On the one hand, the 2009 Corporate Equality Index (CEI) compiled by the Human Rights Campaign indicated that a significant number of companies with LGBTQ-inclusive policies, such as LGBTQ resource groups and same-sex domestic partner benefits, are STEM-based, (National Organization for Gay and Lesbian Scientists and Technical Professionals, 2009). On the other hand, Cech and Waidzunas (2011) provide an alternative view of STEM based on interviews with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual engineering students that indicated feelings of oppression in a heteronormative environment. The authors conclude that STEM fields may be problematically dismissing LGBTQ issues based on the popular notion that these issues are more “social” and not within the purview of STEM educational concern (Cech and Waidzunas, 2011).

With respect to IS, in particular, Trauth, Quesenberry and Yeo (2008) found that some participants indicated that while they did not feel that their gender caused them to be discriminated against, they did experience discrimination and attributed it to race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Some of the participants who identified as lesbians were convinced that their sexualities within the IT workplace was more of an issue than their gender. Interestingly, in a Sexual Minority Survey taken by 415 Finnish women, lesbian participants indicated that workplace attitudes may affect their career choice, however their sexual orientation did not affect their decision, nor were the attitudinal factors directly linked to their sexual orientation (Lehtonen, 2008).

Gedro’s review of LGBTQ workers and their career development indicates that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is prevalent and the decision to “come out” at work creates a catch-22 situation: by not coming out people may feel they are not truly presenting themselves and by coming out they risk rejection and discrimination. Lesbians are stereotyped as filling more male-domination occupations (IT is male dominated) (Pope, Barret, Szymanski, Chung Singaravelu and McLean, 2004) and they often do not have to fill traditional gender roles (Gedro, 2009). Similar to the assumptions made by corporations that assume LGBTQ adults have disposable income, there are also assumptions in career development literature that these individuals do not need to negotiate work-life balance or families.

This brief review of the literature suggests the need for deeper examination into LGBTQ IS professionals and how each subgroup navigates the barriers and challenges faced by other minorities as well as those that are unique to sexual orientation. This work addresses this need; it is concerned with the effect of gender norms on gender minorities in the IT workplace. The specific research question is: How do lesbian and bisexual women navigate gender norms in the IT workplace?

**METHODOLOGY**

We chose the individual differences theory of gender and IT (Trauth, Quesenberry and Huang, 2009) because it could facilitate the examination of factors that account for within-gender variation in relation to IS careers. This theory also conceptualizes gender relations at two different levels of analysis: societally-imposed gender group biases, norms and discourses; and individual variation among women with respect to how they respond. This theory explains the variation through three constructs. The individual identity construct includes factors such as age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity and socio-economic class, along with factors related to the type of IT work one does. The individual influences construct, includes factors such as educational background, personality traits and abilities, mentors, role models, and significant life experiences. The environmental influences construct relates to socio-cultural factors that influence individuals in their choice and enactment of careers, such as: cultural attitudes about women; economic influences such as cost of living; laws and policies related to gender discrimination, parental leave, etc.; and societal infrastructure influences such as transportation and the existence of childcare facilities. The individual differences theory of gender and IT argues that,
collectively, these constructs can explain the under representation of women in the IT field by identifying differences among women in the ways they relate to the IT field, experience gendered discourses about IT, and respond to them.

The nine women whose stories are examined in this paper were participants in a field study of 123 contemporary female IT professionals in the United States (blinded). These face-to-face life history interviews were conducted by the first author with women working in the IS workforce between 2002 and 2006. While sexual/gender identity was not an explicit identity characteristic used in the recruitment of participants, those respondents who identified as lesbian or bisexual in the course of the interview were asked (with the recorder turned off) if they were willing to discuss this aspect of their identity. An interpretive, qualitative approach was employed in this research because the goal was to uncover the subjective experience of these gender-minority women working in a male-dominated field and the factors that motivated them to pursue and remain in this profession. During interviews which lasted approximately 90 minutes, each participant was asked to relate her own life history as an IT professional by describing her earliest encounters with IT, her educational experiences, her career as an IT professional, and her own thoughts on the topic of gender and IT. For the nine women whose life histories are examined in this paper, the topic of non-normative gender identity and its effect on their work experience was also explored. The interviewees were assigned pseudonyms to guarantee confidentiality. Table 1 shows participant information about the nine lesbian and bisexual women who are the focus of attention in this paper.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yvette</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirsten</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Black/West Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristen</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
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<td>Glenna</td>
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<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ava</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clair</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sol</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Latina</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1. Participant Information

The analysis of the interview transcripts was guided by Trauth and Quesenberry’s (2006) application of the theory. They articulated within-gender variation as a result of individual identity, individual influences and environmental influences (i.e. the constructs of the theory) along three dimensions. The first is differential exposure to gender norms. That is, women would vary in the receipt of certain gendered messages about careers due to different demographic traits (such as age). The second dimension is differential experience of gender norms. That is, factors such as personality and support will influence the way and degree to which a person will internalize gender messages. The third dimension is differential response to gender norms. That is, individual characteristics of a person will affect the response to these societally imposed gender messages. In the next section we present the results of our analysis in terms of differential exposure and differential experience. Then in the Discussion section we employ the differential response dimension to consider the range of ways in which non-normative women navigate the gendered IS workplace.

RESULTS

The first two dimensions of the framework – exposure and experience – are used to characterize respondents’ voices. During the interviews, participants recounted messages they received throughout their early lives regarding behaviors and attitudes that conveyed gender norms considered appropriate for women and girls.

Exposure to Gender Norms
Interviewees most frequently recalled messages that posited IS careers, as well as the skills, abilities, and lifestyles most commonly associated with them, in opposition to femininity. Glenna, an academic, recalls notions about acceptable feminine abilities and lifestyles permeating verbal and non-verbal communication both at home and school.

It seemed to me that the subtle messages were “girls don’t like math”.

She added:

I wanted to go to school in [math] in college. And my father said, “What a waste of money. Girls get married and have children.”

Similarly, many of these gender-related messages revolved around life courses suitable for women. Sue recalls:

[I] felt pressure to, you know, follow a path, that there was a path set for me and that I was to follow it. That path was to go into business, get married… That was the direction I was supposed to go in.

While seven of the participants reported receiving verbal and nonverbal messages from their families and the educational system that promoted traditional female lifestyles, two were exposed to opposing views. Lena discussed the influence of the women’s liberation movement in formulating her own thoughts about appropriate behaviors and roles for women. She said that reading Ms. Magazine offered her an alternative worldview by promoting career and self-sufficiency. She said these messages provided her with a different set of options than she saw modeled elsewhere. But even the participants who reported being exposed to rhetoric promoting traditional gender roles occasionally encountered competing messages as well.

Gendered messages about appropriate gender roles and the implications for skills and careers accompanied these women into their male-dominated workplaces. Yvette recalls the assumption during her time in the Navy that the women who enlisted were either actively searching for a husband or were gay. This assumption was sometimes verbalized; she recalls being told by a male authority figure that she would be forced to work twice as hard as any man in the organization. In Yvette’s opinion, this sentiment was reproduced in the IS workplace. Kristen concurred; particularly during meetings it was made clear to her that she would have to fight to be on equal footing and be considered a technical expert. These messages required the women to work harder and “prove themselves” as women within a male-dominated sphere. Glenna observed:

You take messages that this is somehow not suitable work for a woman. They’re not crude enough to say it out loud. But it’s like subliminal messages. You look around the room and there are no other women in the class. Or you see how fellows have this camaraderie and they are certainly not going to include you.

This isolation becomes intensified when already-marginalized women possess non-normative sexualities. Kristen suggests that expectations fellow employees hold for women who openly identify as lesbian or bisexual vary from those held for straight women. She reported that people don’t tell lesbian employees to act more feminine because they don’t believe they’re capable of it. Yet those women who are perceived to be straight will often be instructed to be softer both in dress and demeanor. This suggests that awareness of female employees’ sexuality affects the types of gendered messages to which they are exposed.

Experience of Gender Norms

While the participants acknowledged exposure to messages in which IT and traditional femininity are at odds, their stories reveal that the experience of these messages – i.e. their internalization and effects -- vary greatly depending on individual identity and individual influences that serve to either intensify or mitigate them. Individual identity factors (such as ethnicity, sexuality and age) are intertwined with individual influences (such as personality, support systems and life experiences) to formulate a variety of ways that these messages about gender norms are processed. Many of the participants said that, early on, they felt they were different from other girls their age. Lena recalls being labeled a tomboy by her family, while two interviewees separated themselves from those they considered to be traditional girly-girls. A commonly discussed life event that affected their reaction to societal gender norms was their process of “coming out” or identifying as lesbian or bisexual, to themselves and to others. While one participant recalls openly identifying as a lesbian from the age of 16, the majority of the other participants did not do so until adulthood. Four participants discussed their heterosexual marriages, all of whom described their relationships as unusually egalitarian in their domestic roles and responsibilities when compared to those experienced by their heterosexual peers. While these accounts are not sufficient for population generalizations, what is noteworthy is the similarity in many of the participants’ stories about their gender identities, sexualities, and relationships being different from what they viewed as “normal.”

In addition to gender identity and sexuality, within-gender variation is also in evidence through the role that ethnicity plays in these women’s stories. Kirsten stated that in the IS workplace, she is viewed as “Black first and a woman second.” Consequently, the stereotypes more often imposed on her are related to race rather than gender. She told two stories to
demonstrate that she is subjected to both racial and gender stereotypes. On one occasion a professor, assuming that she was from the US South and slave heritage because she is Black, asked her to read aloud a passage in slave-dialect. She follows this story with an account of a coworker referring to her as a “dishwashing machine,” noting that he had one (referring to his wife) at home. In addition to ethnicity, age is another identity characteristic which might seem to set Kirsten apart from the other women: whereas all of the other interviewees were born from the late 1940’s to the late 1950’s, Kirsten was born in the late 1970’s. Certainly the messages about gender norms that would have pervaded mass media would be expected to be different in the 1950’s and 1960’s (when the other women were growing up) than in the 1980’s when she was growing up. However, geographical region also needs to be taken into account. Because, as a teenager and young adult Kirsten lived in a conservative part of the country which expressed traditional gender norms, her experience was not significantly different from the experience of the other women in the study.

Individual influences were in evidence in several ways. Personality was shown to influence a person’s experience of gendered messages. Almost all of the women described themselves as driven, risk-taking, and bold. Yvette had always known she was different from other women because she felt neither unequal to nor “beholden” to a male. Ava considered herself a radical, which she sees as an essential component of her identity. But even though all of the women described themselves as independent and logical, they varied in their willingness to openly challenge authority and engage in conflict. Individual influences also existed in the form of external support from peers, role models, and mentors. The women noted a lack of peer inclusion from what they termed “the old boys club.” Glenna reported feeling isolated by her exclusion from professional contacts and support:

And all of that put a lot of pressure on women … Because there were like two or three of us and we’re like the fish out of water. Nobody understood.

Lena expressed her frustration about her male boss’s favoritism regarding her male colleagues:

It was extremely male-oriented. In the computer room there were two women out of the entire staff. We got no credibility at all. The men ran all of the applications and worked on the interface with the computer programs and we were left to be tape jockeys, mount disc tapes, and things like that.

While these feelings of exclusion from male groups in the workplace were almost unanimous, the ways in which they were handled varied. Ava sought support from peers by forming a lunch group with other lesbian women at work. Kirsten found her own mentors in order to gain support from more established figures in her field. Ava recalled the enormous impact of a female mentor in college. Lena noted that her older sister and brother-in-law helped her apply to college when the rest of her family was unwilling to do so. Yvette associated her love of math with her aunt, who was a math teacher.

While the participants reported exposure to similar messages regarding the incompatibility of gender, particularly femininity, and IT, each woman interpreted the message in her own way based upon her individual identity and individual influences. These factors also informed each woman’s decision to be “out” as a lesbian or bisexual woman in the IS workforce. Kristen reported that she was not “out” in the workplace out of fear for her career in a Southern, conservative company. Yvette, on the other hand, refuses to be “closeted” after being forced to lie about her sexuality earlier in her career. Lena, a relatively new employee at the time of the interview, was not “out” at work yet, but she intended to be at a later date. She reported that she usually “takes [her] time” with this decision and does so as a slow process. Also, being “out” to one individual or group at work does not necessarily mean that one is “out” to everyone in the workplace. Glenna, a professor, is “out” to her colleagues and is active within the gay community, but is not “out” to her students as a lesbian. Similarly, some participants indicated that they were “out” to their peers at work, but not upper management.

DISCUSSION: RESPONSE TO GENDER NORMS

The third dimension of the framework shows the variety of responses to gender norms. The women’s responses reveal four themes: double jeopardy, gender identity exception, visible and invisible minority status, and policy vs. culture of diversity. Double jeopardy refers to inhabiting more than one minority identity when one is both a gender minority as a woman in IT, and a sexual minority. This experience of identity intersectionality affected their responses to the gender norms to which they were exposed. As a Latina woman, Sol’s educational and IS workplace experiences were shaped by her gender, age, sexuality, and ethnicity.

It’s been a constant challenge in reassertion of my power with men, and women as well. And I think I get it both for being young, being Hispanic, for being a woman.
She felt that being a “multiple minority” gave guidance counselors, employers, and co-workers ample reasons to doubt her IS ability. As a lesbian she feels she is isolated from both men and women in the workplace. The men couldn’t relate to her as a woman and the women couldn’t relate to her because she isn’t heterosexual. She recalled the fear of accidentally mentioning her partner, knowing that her colleagues were uncomfortable with her sexuality. Sol’s response to double jeopardy was to refrain from discussing her personal life and family the way her heterosexual co-workers freely did.

Gender identity exception refers to not being held to traditional standards of femininity because of one’s sexuality. A tension between double jeopardy and gender identity exception could be seen in the narratives. Glenna identified this dichotomy by stating that it is difficult enough to be a woman in IT, much less a lesbian. Both identities bring one a minority status, serving to further alienate one from the normative white, straight male. On the other hand, she thinks it is easier to be a lesbian in IS than a straight woman

... because you already don’t fit the mold...

of conventional femininity. This suggests that because lesbian women do not participate in the gender dynamics of a heterosexual framework they are free from the submissive or sexualized views that are often imposed on heterosexual women. Similarly, Kristen believes that it is easier for a lesbian or bisexual woman to work with married men because their wives do not become jealous about long hours at work or business travel. She also mentioned that lesbian women can more easily participate in all-male golf outings and drinks events. In her view, lesbian women are not bound by the same expectations of femininity, and that it is more acceptable for them to exhibit typically masculine behavior such as aggression or ambition. Glenna, however, indicated that this gender identity exception is precisely why she does not “come out” to her students. While not being constrained to traditional feminine roles may make it easier to break barriers into male-dominated fields, she does not want to perpetuate the idea that only lesbian women are able to do so, and imply that straight women are not.

Visible and invisible minority status is a response that derives from the duality of being a visible minority as a woman and an invisible minority by virtue of a non-normative sexual identity. The “invisibility” of sexuality forces these women to confront a decision about “coming out” in the IS workplace and openly identifying as lesbian or bisexual. As Glenna observed:

You can hide the fact that you’re a lesbian, but you can’t hide the fact you’re a woman.

While Lena feels that her sexuality, although not explicitly stated, is obvious to others, this invisibility gives rise to a type of decision making and choice unique to sexual identities.

The theme of policy vs. culture of diversity captures participants’ observation that their decisions about and processes of coming out in the IS workplace depended on whether diversity was a real part of their workplace culture or simply a line in an anti-discrimination policy statement. Kristen spoke of working at an office with what she termed “southern, conservative values” that had just adopted gender and sexuality discrimination policies a few months prior to the interview. She believes that management did not “feel ready” to have such policies, but adopted them anyway in order to remain consistent with corporate domestic partner benefits. She also believes that it is easier to have gender minorities at lower levels so as to be isolated from management, citing a transgendered employee as an example. She also noted that while her large company might have welcoming policies, daily workplace behaviors are still rooted in the conservative values of a geographic region. This perception that behaviors rooted in local attitudes and values of a company transcend the content of corporate policies provides further insight into the variety of ways that lesbian and bisexual women respond as gender minorities in the IS workplace.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study add to our growing understanding of within-gender variation in factors that can explain the gender imbalance in the IS field. Through the voices of nine women who identify as gender minorities, within-gender variation was expressed in terms of varying exposure to, experience of and response to gender norms about the IS field. The theoretical constructs of individual identity, individual influences and environmental influences are used to characterize this variation. This work contributes to research through the theoretical insights it offers about gender minorities in the IS field. It provides opportunities to develop educational and workplace interventions by documenting the issues encountered by lesbian and bisexual women as they navigate the IS workplace.

A limitation of this research is the small sample from which the data was drawn. While this interpretive research does not endeavor to make population generalizations it, nevertheless, would be strengthened with a larger sample. Hence, future research will include additional interviews to enlarge the sample as well as survey data from LGBTQ individuals about gender stereotyping of IS skills and knowledge.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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REFERENCES