

Research Article

Sexual Minority and Employee Engagement: Implications for Job Satisfaction

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Despite the increasing attention given to the construct of work engagement in the workplace, it remains under-researched in the academic literature. Using Kahn's conceptual foundation of work engagement, this study examines whether high levels of work engagement lead to equally satisfying work experiences for members of the workforce regardless of their sexual orientation. Using the 2012 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), authors find that while active engagement at work had positive influence on employee job satisfaction regardless of one's sexual orientation, high level of engagement at work among LGBT employees was less strongly associated with job satisfaction than it was for those non-LGBT employees. Implications are discussed.

Keywords: Engagement, Job Satisfaction, Sexual Orientation, Discrimination

Work engagement, defined as the employment of oneself physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Kahn, 1990), has received much attention recently as having positive consequences for employees and organizations (Jeung, 2011; Saks, 2006). The benefits of being engaged include increased job satisfaction (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Similarly, research has shown that disengaged employees cost organizations a heavy financial burden (Frank, Finnegan, & Taylor, 2004). Therefore, work engagement is argued in the literature to cure many organizational problems (Banihani, Lews, & Syed, 2013).

Currently, the image of an ideal worker in most organizational studies is an “engaged” one, regardless of one’s social or cultural identities, to help improve the organization’s outcomes (Banihani et al., 2013; Wilson, 1998). This identity-neutral view of work engagement assumes that men and women, heterosexuals and gay men and lesbians, or white and those of racial minority can equally demonstrate their engagement in the workplace. Although empirical studies have not specifically examined the moderating role of employee’s sexual orientation on the relationship between work engagement and its outcomes, researchers in social demography indicate that diversity characteristics of group members may moderate the impact of work engagement on important work-related outcomes (Banihani et al., 2013; Milliken & Martins, 1996; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). We argue that ignoring sexual orientation in organizational research and theory contributes to the perpetuation of inequalities in the workplace.

The aim of this study, therefore, is to respond to the demand for incorporating sexual orientation into organizational research and to work engagement. The main question raised in this study is: Does sexual orientation influence work engagement and organizational outcomes?? Despite the recognition in the literature that there is no ‘one size fits all’ model of engagement and that the effects of work engagement may vary with one’s sexual orientation, to our knowledge no empirical studies have been conducted on the extent to which one’s engagement with work impacts employees of sexual minority. Furthermore, despite the increased attention to strengthening the principle of equal employment opportunity in the public sector for lesbian, gay bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals, most notably by the President Obama who declared the promotion of workplace diversity and workplace inclusion a

top priority through his recent Executive Order, research related to sexual orientation has been restricted by scarcity of appropriate data (Leppel, 2014). Therefore, understanding the impact of sexual orientation on the relationship between employee engagement and work-related outcomes will be one of the critical first steps for developing more inclusive human resource management practices. Previously there has been no comprehensive empirical research that examined the extent to which LGBT employees feel (dis)satisfied with their job compared their counterparts. As such, it stands to reason that understanding their responses to organizational attachment may help clarify the extent to which their LGBT status affects them emotionally. Therefore, this research is of particular practical importance to public managers who are concerned with employee satisfaction.

The study is structured as follows. In the next section, we start with the review of relevant literature on the work engagement and organizational outcome relationships, followed by a theoretical context of integrating sexual orientation as a moderator between work engagement and employee job satisfaction. We then explain the data and method used, describe the variables analyzed, and outline key findings. We close with both implications of the findings and recommendations for practice and future research.

Theory and Hypotheses

Work Engagement and Job Satisfaction

An important first step in understanding how sexual orientation influences the relationship between work engagement and job satisfaction is to determine the direct theoretical linkages between work engagement and its proposed outcomes. To explain these relationships, we turn to several extant theories in social and organizational psychology.

Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that individuals have an inner drive to hold all our attitudes and beliefs in harmony and avoid disharmony (or dissonance) (Aronson, 1969; Festinger, 1957; also see Blanchard, Welbourne, Gilmore, & Bullock, 2009). According to Festinger (1957), we hold many cognitions about the world and ourselves; when they clash, resulting in a state of tension known as cognitive dissonance. As the experience of dissonance is unpleasant, we are motivated to reduce or eliminate it, and achieve consonance (i.e., agreement). In the workplace, employees want their behaviors and attitudes to be aligned. The basic premise is that because attitudes are usually easier to change than behaviors, employees will change their attitudes to justify their behavior (Blanchard et al., 2009). For example, employees with high level of engagement in work by taking ownership of projects and creatively approaching their tasks are more likely than others to justify their behavior by believing that their jobs are both “good” and “worth the extra effort” (Blanchard et al., 2009, p. 115).

Similarly, in his pioneering research on followership theory, Kelley (1992) explains that active engagement in work role fulfills important personal needs for employees as it provides for comradeship with co-workers, satisfying one’s social needs (Howell & Costley, 2006). In addition, by actively engaging in one’s work, employees are more likely to identify with the leader, which enhances one’s self-concepts. This reinforcement of one’s self-concept then helps satisfy individual needs for self-esteem. While research surrounding followership theory is relatively sparse, Howell and Costley (2006) suggest that active work engagement is likely to result in increased motivation, satisfaction, and feelings of empowerment (also see Macey & Schneider, 2008; Jin & McDonald, forthcoming). Several empirical works support the argument that engagement is a causal antecedent of several vocationally relevant outcomes, including job

satisfaction (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Saks, 2006). Therefore, based on the research evidence and conceptual work available in the literature, the following hypothesis is explored:

H₁: Work engagement is positively associated with job satisfaction.

The Moderating Role of Sexual Orientation

Research shows that sexual minority routinely face prejudice and discrimination in the workplace, and these events negatively impact the way they experience work and their overall well-being, such as psychological distress (Leppel, 2014; Waldo, 1999) and depression (Smith & Ingram, 2004). In analyzing the sexual orientation-job satisfaction relationship, Leppel (2014) uses heterosexism, which is defined as an ideological system that “denies, denigrates and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community” (Herek, 1990, p. 89). Heterosexism includes a wide range of discriminatory behaviors from being denied promotion to being verbally or physically abused or having one’s workspace vandalized (Sears & Mallory, 2011). Various research venues indicate evidence of heterosexism (Elmslie & Tebaldi, 2007; Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002; Herek, 2002). For example, Hebl et al.’s (2002) experimental field study found that lesbian and gay job applicants encountered greater hostility than did job applicants who were presumed to be heterosexual.

The concept rests on the notion that heterosexuality is the norm and is the right way of living. According to Foucault (1984), homosexuality is viewed as a category of knowledge rather than a discovered or discrete identity constructed through discourse. This dominant discourse of heterosexuality then suppresses the behavior of LGBT individuals from promoting their own identities in the workplace. Therefore, those who cannot adhere to the heterosexual norm may run the risk of social exclusion, which can lead to poor perceptions of interactional and procedural justice and high frequencies of psychological contract violations (Leppel, 2014). These negative perceptions are likely to lead to reduced job satisfaction, compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Waldo, 1999). Thus, the following hypothesis is examined in this study:

H₂: Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender employees are more likely than heterosexual employees to report low job satisfaction.

Does sexual orientation moderate the relationship between work engagement and job satisfaction? While numerous definitions of moderators have appeared (e.g., Korman, 1974; Terborg, 1980), most agree that moderators affect the nature of the relationship between two other variables, without necessarily being correlated with either of them (Howell, Dorfman, & Kerr, 1986). To explain the moderating role of sexual orientation between work engagement and job satisfaction, one must first understand the antecedents of work engagement. We first turn to Kahn’s (1990) theory of work engagement, which is regarded by many as the foundation for the work engagement literature (Bakker, 2009; Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Rothbard, 2001; Saks 2006). Kahn identifies three psychological antecedents that influence the level of engagement at work – psychological meaningfulness, safety, and availability. He argues that people are more likely to engage in the workplace when they perceive their job to be meaningful, feel psychologically safe, and have a high sense of having the physical, emotional, or psychological resources to personally engage at a particular moment.

With respect to psychological meaningfulness, Kahn (1990, p. 704) refers to it as “a feeling that one is receiving a return on investments of one’s self in a currency of physical, cognitive, or emotional energy.” Meaningfulness at work occurs when employees feel valued by their

organization (Kahn, 1990; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2010). According to social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), every organization is organized by systems of social group-based hierarchies in which at least one social group has dominance over others. It is in this hierarchy that some individuals (i.e. those who identify as LGBT) may experience disproportionate privilege and power due to their membership in a social group that has low social status within the organization. Individuals with higher levels of social dominance orientation, therefore, display discriminatory behavior towards the group to which they do not belong (Sidanius, 1993). The question, then, is whether the so called “heterosexism” exists in today’s workplace. Research studies have demonstrated the existence of sexual stigma (i.e., the shared knowledge of society’s negative regard for any behavior, identity, or community that is not heterosexual), heterosexism (the cultural ideology that perpetuates sexual stigma), and sexual prejudice (negative attitudes based on sexual orientation), as well as the effects that such attitudes have on the everyday experiences of LGBT employees (Herek, 2002). Therefore, it can be said that LGBT individuals and their characteristics are less valued and regarded as less useful than heterosexuals. As a result, several scholars have argued homosexuals will expect lower job satisfaction because their workplace often does not allow them to present more of their selves to the jobs (e.g., Drydakis, 2015). Taking this into account, heterosexuals are in general expected to have better status and better influence than homosexuals in work environment which makes them to have fuller confidence and higher expectations (and thus higher level of consistency in their beliefs) that their dedication to work will lead to high level of job satisfaction (Festinger, 1962). Subsequently, understanding the challenges that come from the existence of sexual stigma in the workplace, it is reasonable to assume that those of sexual minority will have lower expectations that their engagement at work will lead to equally satisfying work experience compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Also, given the empirical evidence that gay men and lesbians are more likely to report lower job satisfaction than heterosexuals (e.g., Drydakis, 2015), it is not out of line to expect that the relationship between work engagement and job satisfaction will be weaker for homosexuals.

Furthermore, psychological safety is referred to as “feeling able to show and employ one’s self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career” (Kahn, 1990, p. 708). Similarly, it is argued that situations that are characterized by more psychological safety allow people to be more engaged (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). As mentioned earlier, research studies ranging from population surveys and statistics to experimental studies and self-report questionnaires provide support for the existence of heterosexism in the workplace (e.g., Blandford, 2003; Herek 2002). In fact, according to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2011), the number of discrimination charges received during the 2010 fiscal year increased by seven percent from the previous year. Lim and Cortina (2005) argue that these mistreatments and workplace deviances are often directed at individuals of sexual minority. As for psychological availability, the final element in Kahn’s theory, which refers to “the sense of having the physical, emotional, or psychological resources to personally engage at a particular moment” (Kahn 1990, p. 714), Kahn posits that engaging in role performance depends on how employees cope with the various demands of both work and non-work aspects of their lives. However, organizations are built on the image of the “traditional worker”, an image which is mostly emulated by heterosexuals (Acker 1990). Although some units of government are making progress in supporting LGBT rights, unfortunately, there has been no consistent set of policies or systems in place to assure universal protection of LGBT workers (Norman-Major & Becker, 2013). For example, while various federal laws (e.g., Civil Rights Act of 1964) provide protection against discrimination based on race, sex, religion or national origin, or even disability and age, there is no parallel federal law prohibiting discrimination in the public or private sector on the basis of sexual orientation (Norman-Major & Becker, 2013). Based on the theoretical argument and extant empirical evidence, we explore the following hypothesis:

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Variables

Variables	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	Unit
Job Satisfaction	2.476	0.611	1	3	Index score
Supervisor	0.800	0.402	0	1	Non-supervisor = 1 Supervisor = 0
Gender	0.043	0.495	0	1	Female = 1; Male = 0
Age	2.420	0.978	1	4	Under 40 = 1; 40-49 = 2; 50 and older = 3
Federal Tenure	2.210	0.802	1	3	5 or fewer years = 1; 6-10 years = 2; 11 – 20 years = 3; 20 or more years = 4
Intention to Leave	0.300	0.156	0	1	Leaving = 1
LGBT	0.030	0.173	0	1	LGBT=1
Active Engagement	2.679	0.397	1	3	Index score

H₃: The positive relationship between work engagement and job satisfaction will be less strong among lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender employees, as opposed to heterosexual men and women.

Methodology

Data

The data used in this study come from the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) 2012 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) (OPM 2012). For the first time since it began as the Federal Human Capital Survey, the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey attempted to reach all permanent full- and part-time civilian federal employees covering 97 percent of the executive branch workforce. A total of 687,687 eligible respondents completed rendering a response rate of 46 percent, making it the largest and most diverse response to the FEVS to date.

Most importantly, this survey marks the first time the Office of Personnel Management added an LGBT identifier to a survey of federal employees, which provides a wealth of data on employment patterns, job satisfaction, perceptions of discrimination and turnover intentions, resulting in a sample of over 13,599 LGBT federal employees to study, not counting those who "preferred not to identify" themselves as LGBT (65,562 cases) and missing cases (78,686 cases). This LGBT release contains the first comprehensive national data on LGBT public employees (Norman-Major & Becker, 2013), which makes our analysis critical for future studies.

The FEVS survey was further condensed into several constructs by scaling similar questions. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of variables used in the study. The scaled variables were all mean centered in the actual analysis in order to reduce multicollinearity in the interaction terms.

Dependent Variables

The survey items did not contain a tested scale for job satisfaction, so we utilize a proxy index for this measure. An additive index was developed with three items ($\alpha = 0.72$) capturing satisfaction with job, pay, and organization: (1) "Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?" (2) "Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your pay?" and (3) "Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your organization?"

Independent Variables

Work engagement is measured by an index of five items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .63$). While they generally reflect the degree of one's engagement at work (e.g., Kelley, 1992), specifically, two items tap employees' physical engagement (e.g., Kahn, 1990): "My talents are used well in the workplace," and "The people I work with cooperate to get the job done. Two other items measured cognitive engagement (e.g., Kahn, 1990; Rothbard, 2001): "I know how my work relates to the agency's goals and priorities," and "I am held accountable for achieving results." And one item taps emotional engagement (e.g., Harter et al., 2002; Kahn, 1990): "I am constantly looking ways to do my job better."

Supervisory status, gender, age, tenure in federal agency, turnover intention and sexual orientation are included as control variables. As briefly described earlier, due to the OPM's strategy for ensuring confidentiality, some of the demographic characteristics were suppressed to prevent identification of individuals. Supervisory status variable, initially with two separate leadership groups between manager and executive, was given as a dummy variable (1=manage/supervisor/executive, 0=non-managerial). Gender (female=1), turnover intention (leaving=1), and sexual orientation (LGBT=1) were included as dummy variables.

Findings

Table 2 presents the results of hierarchical regression model. The demographic variables in step 1 of the job satisfaction model show interesting relationships with the dependent variable. Results show that those in the non-managerial positions were less likely than supervisors to report high levels of job satisfaction ($p < .001$). Female workers were more likely than males to report high levels of job satisfaction ($p < .001$). Age was also a positive predictor of job satisfaction ($p < .001$). Tenure, turnover intention, and sexual orientation were negatively related. For example, an increase in tenure in the federal agency was associated with decrease in job satisfaction ($p < .001$), while those with intention to leave were more likely than others to report low levels of job satisfaction ($p < .001$). LGBT employees were more likely than non-LGBT employees to report low levels of job satisfaction and thus support hypothesis 2.

As hypothesized, work engagement had significant positive effect on employee job satisfaction ($p < .001$) (hypothesis 1). Specifically, one unit increase in work engagement was associated with .852 unit increase in job satisfaction scale (see step 2). Adding work engagement in step 2 created slight changes among the effects of demographic variables. LGBT employees remain less satisfied than their heterosexual counterparts, but the coefficient becomes smaller by more than half. This indicates that some of the dissatisfaction reported by LGBT employees can be attributable to low work engagement (Pitts, 2009). Once work engagement was controlled, the dissatisfaction is reduced, signifying the relevant role of work engagement. Other demographic variables also show slight changes. Managerial authority, tenure, and turnover intention all remain negatively associated, but their coefficients are reduced to -.043, -.009, and -.312,

Table 2. Hierarchical Moderated Regression Results
(Dependent Variable: Job Satisfaction)

Independent Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	<i>t</i> value	<i>p</i>
Step 1: Demographic Variables				
Supervisor	-0.125	0.002	-62.214	0.000
Gender	0.012	0.002	7.275	0.000
Age	0.005	0.001	4.171	0.000
Tenure	-0.016	0.001	-21.145	0.000
Turnover intention	-0.526	0.002	-304.99	0.000
Sexual Orientation	-0.059	0.005	-11.713	0.000
Partial <i>F</i> value = 16,346.968*; $R^2 = .163$; $N = 503,828$				
Step 2: Work Engagement				
Supervisor	-0.043	0.002	-25.156	0.000
Gender	-0.003	0.001	-2.138	0.033
Age	-0.014	0.001	-15.245	0.000
Tenure	-0.009	0.001	-14.017	0.000
Turnover Intention	-0.312	0.002	-205.41	0.000
Sexual Orientation	-0.019	0.004	-4.452	0.000
Work Engagement	0.852	0.002	460.006	0.000
Partial <i>F</i> value = 211,605*; $R^2 = .411$; $\Delta R^2 = .248$				
Step 3: Moderating Effect				
Supervisor	-0.043	0.002	-25.159	0.000
Gender	-0.003	0.001	-2.154	0.031
Age	-0.014	0.001	-15.258	0.000
Tenure	-0.009	0.001	-14.000	0.000
Turnover Intention	-0.312	0.002	-205.41	0.000
Sexual Orientation	-0.020	0.004	-4.724	0.000
Work Engagement	0.853	0.002	454.217	0.000
Work Engagement x Sexual Orientation	-0.029	0.010	-2.818	0.005
Partial <i>F</i> value = 7.944*; $R^2 = .411$; $\Delta R^2 = .000$				

* < .001

respectively. More interestingly, when taking into account the impact of work engagement, the direction of relationship changed for gender and age; female workers were less likely than males to report high job satisfaction and an increase was associated with lower job satisfaction.

In step 3 of the model, we added an interactive term. A statistically significant result would indicate that the effect of work engagement on job satisfaction is moderated by the employee's sexual orientation. The result indicates that sexual orientation moderates the relationship between work engagement and job satisfaction, and that its effect on job satisfaction was less positive among LGBT employees, supporting hypothesis 3.

In summary, because the interaction effect is statistically significant, the regression coefficient ($\beta = .853$) of work engagement represents its conditional effect on job satisfaction when

employees are heterosexuals (i.e., sexual orientation = 0), controlling for all other variables. The effect of interaction, depicted in Appendix, shows that while work engagement had generally positive effect on job satisfaction regardless of one's sexual orientation, the effect was stronger among non-LGBT employees.

Discussion and Limitations

Despite the evidence of heteronormativity in the workplace (Pringle 2008), no direct studies have been conducted on examining the differential effects of work engagement regarding employee's sexual orientation. Additionally, most of the work engagement studies focus predominantly on how it affects organizational performance as its primary outcome. While we recognize a few studies that focused on its impact on psychological affectivity, findings were mixed (e.g., Alarcon & Edwards, 2011; Thian, Kannusamy, & Klainin-Yobas, 2013). As mentioned in Lewis and Pitts' (2009) study, lack of data involving LGBT individuals in the public sector has been a primary obstacle. This study responds to these needs, analyzing the effects of work engagement on job satisfaction from the lens of sexual orientation. The results of this study add to recent research that indicates the importance of social identities for understanding the effects of work engagement on organizational outcomes (Banihani et al., 2013; Pringle, 2008). Moreover, this study is the first large-N study using public sector survey data, which fielded identifying information about LGBT employees.

There are three primary findings that warrant highlighting. First, work engagement matters in the workplace. In each model (i.e., step) in which it was included, work engagement was positively and significantly related to job satisfaction. Second, the moderated regression model demonstrated that work engagement affects job satisfaction more positively and significantly among heterosexual employees than it does LGBT employees, resulting in lower job satisfaction for those of sexual minority. It can be seen that the psychological conditions that lead to work engagement can be more emotionally challenging on LGBT employees because of organizational culture and the belief that heterosexual characteristics should be emulated by all workers (Banihani et al., 2013).

It is expected that, when other things are equal, engaged workers will generally gain greater satisfaction than those who are less engaged or completely disengaged from work. However, in reality, those "other things" are not always equal. As suggested in our findings, the impact of work engagement in regards to job satisfaction differs with one's sexual orientation. A related research by Banihani et al. (2013) has shown that work engagement is a gendered construct where it is easier for men to be engaged than women. These findings together suggest that one's social identity is an important construct that needs to be examined in future engagement studies. For public sector organizations to be successful in both recruiting and retaining talented workers who are sexual minority, they must look beyond their salary and pecuniary incentives which are unavoidably lower than their private sector competitors (Ingraham, Selden, & Moynihan, 2000). Instead, they should focus more on strengthening the inclusiveness of their human resource management practices by making the process of work engagement a psychologically, cognitively, and physically safer experience for LGBT employees. In addition, for organizations to remain competitive in retaining talented employees, more efforts on understanding the drivers of job satisfaction, other than performance, are needed. More efforts on understanding how work engagement affects employees of biological and social minority and how leadership can reduce the potential gap in job satisfaction would further clarify their contributions in the workplace.

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged that point to the direction for future research. First, despite the large sample size which helps control for many threats to validity (Yang & Kassekert, 2009), the cross-sectional nature of the data still poses concerns about causality. Although engagement literature generally supports the direction of relationship examined in the present study, several researchers also showed that job satisfaction can be an antecedent of work engagement. For example, scholars of organizational support theory (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011) argue that employees who are satisfied with their job through perceived organizational support develop felt obligation to 'return the favor' by engaging in their work. Thus, longitudinal data will be able to provide a more nuanced approach to determining their causal relationship.

The second limitation comes from using a secondary dataset. The scales for job satisfaction and work engagement for this study were developed post hoc. Although values for Cronbach's alpha below even .7 can realistically be expected and acceptable when dealing with psychological constructs (Kline, 1999), using proven scales (e.g., Schaufeli et al., 2002) would allow readers to compare with other studies and greatly enhance the understanding of engagement and job satisfaction relationship and the role of sexual orientation in the workplace.

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