AUTHENTICITY IN THE C-SUITE:
PERSONAL AND ORGANIZATION EFFECTS OF LATE CAREER DECISIONS TO COME OUT

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ABSTRACT

Most organizations today understand the benefits of developing diverse and inclusive management teams. Although the literature is replete with studies on diversity management, much of it focused on sexual orientation in the workplace, specific research on the experiences of gays and lesbians in the executive suite is almost non-existent. To address this gap, we conducted an empirical study focused on decisions by gay and lesbian senior executives to come out in their organizations at late career stages. Phenomenological interviews with 25 upper echelons for-profit and nonprofit U.S. executives illustrate the personal and organizational effects of coming out at advanced career stages. Results revealed prioritization of professional vs. personal identity both before and after coming out, emphasized the recursive nature of coming out in the executive suite and suggested positive organizational outcomes of personal intentional change when gay and lesbian executives leverage their status to promote policy and culture reforms.

Keywords: Sexual Orientation; Inclusion; Identity; Success Factors; Stigmatization

INTRODUCTION

Although increasingly chronicled in the popular press (Black Enterprise, 2011; Curve, 2011; HBR, 2011), only recently has the academic literature addressed the experiences and unique challenges of openly gay and lesbian employees (Badget, 2001; Beatty & Kirby, 2006; Bell, 2006). Empirical studies remain scant, however, in particular with respect to senior executive gays. To our knowledge, only one (very recent) theoretical article has focused on this understudied population (Fassinger, Shullman, & Stevenson, 2010). Despite an increasing number of states and U.S. Fortune 500 companies that have granted gay employees same-sex partner benefits and policies (Ragins et al., 2007), little is known about their “lived lives” in positions of authority in for-profit and non-profit organizations.

Recognizing the potential benefits to practice of a better understanding of the experiences of homosexual upper echelon executives, we undertook an inductive inquiry that involved in-depth
phenomenological interviews with 25 who made the decision to come out in the workplace at late stages of their careers, long after establishing themselves as successful and esteemed members of their organizations. The findings of what, to our knowledge, is the first such study, provides insight into their experiences of coming out and being out in corporate America. Our findings should be of interest to corporate management concerned with developing inclusive workplace policies, improving workplace circumstances for all minorities, and accelerating the move towards greater workplace diversity (Griffith & Hebl, 2002) at a time when diversity initiatives are lauded at work, but not always practiced in deed (Hebl et al., 2002).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Discrimination based on sexual orientation is pervasive in today’s workplace (Cunningham, Sartore, & McCullough, 2010; Pichler, Varma, & Bruce, 2010, Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). Despite increased acceptance by society as a whole, sexual minorities experience continued workplace hostility (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2009; Rostosky, Riggle, Jorne, & Miller, 2009). The specific negative effects of heterosexism can be seen during the hiring process (Hebl et al., 2002; Weichselbaumer, 2003), in the work environment and in workers’ ability to collaborate with others to achieve collective action (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009).

Today in 29 states a gay or lesbian employee can be fired based on sexual orientation (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2011) and debate ensues over a proposed national Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) that would at minimum classify lesbian and gay employees in a protected class. It is not surprising, therefore, that the literature suggests disclosing one’s sexual orientation in a prevalent heterosexist work environment is a stressful experience for gay employees (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Ragins et al., 2007; Woods & Lucas, 1993). While attitudes, understanding, and acceptance of gay employees changes, albeit slowly, for the better, disclosing sexual orientation remains a pivotal, often career changing experience (Day & Schoenrade, 2000).

In spite of the risks, there are individual and organizational rewards for those who choose to come out. Research suggests that as executives who are gay realize the full impact of authenticity, others play a critical role in their self-development (Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). One of the most fundamental human motivations is, after all, the need to belong and enjoy social support (Griffith & Hebl, 2002) – a motivation with profound implications in the workplace. Research substantiates that gay workers report less job discrimination and more favorable treatment from both coworkers and superiors when organizations have written nondiscrimination policies, actively show support for gay activities, and offer diversity training that specifically includes gay issues (Griffith & Hebl, 2002) – i.e., when purposeful organizational efforts have been made to reduce the stigma associated with homosexual orientation.

Stigma

A vast literature on stigma has accreted over the years, much of it focused on minorities. This literature, using a variety of theories – expectancy theory, attribution theory and social cognition theory among them (Jones et al., 1984) – has amply demonstrated that people are motivated by a desire for social acceptance. A substantial body of evidence has demonstrated that people
conform to the judgments and expectations of relevant referents to social sanctions (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Reno, Cialdini, & Kallgren, 1993). Sexual stigma refers to "negative regard, inferior status, and relative powerlessness that society collectively accords to any non-heterosexual behavior, identity, relationship, or community" (Herek, 2007: 906).

Goffman (1974: 42), describes the tension subjects of stigma experience when deciding “to display or not display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when and where.” Laying the foundation for a theory of impression management in his seminal book, Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Goffman proposed the notion that individuals are actors who perform on two stages, front and back. On the front stage, where, as he proposed, , the “action” takes place, people present their “ideal” selves using impression management tools and techniques, while on the backstage they may step out of character, revealing their real identities. Partitioning one’s world, Goffman argues, “into forbidden, civil, and back places establishes the going price for revealing or concealing and the significance of being known about or not know about” (Goffman, 1974: 67). When looking at stigma from a sexual orientation perspective, Herek et al. (2009) suggest that internalized stigma (homophobia), felt stigma (masking or covering) and enacted sexual stigma (blatant verbal and physical assaults) drive gay employees decisions about coming out.

Research has shown that stigma affects identity, behaviors, cognition and affect (Deaux & Ethier, 1998, Levin & van Laar, 2006; Miller & Major, 2000). Unsurprisingly, gay workers have reported a distancing from coworkers (Ragins, 2004), a disinclination to participate in work related social activities (Woods & Lucas, 1993) and concerns about current position and career (cf. review by Ragins, 2004). Yet Woods (Woods & Lucas, 1993) suggests that, although gay employees often resist disclosure to avoid the myriad perceived negative consequences of doing so, some reach a point in their lives at which the value of being whole, i.e., authentic, supersedes concerns about career, salary or position.

**Authenticity**

Although long and widely heralded by psychologists and sociologists – not to mention Shakespeare (“To thine own self be true,” Hamlet) and Kierkegarde (“to be that self which one truly is”, 1859) –, Harter (2002) observed that “there is no single, coherent body of literature on authentic self-behavior, no bedrock of knowledge” (p. 382) Largely non-empirical, the literature on authenticity, is, however, somewhat consistent with respect to the general notion of what constitutes it.

Authenticity has been defined as not only “owning one’s personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, preferences, or beliefs,” but also acting on them (Harter, 2002) (emphasis ours). Not an either/or condition but one of “more or less” (Erickson, 1995), authenticity is achieved, according to Luthans and Avolio (2003), through self-awareness, self-acceptance and authentic actions and relationships. Authenticity is not “…reflected in a compulsion to be one’s true self, Kernis (2003) has suggested, but rather in the free and natural expression of core feelings, motives and inclinations.” All the while, however, an authentic individual is mindful of the outcomes of his/her behavior and how it blends with that of others (Kernis, 2003).
Being “authentic” can have dramatic consequences – even to the most confident of individuals (Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005). As with any invisible minority, therefore, gay executives must be sensitive to the effects of coming out in professional relationships and must constantly evaluate and reevaluate the implications of doing so.

The literature suggests that authenticity is indeed relational (Eagly, 2005). In particular, Ilies et al. (2005: 382) posit that relational authenticity “involves striving for achieving openness and truthfulness” in a relationship. A test of a leader’s authenticity, therefore, is whether followers accept his/her beliefs as their own (Avolio, Luthans, & Walumbwa, 2004). Similarly, Sparrowe (1993) argues that a leader can’t achieve authenticity unless others play a constructive role in the self. If engaging others is a requirement of an authentic leader, then those who are hiding a stigma must disclose it (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). This suggests that disclosure as a purposive act promotes authenticity. But executives who are gay face a unique challenge of managing their interactions as an invisible minority (Ragins et al., 2007) and Crocker, Major and Steele (1998) argue that, as such, they are burdened by not knowing how their disclosure will effect the way others view and or treat them.

Recognizing definitional confusion about authenticity and acknowledging a resurgence of interest in it by the positive-psychology movement, Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis and Joseph (2008) developed a scale to measure it as an individual difference variable, factoring it as “authentic living,” “self-alienation” and “accepting external influence” and finding it robustly correlated with subjective well being, psychological well-being and self-esteem. And others (Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Masaya & Masahiro, 2005) have developed and tested similar scales reporting analogous results – strong correlations between authenticity, self-esteem and social and psychological well-being.

The link between these constructs, reflecting a person-centered approach to the notion of authenticity, seems well supported. Emphasizing the social, interpersonal dimension of authenticity, Schmid (2001) has positioned it as “the opposite of alienation (p. 230), and labeled it an “encounter attitude” (p. 217). “In the context of the anthropological meaning of ‘person’ from a dialogical perspective,” Schmid observes, authenticity “designates a human being as the genuine author of his or her relationships, both to him or herself (openness) and to other persons (transparency).”

The literatures on authenticity, stigma, and impression management converge, amplifying, but not satisfying our understanding about the issues related to and challenges involved in the disclosure of sexual orientation by senior gay and lesbian executives. We needed, for that, to turn to the men and women who have done it.

METHODS

Methodological Approach

We conducted an exploratory, inductive inquiry based on phenomenological interviews to generate a grounded theory, a research approach praised by Elsbach (2005: 9) referencing Weick (1979) as “…rich, effective in describing process and relevant to understanding real life
phenomena.” As described by Van Maanen (1983: 9), “the data developed by qualitative methods, such as we used, originate when a researcher figuratively puts brackets around a temporal and spatial domain of the social world” – in our case, organizations in which gays and lesbians lead -- and generates raw materials “in vivo.” We followed analytic strategies recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2008) – a rigorous phased process that involves the constant comparison of data collected and analyzed concurrently and the principles of theoretical sampling, the selection and inclusion of research participants on the basis of ideas and themes yielded by data already in hand.

**Sample**

The sample consisted of 25 US gay or lesbian executives in senior positions in US for profit and nonprofit organizations in six states. All had revealed their sexual identity at late stages in their careers. Participants were selected based on their P&L responsibility or organizational positions on executive or chief executive teams. Informants ranged in age from 40 to 60 years of age. Thirteen were male of which two were African American. Of 12 females, 11 were Caucasian and one was Hispanic. Three (all female) were CEOs, twelve were C-suite executives and the remainder held positions of director or above. Five participants worked for nonprofit organizations and the remainder in the private sector. Thirteen were associated with service industries of accounting, banking, and insurance. All were college graduates and 17 had earned advanced degrees. On average, their careers exceeded 27 years.

**TABLE 1: PERSONAL DATA ON RESPONDENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Male (13)</th>
<th>Female (12)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Manufacturing</td>
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<td><strong>Job Function</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Accounting</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>HR</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Marketing</td>
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<td>Finance</td>
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<td>c-suite</td>
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<td>CEO</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Avg. Tenure and Education</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Years on the Job</td>
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<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Masters Degree and above</td>
<td>8</td>
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The sample did not include individuals who self-identified as bisexual or transgendered, or executives who had not disclosed their sexual orientation in the workplace.

Respondents were selected from the principle researcher’s personal and professional networks and by using a snowball sampling technique in which potential informants were nominated by previous interviewees.
Data Collection

The interviews were conducted during a four month period from July to October 2011. We used semi-structured open-ended questions in interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes. Seventeen interviews were conducted face-to-face, either in the office of the executive or at a location convenient for him/her and eight were conducted by telephone. All interviews were digitally recorded. Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, each respondent was informed a priori about the nature of the research and assured of confidentiality. Participants were informed of and provided the option to stop the interview at any time with no negative consequence. None did.

Interviews focused on the experiences of the executive prior to, while and after enacting disclosure of his/her sexual identity in the workplace. We asked open ended questions and used probes to elicit rich, detailed narratives about specific events and experiences. Informants were first asked to review their personal and professional backgrounds and to elaborate on work experiences prior to and after coming out. We asked them to recall and recount specific events, providing elaborate detail rather than rendering opinions. These events included those transpiring in the workplace proper or outside of it with co-workers or extra-organizational actors engaged in a professional capacity. Informants provided vibrant stories of both positive and negative events and interactions before first coming out, while coming out and after coming out. Most respondents provided details of multiple events. After capturing these stories, we asked respondents to provide examples, again by recounting specific events and experiences, of post-disclosure change in their professional lives. We concluded by inviting them to share any ideas, feelings, beliefs and opinions about coming out and being out in the workplace.

Data Analysis

As appropriate for the type of exploratory research we conducted, data collection and analysis were conducted concomitantly. Each audio recording was listened to repeatedly, and also the transcription of it read several times and rigorously coded. Following the recommendations of Corbin and Strauss (2008), we conducted three stages of detailed coding – open, axial and selective. Open coding requires the researcher to examine the data line by line to identify fragments of it with potential meaning. These fragments were captured, tentatively labeled and sorted with similar fragments from other interviews. Our data yielded 1156 such pieces of data which, during the open coding process, were sorted in 73 initial categories. As categories were developed, properties and dimensions of them were articulated and categories were continually compared to one another. In a second stage of coding, by comparing, contrasting and identifying relationships between categories (or concepts), patterns and themes emerged from the data. During this phase our categories were reduced to 27. In the third stage, selective coding, key themes were refined to yield our findings. We concluded analysis by focusing on seven themes from which our findings derived: motivation, personal growth, organizational transformation, community support, business first, privilege and opportunity. Throughout data analysis we produced detailed memoranda to capture our reflection on and management of emerging ideas and themes.
FINDINGS

We conducted, to our knowledge, the first study specifically focused on openly gay and lesbian U.S. senior executives to reveal experiences of coming out and being out in their organizations in mid to late career stages. Our data derived from semi-structured interviews with 25 senior leaders employed by both for-profit and non-profit sector organizations. The data revealed clear patterns across sectors irrespective of industry, job focus, professional experience or gender. All of our respondents held longstanding leadership positions in their organizations and had attained them prior to coming out. None had been openly gay community activists. Without exception, coming out at a later career stage was an intentional act. Most respondents described their coming out as motivated by a desire for self-actualization, the betterment of organizations to which they felt great loyalty and commitment and a desire to support the gay/lesbian community. Coming out was described not as a single intentional act, but a recursive one, repeatedly re-enacted in response to environmental dynamics. For our gay and lesbian leaders, coming out constituted personal intentional change while being out was viewed as an opportunity to promote positive social change. In summary:

• Gay and lesbian executives who come out at mid to late career stages are motivated to do so by a desire to self-actualize, by loyalty and commitment to the betterment their organizations and by a desire to support the gay/lesbian community.

• Gay/lesbian executives prioritize professional identity over gay/lesbian identity – both before and after coming out.

• Coming out is not a single event, but a recursive process.

• Coming out promotes positive personal change for executives; Being out promotes social and organizational change.

Self Actualization

Most of the executives in our sample described coming out in their organizations as “liberating” after subjugating their gay/lesbian identities to career advancement in earlier years. All of them had since achieved considerable professional success and community standing, serving at director or higher levels in their organizations. They described coming out (both initially and recursively) as an important effort to self-actualize and to achieve “wholeness” after years of non-disclosure. Many described frustration and/or tension in early years as they avoided revealing their sexual orientations. As one interviewee, a successful Internal Audit Executive, revealed,

“… even though I was out personally and out to my family I was completely closeted at work… even after being with the firm for 10 or 11 years (and) made partner... Some companies were ahead of the curve but not us. When we first started kind of an internal underground LGBT organization it was all secret email, it was mostly meeting at bars, socializing...Even though I had reached that pinnacle that you’re supposed to reach within our organization, I was still concerned that I’d be labeled, (that it would be) the
first adjective that people would think of me, that it still would limit my opportunities…I just wasn’t comfortable enough of myself in the workplace.”

Executives talked of being “tired,” “worn out” and “frustrated” by hiding their gay/lesbian orientations from otherwise trusted colleagues – sometimes for decades. They described the awkwardness of being asked about wives, husbands and children and the challenges encountered at company events attended by family members. As a Senior Vice President for a fortune 100 bank observed, “…there are people that don’t feel that gay relationships are real relationships. So they might be accepting of gays, but you wouldn’t bring your boyfriend or girlfriend to a black-tie event.” Another, describing an experience at such an event soon after joining his firm, recalled being asked how his spouse was adjusting to the recent move. “…They don’t even ask if I’m married. They see the ring on my finger or they just make an assumption about you… I don’t respond by (saying) “Well I’m gay.” I respond by “Well my partner is here and he hasn’t got a job yet.” Coming out allowed the executives to project not only their well-earned and highly prized professional identities, but their personal identities as well.

Organizational Contribution

As perceived by gay executives, not only did they personally benefit from coming out, but so did their companies. Uniformly, interviewees expressed that coming out helped to enlighten and inform organizational members and to sophisticate policies and procedures which, in turn, they believed, bettered their organizations and promoted fair and just treatment of others. Consequently, our respondents viewed themselves as organizational change agents. Some served on formal LGBT committees in their organizations or on various HR panels, others were called upon as occasional, often informal, policy consultants. More commonly they took advantage of their “privileged” executive status to advance positive organizational reform by simply and subtly “raising awareness.” They sometimes did this by using themselves as examples and gently “reminding” others of their orientation. “Sometimes in the boardroom, one respondent explained, “I have to remind them that we have all kinds of employees here and kind of point to myself.” As an example, she offered this story:

“…My partner and I got married legally in New Hampshire last August and …and our annual offsite board meeting was in September. I took with me our marriage license to give to the staff person who registers marriages and she said we can’t change your status yet to married because the system won’t allow us to do that because it’s not yet been recognized. And so when we were sitting in the board meeting we all go around the room as a board from all over the country and talk about …what’s happened in your life over the course of the year that you want to share with the board and I said you know I want to share that (my partner) and I celebrated our 10th anniversary we were married in New Hampshire last month and here is my marriage license for you now to put in the file on hold until we create parity in (this organization). So that was a pretty profound moment when I handed over a copy of my legal marriage license so that at some point there could be equality in the system”

Another respondent poignantly described an interaction with an employee who, having learned that the executive was gay, “prayed with (his) pastor” over it and then announced he would
rather quit than work for a homosexual because “it’s evil, it’s wrong, it’s against God’s law.” The executive said, “But... good people are hard to find in a company. So I actually told him that I thought he was a great programmer, I understood where he was at and what he was thinking about, (and) would he allow me to find another programming group for him to go work at so that he didn’t have to deal with me.” Not long afterward, the executive continued, “…he was back in my office knocking on the door….he came in and said he had been praying over this dilemma with his pastor and he had reached the conclusion that this pastor was wrong. He said I had been more Christ-like than his pastor was (because) I showed real concern for him as a human being.”

**Gay/Lesbian Community Support**

Interviewees explained coming out as also motivated by a sincere (if belated) desire to support the gay community. None of them self-identified as social activists, and none admitted participating in gay events outside of the workplace. They did, however, proclaim a commitment to advance gay rights – but in their own way, using their professional status as collateral. Respondents felt that coming out allowed them to “speak and stand up for” gay employees at more junior levels in the organization and to mentor and be a role model for them. As one executive explained, “I think we have a responsibility, those of us that are leaders in the GLBT community and the GLBT business movement, we have an obligation to the next generation…to make it easier for them, to show them that you can be everything you ever thought you could be and that being GLBT isn’t a roadblock…”

**Professional Identity/Personal Identity**

Although coming out allowed our respondents to openly identify as gays or lesbians in the workplace, they continued, first and foremost, to self identify as professionals. Prioritization of professional identity was a clear and ubiquitous pattern in our data. Strong self-efficacy and confidence were revealed in respondents’ descriptions of their jobs and community commitments.

When they first revealed themselves as gay/lesbian, some respondents did so hesitantly and for practical reasons. “My partner’s parent was dying and she had to go home,” one interviewee explained. “I needed time off to take care of the kids. I just told my boss the truth and trusted him to keep it to himself and he did.” The data suggested, however, that the higher the professional status of the respondent, the more intentional was the decision to come out and the more forthrightly it was done. “I was being actively recruited by a new company, “said a prominent IT expert, “and they knew I was the best person they could get. I noticed they had no provision for partner benefits and said, ‘I’m a lesbian if you haven’t noticed.”

**Coming Out as a Recursive Process**

Our respondents ubiquitously acknowledged the recursive nature of coming out in the workplace and described the environmental triggers of the process. As senior leaders of their organizations, they travel, represent their companies on outside boards and community platforms and attend conferences and social functions -- in every case mingling with new acquaintances. New assignments or personnel changes within their own organizations also result in a continually
expanding social network. Each of these events or situations presents the executive with a choice – to openly acknowledge his/her sexual orientation or not.

In response to the question, “How out are you?” most of our respondents replied with a fraction and explained why it most cases it wasn’t 100 percent:

“I would say probably 85%. …I find myself in certain situations with certain clients (and) I don’t know their belief system so I think I put myself into a different scenario then.”

“About 75% out. There are times when it just doesn’t matter or there isn’t enough energy to go down that path.”

One executive, because his position was director of LGBT supplier diversity in an organization, proclaimed being “100% out” and said, “It’s on my business card”. Another assumed “that if you were to put 10 people, 20 people, 30 people in the room, 99.9% of them would immediately assume I was gay.”

Still, because these executives frequently found themselves interacting with new people in different contexts in the course of their professional lives, they continually wrestle with decisions about acknowledging their sexual orientation anew. A very senior executive who came out initially many years ago remarked, “you come out many, many, many times throughout your entire life …even today…I’m still coming out.”

Coming out might not always be a verbal proclamation. As an IT executive noted, “I come out almost every day, but as far as actually saying the words “I’m gay”…(I do it) maybe 50 times a year.”

**Intentional Change – Personal and Social**

We saw clear evidence of the processual enactment of both personal change and social change by gay/lesbian senior executives in our sample. Coming out for most of our senior executive respondents occurred late in their careers at a time when they felt less professional risk in doing so. The majority of respondents reported coming out then as a carefully considered decision to effect personal change. After *coming* out in the workplace, however, these executives found that *being* out provided them with the power to intentionally invoke organizational change. Most of them told vibrant stories about how they leveraged their sexual orientations to promote organizational inclusiveness and ignite culture or policy reforms.

“We had the first allies group and gay, lesbian and bisexual support group and none of them had been started by me. They were started because I was present and respected”

“Being out lead me to becoming the firm’s first director for LGBT inclusiveness. It opened up an opportunity that I never thought I would ever have had.”
In some cases this mission extended outside the organization. One executive, long out in her own company, recounted a story about being asked by a fellow member of an association of civic leaders to help promote the importance of diversity to that group by coming out to them. “Will you come out in this group of people and help them understand the business issues around being a gay leader in their organization?” she asked.

“I ended up telling a story about the power of insurance and medical care and benefits to people that you value in your workforce and gave them a real story about my life and when (my partner and I) didn’t have them and what harm it caused and I said, ‘I’m somebody you know – and there are a whole bunch of somebody’s you know in your company who are waiting for you to do the right thing. They’re afraid to ask you, they’re afraid to tell you they need it and they’re going home every night trying to figure out how they’re going to pay that $100,000 neck surgery … because they couldn’t get (the benefits you offer) for their significant other. People cried.’”

Another, acknowledging how changing his own life by coming out had led to leading social change, narrated a story of coming out at a regional meeting. Noting that although he would have “ never have (earlier) entertained the thought of actually doing so…I stood up in front of a group of about 200 people that I had never met…(to say) I’m an independent, confident, loved gay man living my truth. I got a standing ovation and afterwards…a couple of (younger) people who were also gay in the group… actually came up to me to say ‘that took guts. How do you do that? (I said), ‘It’s a process.’”

**DISCUSSION**

Our study of senior executives who are gay and lesbian was motivated by a substantial gap in the literature. While previous researchers have addressed coming out at work and the challenges associated with it more generally, our inductive study about coming out and being out in the executive suite at a late career stages is unique.

Our data revealed that executives who come out at late stages in their careers effect not only personal, but organizational change. For most of our respondents, personal change was intentional, but the promotion of organizational change was initially not. Rather, it was an unanticipated institutional consequence of personal intentional change.

As they very clearly expressed, our respondents experienced coming out as a persistent process, not an “event.” Professionally accomplished gay executives operate in complex social networks that extend beyond their immediate workplace to more remote reaches in their own organizations and beyond those firms to professional associations, civic, cultural, charitable and community organizations and other social/professional venues where they interact with a continually changing cast of others to whom they must always decide whether to reveal their sexual orientation or not. Accordingly, making an initial intentional decision to come out sets in motion an ongoing series of decisions about coming out in other contexts to other people at other times. The initial decision to come out is often made at a relatively advanced point in the executive’s career when he/she feels confident that doing so will not be a risk to hard earned professional legitimacy. Our respondents made clear that they prioritized their professional identities – both
before and after coming out. The decision to come out was made in most cases only at a career point where the executive considered his/her professional identity as unimpeachable. Thus, a secure professional identity facilitated the personal coming out experience – but also enabled an important secondary effect of it – positive organizational change.

We saw a strong pattern of initially unintended – but later very purposeful – behavior by our respondents to inspire institutional change. Once out, most of the executives in our sample reported working within the system to alter the attitudes, beliefs and behavior of others, serving on committees or speaking, counseling and consulting others in the organization (or in other organizations), both formally and informally. Leveraging their professional status and the legitimacy it rendered, these executives operated as what Meyerson (Meyerson & Scully, 1995) has described as “tempered radicals” – “…individuals who identify with and are committed to their organizations, and are also committed to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of their organization.” Tempered radicals, Meyerson emphasizes – and our data corroborates – always work within rather than against their organizations, using their differences to effect change endogenously. Elsewhere, Meyerson has compared these change agents to “institutional entrepreneurs,” who “deliberately work to transform institutional arrangements to advance a set of interests.” Our executives reported having kept those interests out of the workplace during the formative phases of their careers, but, once disclosed, discovered they provided an institutional entrepreneurial opportunity. As Meyerson argues, “…institutional entrepreneurship—or deliberate, interest-driven action—is most likely to be pursued by individuals or collectives where multiplicity and contradictions are most acute, such as when actors are disadvantaged by institutional arrangements or when they experience ongoing value conflicts.” The majority of our respondents did, indeed, articulate institutional disadvantage, contradiction and value conflict before, as well as after, coming out – but they differed in a significant way from the institutional entrepreneurs described by Meyerson and others as operating most commonly at the margins of organizations. Our executives held highly visible, centrally situated positions in their organizations and wielded considerable influence in them as well as in extended communities of practice. Meyerson had noticed that while marginalization “…may loosen the institution’s hold” on an individual and “create the motivation for change, actors on the margin lack the authority to mandate or legitimate change and may lack the resources to mobilize a broad base of support for grass-roots transformation.” The gay and lesbian senior executives we studied, however, possessed the respect and authority to challenge institutional logics, foment change and influence and mobilize others. Like Meyerson’s tempered radicals, they sometimes chose to do so in subtle, incremental ways, taking advantage of their dual “commitments, identities and networks and thus their exposure to multiple logics” to promote change. But we also saw them at times engaging in less tempered behavior -- taking chances, speaking boldly and acting purposefully as organizational catalysts. Meyerson has argued, and we see in our data, evidence that supports the idea that embeddedness in multiple environments facilitates institutional change. Organizational embeddedness, she observes, often erodes an individual’s critical consciousness – but “the constraints of institutional embeddedness can be overcome through exposure to contradiction and multiplicity in ideas, networks, or frameworks” (Meyerson & Tompkins, 2007). Our executives acknowledged and, in some cases, celebrated their willing embeddedness in their organizations. The prioritization of professional identity was a very dominant pattern in our data. Our respondents enjoyed their jobs and expressed their principle identity through them. They
may have wanted to come out, but they also desired to maintain their professional identities and organizational status.

In defining intentional change, Boyatzis (2006) points out that a “desirable, sustainable change” may also include the desire to maintain a current desirable state, relationship, or habit.” This was certainly true of our gay and lesbian executives. The executives had long and persistently idealized their professional identity – but at the expense, many came to realize, of a more holistic sense of their Ideal Self. As Boyatzis has argued, we “…often allow ourselves to be anesthetized to our dreams and lose sight of our deeply felt Ideal Self.” The “Ideal Self” is defined by Boyatzis as the “person one wants to be” as compared to the “Real Self,” i.e., how one acts and is perceived by others. Because they delayed coming out until later in their careers, the executives in our sample clearly subjugated for a period of time some aspects of their “Ideal Selves” to the socially constructed consummate professional “Real Selves” that others saw – failing to appreciate that their cherished professional identities were a critical part, but not all, of their authentic selves. This appears to explain their positive view of, and avid desire to, maintain that aspect of themselves – but also their desire to fully actuate their more authentic Ideal Self.

The notion of authenticity, with its roots in ancient Greek philosophy, is a very contemporary concern evidenced by a rapidly expanding literature. In a 2011 review of that literature, Gardner, Cogliser, Davis and Dickens cite Harter’s (2002) definition of authenticity as “owning one's personal experiences, including one's thoughts, emotions, needs, desires, or beliefs.” Referencing Luthans & Avolio (2003), Gardner et al. conclude that authenticity therefore involves “…being self-aware and acting in accord with one's true self by expressing what one genuinely thinks and believes.” Unsurprisingly, research on authenticity has emphasized such factors as self-awareness, self-knowledge, self-verification, self-concept clarity, self-certainty, self determination, self-congruence, self-consistency, self-concordance and self-expression (Gardner et al., 2011). Shamar and Eilam (2005: 339), for example, emphasize that authenticity requires a “high level of self-resolution or self-concept clarity” and Kernis's (2003: 13), argues it involves the “unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self.” These foci on self are vividly evident in our data. Late in quite stellar careers, our respondents sought self concept clarity and congruence by “owning” their experiences and pursuing intentional change to actualize their Ideal Selves.

Sustainable change, proponents of Intentional Change Theory (ITC) contend, must be purposeful – and it requires courage and commitment. Understanding the differences between one’s Ideal and Real selves is essential – but, according to Boyatzis, those are just two of five “discoveries” an individual must make to effect profound and lasting change. The third discovery involves the creation of a learning agenda for how a change one wants to achieve can be implemented by reconciling the ideal and real selves. In the fourth discovery the individual tries out new behaviors through experimentation and role play and in the fifth collaborates with trusting others to achieve the goal. We saw evidence of these sequential steps toward authenticity and successful intentional change in the narratives of all of our gay/lesbian executives.

Boyatzis maintains that the ideal self – potentially the most confusing of all the ICT discoveries because of ill-informed models (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006) – is, nevertheless, the “driver” in the intentional change process. In some of the literature on the ideal self, which stems from

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Baumeister (1998) and Higgins (1989) work on the self, it is viewed as a way to protect the self— but positive psychology sees it contrarily as a way an individual can set goals and reach for ideals (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006). The ideal self consists of a personal vision, hope or optimism and core identity (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006). Each of these components builds on the others to create a strong vision of the ideal self. Individuals vary in the ability to envision an ideal self—for some it is a complex and grueling assignment, often complicated by what Boyatzis calls the “ought self,” a version of the ideal self imposed by others, or by an internal desire to please others (Boyatzis, 1973). Disclosure for any invisible minority would have to deal with the ought self from both perspectives. Invisible minorities might be told not to disclose or they might choose not to in order to “fit in.” But awareness of the ought self can facilitate achievement of the ideal self. Boyatzis (2006) describes hope as the driver, core identity as the personal context, and image of a desired future as the content of the ideal self, defining it as “…the picture of what is hoped for” (p. 632). Dreams of that future are derived from family, friends, reference groups and social identity groups (Boyatzis, Murphy, & Wheeler, 2000). Starting the intentional change process with the ideal self allows one to focus on the future and who an individual wants to be and promotes self-confidence and self-esteem (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006). In this exercise, Boyatzis commends the benefits of dreaming or visioning which “arouses the Parasympathetic Nervous System (PSNS) and creates a neural condition for new ideas (p. 643).

The second discovery, the real self, explores who the person is today and how others see that person. While the literature on the self is complex and easily confused (Baumeister, 1999), the notion of the real self is important to the explanation and foundation of ICT and why individuals who attempt to undergo a desired change either succeed or fail (Taylor, 2006).

The real self as defined by Taylor (2006) consists of two attributes “First, it is the accurate self-knowledge a person possesses of his or her own competence. Accurate self-knowledge refers to what a person knows about him or herself that is correct. Next, the real self is also the correct assessment of a person’s competence as reported by others in the context in which the person interacts” (Taylor, 2006: 644). Taylor argues that in studying this definition of the real self, three observations need to be made. First it is not what or how a person thinks of herself but more importantly the combination of self-perception and the perception of all others in her life (Taylor, 2006). Second, because of the complexity of a person’s life, there is no way to understand the whole person unless you have access to every aspect of his life and have full awareness of all of his competencies (Boyatzis, 1993). William James said: “A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him...(and he) generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different people (James, 1950: 294). Third, both the self-assessment and observations by others must be without bias (Taylor, 2006).

Our objective was to shed a brighter light on the “lived lives” of gay and lesbian upper echelon professionals and their experiences of coming out and being out in the executive suite. Our findings differentiated two important outcomes of these individuals’ intentional change from non-disclosed to openly gay status in the workplace and beyond: personal authenticity and organizational impact. Our data prompted conceptualization of the model shown as Figure 1, expressing the recursive process of coming out/being out driven by intentional change
Sustainable change, proponents of Intentional Change Theory (ITC) contend, must be purposeful — and it requires courage and commitment. Understanding the differences between one’s Ideal and Real selves is just the beginning. Thereafter, an individual must commit to a learning agenda and experiment with and practice new habits. Finally, he/she prioritizes the development of resonant relationships with others critical to his/her success. We saw evidence of these sequential steps toward authenticity and successful intentional change in the narratives of all of our gay/lesbian executives. This process is captured in the conceptual model presented as Figure 1. The model reflects that coming out and being out is a long and recursive process that begins when a gay executive idealizes a life of authenticity and prioritizes the ideal over the ought self. Being out in the workplace allows the executive, protected by his status, an opportunity to exert positive influence on the firm and to promote, sustainable organizational change. Exercising a “tempered” approach to activism creates more inclusive organizations, encouraging and supporting coming out and being out by others which perpetuates the cycle.

FIGURE 1: COMING OUT/BEING OUT PROCESS AND EFFECTS: AUTHENTICITY AND SUSTAINABLE ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

LIMITATIONS

This inductive exploratory study contributes to a scant literature on gays and lesbians in senior professional roles. We were gratified by the forthright cooperation of informants. A study of this nature is, however, not without limitations. Although appropriate for the type of study we conducted, our sample was small and our findings may not be representative of the experiences
of all gay and lesbian executives. The sample included some double minorities (African American and Hispanic gay and lesbian executives, for example), but not enough of them to discern differences in experiences on the basis of ethnicity. We also intentionally did not look at bisexual or transgendered executives and our findings may not apply to them. Although we included informants who lived and worked in various US cities, the sample size did not permit enough respondents from any particular region to distinguish differences based on geography.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Our findings should be of keen interest to not only human resource and diversity professionals but to executive leadership and gay and lesbian executives who have not yet come out in their organizations. In an environment in which recruiting and retaining executive talent is increasingly challenging, understanding the experiences of marginalized employees can affect the crafting of policies, benefits and recruiting strategies. Our findings should be useful to diversity professionals internal to the organization, seeking to initiate or expand a current program around LGBT inclusion. Upper echelon gay and lesbian executives who are out provide diversity offices with an ally in the boardroom. We hope our work will inspire and empower gay and lesbian executives who have not yet come out by demonstrating the positive effects of doing so – including the advancement of sustainable organizational change. Finally, this research may be of interest and use to national, regional and local organizations that work to create safer, more inclusive organizations for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered persons.

We focused on an understudied phenomenon and there is thus expansive opportunity for future research. Our immediate intention is to conduct a national quantitative study using a survey instrument to validate our findings. Recognizing the novelty of our study, we recommend the need for more qualitative research into the experiences of senior executives who are gay and lesbian. Additional research, using ours as a model, could also explore the experiences of bisexual and transgendered executives. Additionally, a longitudinal study tracking the process of coming out and its effects on both the individual and his/her organization could be conducted. We see rich opportunity for case studies as well. All of this suggested work on the experiences of gay and lesbian executives would strengthen the literature and provide practical data for professional and organizations alike who want to create more inclusive organizations.
REFERENCES


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