Contextual determinants in disclosing one’s stigmatized identity during expatriation

The case of lesbian and gay self-initiated expatriates

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to add to the understanding of the international work experiences of lesbian and gay self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) with a particular focus on the effects of different contexts on their disclosure decisions. In doing so, this study responds to the call for more empirical and extensive studies of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) expatriates.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based on in-depth analysis of four interviews of lesbian and gay SIEs.

Findings – The findings presented in this paper support three contextual determinants – personal, organizational, and country-level context. These contextual determinants significantly influence lesbian and gay SIEs’ disclosure decisions and their overall international work experience.

Originality/value – Given the rapid globalization and dynamic business environment, workforce diversity has become a business imperative over the past few decades. Diversity in today’s workforce includes not simply gender and racial diversity, but also age, culture, sexual orientation, religion, education, and disabilities as primary categories of diversity. Moreover, new technologies require highly skilled labor the world over, exacerbating existing global talent shortages. These advancements in technology, accompanied by massive shortfalls in skilled labor, have expanded the pool of potential expatriates to include those non-traditional ones who have been excluded from international assignments. Particularly, as LGBT rights to equal employment opportunity and their potential contributions to international assignments have been increasingly recognized worldwide in recent years, attention to LGBT expatriates has grown exponentially. Nevertheless, neither their experiences as lesbian and gay SIEs in international assignments nor the effects of contexts on those experiences, including disclosure decisions, have yet to be fully explored. In this sense, this paper provides a contribution to the deeper understanding of lesbian and gay SIEs in multidimensional contexts of an international assignment. Although the study examined lesbian and gay expatriates, results suggest insights into the entire LGBT expatriate community.

Keywords Context, Self-initiated expatriates, Qualitative research, LGBT expatriates, Non-traditional expatriates

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Companies operating globally that are commonly referred to as multinational enterprises (MNEs) need to acquire a set of abilities, such as a high degree of flexibility, adaptability, and creativity in a rapidly changing business and technological environment. Considering the fact that workforce diversity is one key to such capabilities, an increasing number of MNEs have begun to build a large and diverse global talent pool beyond traditional, organizationally-assigned expatriates (AEs), including non-traditional expatriates and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs; Cerdin and Selmer, 2014; Kim et al., 2016; Vance et al., 2016).

In recent years, SIEs have become one of the most researched groups of expatriates among scholars (Myers and Pringle, 2005). Indeed, according to a number of comparative studies, SIE samples represent almost half of the surveyed population of expatriates (Cerdin and Pargneux, 2010; Jokinen et al., 2008; Tornikoski, 2011). Unlike AEs who are
deployed by the MNE on international assignments, SIEs, as their name suggests, initiate their own expatriation; thus, their expatriation is primarily driven by a complex set of personal interests and intrinsic motivations (Doherty et al., 2013; Guo et al., 2013; McNulty and Selmer, 2017; Selmer and Lauring, 2012). Accordingly, SIEs are more likely to contain a much more diverse population with respect to age, gender, race, marital status, and management or professional position (Biemann and Andresen, 2010; McNulty and Selmer, 2017). In other words, SIEs serve a wide range of occupations, from low-skilled jobs to high-skilled jobs, in a variety of different job sectors (Kim et al., 2016). In line with this, numerous studies have shown that SIEs often appear to be young, single, and more educated as compared to AEs (Biemann and Andresen, 2010; Cerdin and Pargneux, 2010; Suutari and Brewster, 2001). Moreover, the population of SIEs is less gendered; women are more visible and better represented among SIEs than they are among AEs, who have traditionally been dominated by males (Cerdin and Pargneux, 2010; Jokinen et al., 2008; Peltokorpi and Jintae Froese, 2009; Selmer and Lauring, 2012; Suutari and Brewster, 2001). Taken together, and on the basis that SIEs make up a much larger percentage of the international assignee workforce than they have in the past, workforce diversity has become a key issue in many MNEs.

Workforce diversity is commonly defined as the variations of traits and attributes, both visible and invisible, among members in the workplace (Esty et al., 1995; Jehn et al., 1999; McGrath et al., 1995; Milliken and Martins, 1996; Tsui and Gutek, 1999). Visible diversity, which is also called surface-level diversity, refers to characteristics that can be outwardly observed and that are different from the majority of others within the same organization, such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, and physical attributes. Invisible diversity, on the other hand, refers to those differences that are underlying and cannot be readily discerned by even those in the same organization, such as sexual orientation, religion, education, and socioeconomic status (Barak, 1999; Cummings et al., 1993; Harrison et al., 1998; Jackson et al., 1995). Unless individuals disclose their diversity characteristics, invisible diversity is hardly seen in the workplace.

In this sense, workforce diversity today is about far more than just visible diversity, as it encompasses various characteristics of invisible diversity as well (Clair et al., 2005; Williams and O'Reilly, 1998). In other words, today's workforce continues to diversify not simply in terms of gender and race, but also in terms of personal characteristics that make the workforce heterogeneous, such as sexual orientation, religious beliefs, political affiliations, education, and mental or physical disabilities (Ely and Thomas, 2001; Jehn et al., 1999; Watson et al., 1993). Accordingly, a large number of studies have begun to shed light on a broader variety of invisible diversity attributes. Amid invisible diversity attributes, sexual orientation diversity has received particular attention (Day and Schoenrade, 1997), largely due to the legality of same-sex marriage across the entirety of the USA beginning in 2015. Moreover, social recognition of equal employment opportunity empowers lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) labor to enter the workforce.

Even though LGBT employees have long been considered as invisible or hidden minorities in the workplace (Bell et al., 2011; Bernstein and Reimann, 2001; Fassinger, 1991), they make up an increasing proportion of the total workforce. According to a new Gallup poll (Gates, 2017), approximately 4 percent of the USA working-age population is LGBT. Furthermore, Diversity Best Practice (2015) revealed that the labor force participation rate of homosexual individuals was greater than that of heterosexual counterparts. In particular, lesbians are more likely to participate in the labor force compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Schneebaum, 2013). Considering that more than half of LGBT employees conceal their sexual orientation at work, primarily because the workplace environment is frequently not accepting of LGBT identities (Fidas and Cooper, 2015; Out Now Global, 2013), the actual number of LGBT employees may be higher than reported (Herek, 1996). In fact,
a recent survey from the Human Rights Campaign Foundation (2014) found that 62 percent of LGBT college graduates in the USA who had disclosed their orientation at the university go back in the closet when they take their first job.

Extending on the above, numerous researchers have realized the importance of LGBT expatriates (Gedro, 2010; Gedro et al., 2013; McNulty, 2015; McPhail and Fisher, 2015; McPhail and McNulty, 2015; McPhail et al., 2016; Paisley and Tayar, 2016). While some studies have made important conceptual contributions (Moeller and Maley, 2017; Paisley and Tayar, 2016), empirical evidence of the impact of context on LGBT expatriates, particularly their decision to conceal or not to conceal sexual orientation during expatriation, has been less studied. Additionally, notwithstanding that most prior research on LGBT expatriates has not delineated between AEs and SIEs, there appears to be very few studies that have addressed the experiences of SIEs who identify as LGBT. The goal of our study, therefore, is to empirically investigate contexts that affect the decision by LGBT SIEs to disclose their sexual orientation during expatriation.

Furthermore, although LGBT people are often lumped together for research purposes, their international experiences are likely to be different. In other words, being homosexual is not the same as being bisexual or transgender when living and working abroad. This is because, in addition to differences in sexual orientation (i.e. LGBT), LGBT people also have a different perspective on their sexual orientation. According to a 2013 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, bisexual people are more likely than homosexual (lesbian, gay) people to consider their sexual orientation less important to their entire identity. Moreover, in general, homosexual people feel a stronger desire to reveal their sexual orientation to important people in their lives than bisexual people do. Furthermore, not all LGBT people are treated the same by society. In fact, according to the same Pew Research Center (2013) survey, there is more social acceptance for bisexual women and lesbians than that for bisexual or gay men. Transgender people are perceived as being the least socially acceptable. In sum, each LGBT person should be addressed and studied separately. In this sense, the present study aims to explore the role of contexts in lesbian and gay expatriates’ decision to disclose their sexual orientation during expatriation, particularly those who voluntarily and independently choose to expatriate.

Theoretical framework and research propositions
The way people identify themselves to one another makes them both similar to and different from others. According to social identity theory, people identify themselves, in part, as members of social groups – either those they choose to belong to (e.g. occupation, sports teams) or those they are given at birth (e.g. age, gender, race) or those in between (e.g. religious beliefs, socioeconomic class, political affiliation; Tajfel, 1982; Turner et al., 1987). This sense of belonging to a certain social group, which is known as collective identity, is shared among same group members. In this regard, people who share the same collective identity are called the ingroup, while others who do not share it are called the outgroup.

Previous studies have found that ingroup members share not only a feeling of unity, but also many other characteristics and traits, such as values, interests, and goals (Triandis, 1988; Williams, 2001); thus, they feel more attached to each other than outgroups do. Furthermore, people, in general, seek to attain, retain, and even enhance the positive distinctiveness of their ingroup vis-à-vis outgroups. More precisely, people are instinctively willing to reinforce a positive sense of self and self-concept by positively differentiating themselves from others; as a consequence, they are naturally inclined to favor their ingroup over outgroups. To wit, the ingroup-outgroup categorization can lead to ingroup favoritism, and a significant ingroup favoritism often results in outgroup derogation, such as insulting and discriminating (Brewer and Brown, 1998).
In addition to the collective identity, people hold their own personal identity that makes them unique and differentiates them from others even within the same social ingroup (Tajfel, 1982; Turner et al., 1987). These two levels of identity are often hard to disentangle, but rather coexist in a person – sometimes in harmony, sometimes in conflict. In other words, people have personal and collective identities that may overlap or collide (Deaux, 1996). Moreover, most people hold more than one identity at both the personal and collective identity levels, since they are expected to fulfill multiple roles and responsibilities simultaneously (e.g. parent, daughter) and to affiliate with multiple social groups at the same time (e.g. Women, Americans, Christians; Deaux, 1996; Hugenberg and Bodenhausen, 2004; Macrae et al., 1995; Tajfel, 1978). As society becomes much more pluralistic, so does identity.

Taken together, the relationship among these numerous identities that people possess contributes to complexity of self-categorization, which refers to a cognitive process by which people identify themselves with others (Burke and Stets, 2009; Spears, 2001). Further elaborating on social identity theory, self-categorization theory argues that people identify themselves differently according to context (Turner et al., 1987). This process is not static, but constantly changes over time. In brief, self-categorization is a complex, dynamic, and context-dependent process (Sedikides and Brewer, 2015).

Personal-level context during expatriation
Research has shown that self-categorization is significantly influenced by one’s personal context, such as past experience (Dutton et al., 1994; Sedikides and Brewer, 2015). In that vein, lesbian and gay expatriates’ past experiences of prejudice and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation may interfere with their self-categorization, reducing their willingness to identify with homosexual identity. This is primarily due to their fear of rejection by others during an international assignment, just as they have experienced in the workplace either in the home country or other host countries in the past.

In the case of SIEs, they are less likely to adhere to the organization’s goals, to have higher organizational mobility (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013; Biemann and Andresen, 2010; Cerdin and Pargneux, 2010), and to seek high levels of personal well-being and self-fulfillment through expatriation (Crowley-Henry, 2010). In other words, the disclosure decisions of SIEs are highly associated with their internal satisfaction derived from personal situations (Vaiman and Haslberger, 2013) such that if their internal satisfaction were to be threatened by disclosure of their sexual orientation, the decision to disclose takes on greater significance. Based on the arguments above, we suggest the following proposition:

**P1.** Lesbian and gay SIEs’ personal context impacts on their disclosure decisions, such that severe past discrimination based on sexual orientation reduces lesbian and gay expatriates’ willingness to disclose during expatriation.

Organizational-level context during expatriation
Several studies have assessed the impact of work group composition on self-categorization, particularly that of numerical majority on identity salience (Kanter, 1977; Sedikides and Brewer, 2015; Simon and Klandermans, 2001). For example, the female identity becomes less salient for the women who work in male-dominated settings even if gender is a primary and dominant identifying factor of those women. This is due to the fear of deviating from the dominant gender or ingroup and being at a disadvantage.

Furthermore, self-categorization theory demonstrates that in a salient group context, people perceptually become integrated into the group through their assimilation into group prototypes (Gergen, 1968; Kramer, 1991; Stryker and Serpe, 1982). This process, called depersonalization (Hogg and Terry, 2000; Turner et al., 1987), accentuates similarities within the group. For example, in male-dominated contexts, women become members of a group
through internalizing masculine values, attitudes, norms, and behaviors and diluting their femininity (Palomares et al., 2004); otherwise, they become the token outgroup that has low status (Kanter, 1977). In that vein, studies have found that depersonalization pressure or assimilation pressure is particularly pronounced in minority groups (Yinger, 1981). This is because minority groups are more likely to be socially stereotyped and to have a stigmatized identity in society, and depersonalization or assimilation may help them to deflect negative perceptions that are associated with their identity (Crocker et al., 1998; Goldscheider and Uhlenberg, 1969; Kanter, 1977). In sum, minority groups are more likely to be forced to comply with norms and values of the dominant group (Yinger, 1981).

In this regard, social pressures to hide their sexual orientation may induce lesbian and gay expatriates to depersonalize themselves, assimilate into a group, and adopt group prototypes, rather than disclose their sexual orientation identity. This is because heterosexual people – especially straight men who are married to women – are historically predominant in expatriation contexts (Adler, 1979, 2002; Hutchings et al., 2008; Tung, 1993), and lesbian and gay people still largely remain token minorities and are often subject to negative stereotypes. Moreover, even with the recent advent of SIE research, international assignments are still staffed to a great extent by traditional AEs, primarily because MNEs seek to construct and maintain their homogeneous workforce (Adler, 2002) and exercise control over the subsidiary by using them. To wit, lesbian and gay SIEs often have a double minority status (being SIE, being in a sexual minority) with substantial depersonalization pressure in the expatriation context.

More concerning is that, if their sexual orientation identity is perceived as unacceptable and inappropriate within a host country’s organizational culture, or it constitutes a violation of the policies within an MNE and/or an expatriate group, lesbian and gay SIEs are more likely to experience internal gaps, tensions, and conflicts between identities, particularly when sexual orientation is a salient component of their identity. Although social identity theorists argue that depersonalization does not necessarily mean a loss of self (McGarty, 1999; Turner, 1985; Turner and Oakes, 1986), long-lasting and severe identity-based conflicts resulting from depersonalization pressure may lead to numerous undesirable consequences, such as low self-esteem, low psychological well-being, depression, anxiety, and negative perceptions toward international assignments among lesbian and gay SIEs (Brook et al., 2008; Crocker et al., 1998; Paisley and Tayar, 2016). As a result, they may find themselves being oppressed and excluded, as not being “themselves,” or even pretending to be someone else in an organizational culture perceived as hostile toward them. This may explain lesbian and gay employees’ low participation in expatriation compared to their heterosexual counterparts, as well as lower rates of self-disclosure of their sexual orientation identity to the expatriate group. Indeed, McPhail et al. (2016) argued that there often exists a corporate ceiling for lesbian and gay expatriates, which is referred to as the lavender ceiling (Gedro, 2010). This invisible and artificial barrier has likely prevented large numbers of potential LGBT expatriates from undertaking international assignments (Vance, 2005; Insch et al., 2008).

In this regard, a number of studies have found a strong association between workforce diversity and inclusive organizational culture (Cox and Blake, 1991; Findler et al., 2007; Hewlett and Yoshino, 2016). This is because workforce diversity leads to exposure to diverse attributes and thereby promotes willingness to encompass and accept those with different characteristics (Findler et al., 2007). To wit, organizational culture embracing diversity and promoting inclusiveness encourages the disclosure of sexual orientation and identity during expatriation. Based on the arguments above, we propose the following:

**P2.** The organizational context of expatriation impacts on lesbian and gay SIEs’ disclosure decisions, such that a homogeneous group of expatriates and a hostile organizational culture reduce lesbian and gay expatriates’ willingness to disclose during expatriation.
Country-level context during expatriation

Numerous studies on expatriates have attempted to understand the multi-faceted nature of expatriates’ identities and explored how social context affects expatriates’ dominant identity (Fechter, 2007; Kohonen, 2008; Leonard, 2016; Paisley and Tayar, 2016). For example, Fechter (2007) found that European and North American female expatriates in Jakarta are more likely to identify primarily with westerners beyond any other identifiers, since westerners are in a privileged position in Indonesia. In short, social contexts in the host country largely determine which identities become most salient, overwhelm other identities, and represent the primary identity (Oakes et al., 1994; Proudford and Smith, 2003). Similarly, in addition to personal and organizational contexts, country-level contexts, especially those of the host country for LGBT people, add a further layer of complexity to the self-categorization of lesbian and gay expatriates. In other words, it is possible for sexual orientation identity to become much less salient in lesbian and gay expatriates when homosexuality is shut out from certain local contexts.

Although many European countries and the USA have recently begun to protect LGBT rights through antidiscrimination laws, according to the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (2016) 76 countries across the globe still maintain anti-homosexuality laws against LGBT people. Moreover, being LGBT poses the risk of losing almost everything in some countries where the death penalty or life imprisonment applies to homosexuality, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. In those countries, lesbian and gay expatriates can no longer identify themselves primarily through their sexual orientation, but must instead identify according to their nationality or profession. Other identities, such as occupational identity, supplant their sexual orientation identity in the presence of antagonistic practices in the host country. This, in turn, not only prevents lesbian and gay expatriates from identifying with their homosexual identity, but it also eventually hinders them from reaching their full potential during international assignments. Furthermore, negative consequences may be even more obvious for lesbian and gay SIEs as they are more likely to pursue self-centered or self-oriented goals during expatriation, such as personal interests in the host culture. Based on the arguments above, we suggest the following proposition:

\[ P3. \] The host country context impacts on lesbian and gay SIEs’ disclosure decisions, such that the host country’s weak legal, regulatory, and policy systems protecting LGBT rights reduces lesbian and gay expatriates’ willingness to disclose during expatriation.

In brief, three propositions suggest the effects of three different contexts – namely, personal-, organizational-, and country-level contexts – on lesbian and gay SIEs’ disclosure decisions.

Methodology

Sampling

Although there are many different types of sampling strategies (e.g. random, ethnographic, and purposive), purposive or criterion-based sampling is generally used in qualitative research, particularly when targeting specific groups of people within the population. This is because it allows researchers to identify and select information-rich cases (Patton, 2005) or key informants who are able to offer a thick description, which refers to in-depth information about a particular phenomenon in relation to the context in which it takes place (Geertz, 1973). In brief, the use of purposive sampling ensures the credibility of our research findings (Suri, 2011).

Since the aim of the present study is to analyze and understand the effects of different types of context on lesbian and gay SIEs’ disclosure decisions, the use of purposive
sampling is appropriate. In particular, among different subsets of purposive sampling, this study employed snowball sampling (chain sampling). Hence, each participant was asked to refer other potential participants of interest.

Data collection process
This study incorporated two sources of data: questionnaires and interviews. Numerous studies have argued that the use of multiple sources of data increases not only the volume of data, but also the overall quality and validity of data (Creswell et al., 2003; Merriam, 2002). In sum, we intend to foster both the breadth and depth of our understanding of LGBT expatriates by combining data from questionnaires and interviews.

The questionnaire was sent to each of the four participants the week before the interview. Based on their answers to the questionnaire, in-depth, open-ended interview questions were developed. A total of four interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting between August and October 2015. These interviews lasted, on average, approximately 45 minutes, and ranged in length from 30 to 60 minutes. All participants signed the informed consent by e-mail prior to participating in order to protect their privacy and to ensure complete confidentiality of data. Pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Two interviews were conducted in person, while the other two were conducted online via Skype due to geographic limitations. The online interview helped not only overcome the challenges of geographic dispersion, but it also allowed participants greater flexibility, especially in terms of location. In other words, the Skype interviews used in the present study increased both privacy and familiarity of lesbian and gay participants by letting them choose a comfortable location (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013). Additionally, although in-person interactions are generally believed to provide a high level of authenticity, the perceived distance in online interactions encourages reluctant or hesitant participants, especially when the interview topics are personal or intrusive and thereby evoke painful or unpleasant memories in their lives (Bargh et al., 2002; Deakin and Wakefield, 2013; Ellison et al., 2006; Janghorban et al., 2014). In that sense, considering the fact that sexual orientation and lesbian and gay identity still remain sensitive issues in society, the mixed method of interviewing contributes not only to the participation rate, but also to the trustworthiness of data. Indeed, we found no significant differences between in-person interviews and Skype interviews in terms of the overall quality of interviews. Specifically, there was no noticeable difference in the overall duration of the interview and the length and number of answers per question. Although length is not a single indication of whether an interview was successful, it is often considered an important proxy that estimates the comfort level of participants and rapport in researcher-participant relationships (Glogowska et al., 2011; Vogl, 2013).

Participants
Each of the participants was identified as a lesbian or gay SIE. A total of four lesbian and gay expatriates – specifically, three gay expatriates and one lesbian expatriate – participated. Although the representativeness was considered when selecting participants, bisexual and transgender expatriates were not included in our sample primarily because of limited access. Table I shows the demographic information of the four participants.

Results
Interview 1
Peter Williams is young, in his mid-20s. He identifies himself as an Irish gay man from a traditional Catholic family. Although 62 percent of Irish people voted in favor of same-sex
marriage (Halpin and Humphries, 2015), Peter experienced discrimination based on his sexual orientation while he worked for an electronics company in Ireland. “Ireland in some sense is very forward-looking in the newer generation, but it is just not as comfortable as other international city hubs,” said Peter. Similarly, Selmer et al. (2015) found a discrepancy between expected country-specific environmental characteristics and actual existing conditions within the host country. Peter further added, “In the work environment, there is still a strong attachment to concepts like masculinity.” Several studies have posited that people who hold strong beliefs in dichotomous, traditional gender roles, particularly those who support the idea of masculinity, are far more likely to display unfavorable attitudes toward homosexuality (Ratcliff et al., 2006; Sánchez and Vilain, 2012).

As our first proposition suggested, lesbian and gay employees are often reluctant to disclose their sexual orientation in the workplace, largely due to previous traumatic events of labeling, stigma, and discrimination based on homosexuality. Peter’s personal experiences in his home country make him more hesitant to disclose his homosexual identity at work. “I didn’t [disclose my sexual orientation] at my last job,” Peter says. He added, “[The decision of whether or not to disclose his sexual orientation] just depends on where you are and the people as well who will be more accepting or unaccepting or whatever.”

Peter worked as an SIE for six months in Munich, Germany. “Germans are serious in work, but […] they are really accepting of modern fashion,” said Peter. The company he worked for in Munich was an eight-year-old start-up with a total of 60 employees. “The company was so new and [entrepreneurial], not ‘faceless’, as many companies become when they grow in age and size,” Peter said, “We were so small that everybody knew each other and it was hard not to bring out that side of yourself and not to let people know exactly who you are in many different senses.”

“Almost everybody was from a different place,” he added, “It was a melting pot.” In fact, employees came from 30 to 40 different ethnic backgrounds, including Polish, Lithuanian, Pakistani, Brazilian, Serbian, American, Australian, Portuguese, Colombian, and Russian. Considering the fact that the total employees numbered about 60, this literally constitutes a melting pot in terms of ethnicity. “We had a lot of staunch Catholic, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim. And there was never a bit of discrimination in them either,” said Peter. Furthermore, he recognized that there are a number of employees in varying degrees of seniority who are gay.

Although there are no formal guidelines regarding lesbian and gay employees, the company consciously supported them in its organizational culture largely due to the diverse workforce. “Eight to 9 people [know my sexual orientation],” Peter added, “A company culture is a major aspect of safeguarding LGBT employees from discrimination in that sense.”

Likewise, inclusive and supportive organizational cultures are significant in lesbian and gay expatriates’ disclosure decisions. This is because the greater internal conflict that stems from unfavorable organizational contexts in lesbian and gay expatriates often leads to a distorted or negative self-concept and thereby low disclosure rates. This may, in turn, result in lower levels of performance during international assignments. In a similar vein,

| Table I. Demographic characteristics of study participants |
|---------------|--------|---------------|-------------|
| Sexual orientation | Age     | Type of expatriation | Home country | Host country |
| Peter Williams    | Gay     | 20s           | SIE         | Ireland     | German     |
| Rigoberto Miller | Gay     | 20s           | SIE         | Italy       | USA        |
| Patrick Jefferson | Gay    | Retirement age | SIE         | USA and Hungary | Estonia |
| Sonia Warren      | Lesbian | 30s           | SIE         | Colombia    | USA        |
Tajfel and Turner (1979) posited that a positive self-image is necessary to operate effectively at work. In this regard, Goldberg and Allen (2012) argued that there are unique characteristics of the workplace to meet the needs of LGBT employees, such as the extent to which their LGBT identity is accepted by coworkers.

Primarily owing to a favorable and supportive organizational context, Peter was able to successfully finish his assignment. “My evaluation was based on the quality of my work, my ability to work as part of a team and as an individual and my general attitude. I am very happy to report that the reviews came back very positive,” he said.

“I think my experience was, while a rare one, a place where many companies will drive toward in the future. I worked for an excellent, modern startup company, [which] honestly believed in the health and well-being of their staff. Great efforts were made by upper management for everyone to know each other […]” Peter said.

As proposed, Peter also pointed out the significance of host country context in the disclosure decisions of lesbian and gay expatriates. “I think [disclosure decision] depends on what part of the world. I don’t think I’d disclose [my sexual orientation at work or expatriate] in countries like Saudi Arabia. Because I mean obviously I don’t want to get shot or killed,” Peter said.

The fact that lesbian and gay rights have been increasingly recognized worldwide not only brings official or public attention, but it also increases the potential cross-border mobility of lesbian and gay employees. In this regard, some countries will lose the opportunity to benefit from young, talented lesbian and gay SIEs like Peter due to the absence of adequate legal protections for them. This is a considerable impediment to a country’s competitiveness in the current war for talent.

*Interview 2*

Rigoberto Miller is an Italian researcher in his 20s. While he worked as a researcher in Milan, Italy, Rigoberto had to conceal his sexual orientation, because it was not an LGBT-friendly workplace. “It was a very homogenous group of people. They were all Italians [except one foreigner], white, and Catholic,” he explained. “Most of them [were] married with kids, just like a traditional Italian family. Being different was not accepted.” In the past, gay employees had to quit their jobs because of a hostile work environment after coming out as gay. “That is why I did not want to disclose my sexual orientation at work. Only one person knew I was gay, because he was gay as well. He had been working there for ten years, but he never said he was gay. He told me that if I want to survive working in that department, I have to shut up,” he said. This illustrates that a hostile culture within an organization can result in increased depersonalization pressure among LGBT expatriates, reducing their willingness to identify with their sexual orientation and to disclose their homosexual identity during expatriation. About this personal experience, Rigoberto said, “I was feeling upset about it. As a researcher, I can write, I can teach and I can do the exact same thing as others do. But why can [I] not be who I am and why [do] I have to pretend being somebody else?”

Rigoberto left Milan and came to the USA as a self-initiated researcher in 2012. “When I first moved here, I was afraid [of finding] a situation similar to the one in Italy. However, when I realized that people do not care if I am straight, gay or whatever, well, I said [to] them [that] I am gay,” he said. Nothing changed after his disclosure. “The relationship with some cohorts even improved a lot, because I do not have to pretend [to be] somebody I am not. I am more myself,” he said, “As a gay [person], I have never had a problem while working here.”

The diversity of the department itself in terms of race (e.g. American, Asian, Indian, and Latin) and religion (e.g. Christian, Jewish, and Hindu) may contribute to the level of tolerance and inclusion. Additionally, Rigoberto’s current school has well-developed and
proactive HR policies against discrimination of any kind as to race, gender, and sexual orientation. “I felt accepted for who I am and [felt] no need to cover my identity,” said Rigoberto. A sense of belonging and being himself led to good job performance; as a researcher, he has several publications. To wit, building a diverse workforce promotes inclusive organizational practices for lesbian and gay SIEs and thereby encourages them to disclose their sexual orientation; this, in turn, eventually contributes to their better performance during expatriation.

Rigoberto’s advice for other LGBT expatriates is: “Just be yourself and work hard to prove that your diversity does not affect your work performance. Being gay always pushes me forward to the limit. I always need to prove myself,” he said.

Interview 3

Patrick Jefferson was born and raised in Ohio, in the USA, which was, according to him, a very conservative, traditional, and homophobic environment. Patrick has been working for a number of MNEs for about 30 years. Now, he is about to retire.

In the 1970s, Patrick was laid off from his job because of his homosexuality. “Other people brought their girlfriends and I brought my partner,” he said, “It was never said or established that my partner was my life-partner, but anyone with any intelligence would draw that conclusion.” Since then, Patrick has never brought up his sexual orientation to business associates. Even when people asked him about his homosexuality, he denies it. “I do not think it is wise in our business environment to do that.” In fact, considering the risks of disclosure, many lesbian and gay expatriates believe that the decision not to disclose their sexual orientation during expatriation is conscious and rational. Similar to Patrick, such belief is often grounded in their personal experience.

Although he faced this challenge in his home country, the USA, Patrick thinks discrimination against LGBT employees is widespread all over the world. “That was then in the ‘80s and ‘90s and I find it still true today,” Patrick said. He is currently running an agricultural business in Southern Estonia. “If you look in the USA, the agricultural areas are a little more conservative, whereas if you go to the East Coast, New York City […] the coast or you go to the West Coast as well, they seem to be liberal,” he said. Agricultural organizations have long been characterized as masculine, male-dominated workplaces. In this sense, both the homogeneous group and the strong gender role categorization within the organization may not only prevent lesbian and gay expatriates from identifying with their homosexual identity, but they also hinder them from realizing their full potential in the international assignment. Indeed, Patrick experienced tough times in the initial stages of doing business there, which is consistent with a Construction Industry Training Board (2014) survey showing that nearly half of people working in construction workplaces hear homophobic language in an attempt to display emphasized masculinity.

Patrick is now, however, quite successful in his business. This is primarily because he has learned how to separate his personal life from work. “Business is business and your private life is your private life,” Patrick said. “[My partner and I] are very private in our house, so that we could be ourselves in our house,” he further explained, “We have the flexibility to […] take nice vacations and enjoy ourselves in a gay environment or be as we want to live and then come back to work.” Patrick also emphasizes the importance of host country settings in relation to the disclosure of being a gay expatriate. “My gayness to this day is not an outward expression in Estonia. It is not outwardly expressed nor accepted here,” he explains, because “it is possible for community members to act adversely.” Patrick further added, “If [my partner and I] go out and we do not show our affection in public, we are more welcome. If you are abrasive to their culture, you are not going to be very welcomed,” he said. “I have the means to go places and do things where I am accepted,” said Patrick.
As an employer, Patrick shared his views on sexual orientation and business. “Work is work and sexual orientation really does not have anything to do with your talents or your work or whatever per se. Rejecting somebody […] does not allow the person to do their function or their duty that they were hired [for],” he added, “I did not hire [people] because they were gay, straight or anything other than they were able to perform a job and if somebody restricts them other than their talents then they are doing your business a disservice.”

“You hire [people] because they have a potential to do a job [and] you want the maximum out of them. Get your money’s worth; that is a business philosophy. That is a business thing you want,” he emphasized. “If somebody is really working hard […] do you tell him he has to go home or do you let him continue working? I let him continue working. You want the most out of him. I do not want to limit any potential, because that is silliness. That is craziness,” he added, “Not business smart.”

His final comments for other LGBT expatriates are: “It is critical to be understanding and knowledgeable of the culture and environment that one is placed into or is to be part of,” he said.

Interview 4
Sonia Warren is a lesbian expatriate from Colombia. She has been with her wife for six years. She has bad memories from the time she worked as a researcher in Bogota, Colombia, because of the homophobic work environment. “I was very uncomfortable the whole time. It was not only homophobic, but it also was very aggressive [to] diversity. [Also, it was] macho. Gender roles were well-established and I did not like it,” Sonia said.

She added, “[My coworkers] started to talk about my husband. It was crazy. [I said I have a partner, but] I never said [I have a] husband.” “Do you hear me talking about a husband? Using the word, husband? Why are you saying these things? You have to ask first,” said Sonia.

Although the “do not ask, do not tell” policy was originally created for protecting the LGBT workforce from discrimination, it instead hindered them from serving openly in the military; in turn, it was repealed. Nevertheless, the “do not ask, do not tell” policy appears to be still in use in some expatriation contexts. As Sonia’s coworkers jumped to conclusions by making inferences or assumptions without even asking, being disinterested about lesbian and gay expatriates’ personal contexts may not be the best option for them. Instead, MNEs should create a welcoming, supportive environment that encourages and facilitates a status of being oneself on the assumption that s/he desires to disclose his or her sexual orientation. In doing so, MNEs can increase lesbian and gay expatriates’ commitment and contribution to international assignments.

In 2013, Sonia came to the USA as a self-initiated scholar. When she was in Virginia, in the USA, for the pre-orientation program, she had a traumatic experience related to homophobic slurs and sexist jokes. “Young boys tend to show off their masculinity, making silly jokes about women or gays. The program has to correct it,” said Sonia.

Sonia is currently studying and working in Florida, in the USA. Her current school embraces diversity and provides several programs for LGBT people. “I feel very lucky, because I never have felt any discrimination here. I feel accepted by my program, my classmates, and my professors,” she said, “Also, my department is serious about jokes.”

About her disclosure decision, she said, “There is no special moment for disclosure. It is more like you have to talk about your life at some point. You have to say the truth. If somebody asks me, ‘Are you married?’ [I answer] ‘Yeah, I have been married to a woman for six years,’” Sonia said. As a result of being herself in an inclusive work environment, her performance has been good and she is also satisfied with what she has done. “I have done my best so far, and have obtained good results in general terms. I think my supervisors are pretty satisfied with my performance,” she said.

During the interview, Sonia mentioned that she would not work in a closed or homogeneous country. This is because such places may expose her to unwanted workplace discrimination.
and harassment. “I [will] never put myself in danger. I am never going to be in an environment where something represents a threat to me due to my sexual orientation,” said Sonia.

Her advice for other LGBT expatriates is: “Always look for help and try to build a support net,” Sonia said.

Discussion
Over the past few decades, workforce diversity has increased enormously largely due to increasing globalization and equal employment opportunities. As such, managing a diverse workforce is inevitable. Accordingly, much attention has been given to the importance of workforce diversity. Previous studies have shown conflicting results regarding the effects of workforce diversity on work-related performance such that workforce diversity may act as a double-edged sword for MNEs depending on how they manage it (Milliken and Martins, 1996).

In this sense, as the workforce has embraced various diversity attributes, the definition and scope of workforce diversity has been broadened. In particular, both researchers and practitioners have begun to turn their attention to LGBT employees. This is not only because of the greater visibility of LGBT people in the workplace, but also because of a growing worldwide recognition of their rights. Although there have been few studies on either LGBT expatriates’ experiences with international assignments or the significance of contexts on their disclosure decisions and expatriation, LGBT expatriates remain considerably less studied when compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Gedro et al., 2013; McNulty, 2015; McPhail and McNulty, 2015; McPhail et al., 2016; Paisley and Tayar, 2016). In particular, there have been a limited number of empirical studies attempting to explore the experience of LGBT expatriates. Moreover, previous studies have argued that more attention should be paid to diversity in SIE research. Specifically, they argue that SIEs from minority groups need to be studied further (Cao et al., 2012; Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013).

The aim of this paper has been to explore lesbian and gay SIEs’ international work experiences with a particular focus on which contexts play important roles in their disclosure decisions during expatriation. Using social identity theory, self-categorization theory, and theory of social stigma as backdrops, three propositions were developed. As Figure 1 shows,
a three-dimensional context model suggests that lesbian and gay SIEs’ disclosure decisions during expatriation need to be understood in three-levels of context: personal- (Dimension I), organizational- (Dimension II), and country-levels (Dimension III), respectively.

Among all four participants, we found effects from these three different contexts on lesbian and gay SIEs’ disclosure decisions and their overall expatriation, albeit to different extents. First, our findings suggest that personal-level contexts, such as previous discrimination or harassment based on sexual orientation in the workplace, have a substantial impact on subsequent disclosure decisions of sexual identity for lesbian and gay SIEs during expatriation. For example, Peter’s (Interview 1) experiences of workplace discrimination on a basis of sexual orientation in his home country make him very reluctant to disclose his homosexuality during the international assignment. In a similar vein, Patrick (Interview 3) never brings his sexual orientation to expatriation due to a strong fear of being stigmatized. Second, findings also indicate that organizational-level contexts play a major role in the decision by lesbian and gay SIEs to disclose their sexual orientation during expatriation. In particular, organizational culture that lacks diversification or diversity awareness may prevent lesbian and gay SIEs from disclosing about their sexual orientation. Peter, Rigoberto, and Sonia (Interviews 1, 2, and 4) stated that a homogeneous workforce and a closed work environment of their previous work, such as masculine culture, aggravated workplace discrimination against LGBT employees and reduced the willingness to disclose their sexual orientation at work. In contrast, supportive and inclusive cultures within the organization elicited their disclosures during expatriation. Third, our findings also show an influence of country-level contexts on lesbian and gay SIEs’ disclosure decisions. All participants mentioned the importance of host country factors in their international assignments. For example, due to societal hostility toward LGBT people, Patrick (Interview 3) conceals his sexual orientation not only in his expatriation, but also in his personal life in Estonia. Similarly, both Peter and Sonia expressed their reluctance of accepting international assignments that are carried out in a host country in which represents a threat to LGBT people. In sum, expatriates’ disclosure decisions and their overall international work experiences are embedded in each of the three multidimensional contexts.

A contribution of our study is that, even though Paisley and Tayar (2016) proposed a conceptual framework that explains how the multiple identities of LGBT expatriates are reorganized by both organizational and national contexts during an international assignment, there has been a paucity of empirical findings in this area which we have addressed here. Moreover, each LGBT should be treated in accordance with his or her different identity. In this vein, our study improves on existing knowledge based on: focusing attention on lesbian and gay SIEs (different identities); adding an additional factor that influences lesbian and gay SIEs’ expatriation, namely the personal factor; and providing empirical findings of the effects of contexts on lesbian and gay SIEs’ disclosure decisions during expatriation. Moreover, this study extends social identity theory. Specifically, the use of the social identity theory in lesbian and gay SIEs’ disclosure decisions is believed to increase the explanatory power and predictive ability in the context of expatriation. In brief, our study adds a realistic understanding of lesbian and gay SIEs’ decisions to disclose and their international work experiences in various contexts.

Implications
Findings presented in this study have important practical implications for international human resource management (IHRM) in MNEs, especially those with lesbian and gay SIEs. Based on our empirical findings, we argue that IHRM takes into account three contexts when using lesbian and gay employees to fill international positions.

First, MNEs would do well to take more interest in lesbian and gay expatriates and their personal context. According to Mercer (2015), when it comes to using expatriates overseas,
93 percent of MNEs do not even track their employees’ sexual orientation. As a consequence, depersonalization pressure and internal conflict among identity are likely to be greater in lesbian and gay expatriates, thereby increasing not only their reluctance to accept international assignments, but also concealment of their sexual orientation identity leading to dissatisfaction and possible failure. Considering that SIEs tend to be self-directed and driven by their own personal values, MNEs could direct particular attention to personal contexts.

In addition to their experiences of workplace discrimination, other personal contexts such as marital status and family structure may also influence their disclosure decisions. In particular, as they get married and have children, lesbian and gay expatriates become more reluctant to disclose their sexual orientation due to the potential stigma of homosexuality (Lewis et al., 2003) which may be directed toward their family members. This tendency becomes more apparent when an MNE lacks LGBT-supportive policies or when the host country is hostile to LGBT. In these instances, lesbian and gay expatriates’ accompanying homosexual spouses, partners, or other family members are generally excluded from organizational support, such as health benefits and visa sponsorship (McPhail et al., 2016), as are many SIEs compared to the support given to AEs (Selmer and Lauring, 2010; Tharenou, 2013). To a large extent, exclusion of spousal support is likely due to the traditional definition of spouse still being widely applied in the expatriation context. For instance, Mercer (2011) found that fewer than half of MNEs use a broader or more inclusive definition of spouse irrespective of gender.

Not all host countries in which MNEs operate businesses are safe or legal for lesbian and gay expatriates. In fact, countries in various regions, including Africa and the Middle East, pose potential threats and dangers of violence or even death. Yet, Mercer (2015) found that 61 percent of MNEs are not aware of the local cultural and legal threats that exist for their lesbian and gay expatriates, which places these employees in precarious work situations abroad. Since cultural and operating environments may significantly differ from country to country, and there is only a limited extent to which MNEs as foreign companies can change such situations in the host country, MNEs have a dual responsibility to comply with legal and cultural requirements in operating businesses abroad as well as to provide a safe and secure work environment for their lesbian and gay expatriates. The above illustrates that, for the MNE, host country contexts are increasingly important.

In contrast to the above, knowledge of host country contexts can be advantageous for the MNE as well as its potential expatriate workforce. Consider, for example, the case of Taiwan where, in 2017, the supreme court ruled in favor of same-sex marriage making it the first Asian country to legally recognize same-sex unions. Such granting of equal rights and equal status to homosexual people provides a strong impetus for Taiwan to attract lesbian and gay expatriates, both as SIEs and also as AEs deployed by the MNE, to fulfill talent shortage demands. Indeed, the 2016 LGBT pride parade in Taipei attracted nearly 80,000 participants from Taiwan and the adjacent countries (The Telegraph, 2016). In particular, given the fact that the desire for travel or adventure is one of the main drivers of self-initiated expatriation (Selmer and Lauring, 2010), a country’s ability to embrace LGBT diversity is key to winning the global war for talent and determining the future range of possibilities for a nation. Recognizing the potential of the LGBT workforce may, in fact, enhance countries’ global competitiveness.

Limitations and future research
The study has some limitations. First and foremost, generalizability of the findings is limited by the small sample. Only one lesbian and three gay men were interviewed. Even though the findings can provide a broad understanding of the entirety of LGBT expatriates, these are neither enough nor generalizable. As discussed earlier, an over-generalization should be avoided since it ignores the different identities within LGBT identity-categorizations. Therefore, future studies should attempt to select more diverse
LGBT populations. Moreover, since this study only involved those who had initiated their expatriation themselves (as SIEs), it would be beneficial to replicate this study involving the LGBT AE to determine if there are differences in terms of the effects of the multidimensional contexts on their disclosure decisions during expatriation. Another fundamental limitation of this study underlies the fact that the sample comprises largely western expatriates who were sent to other western countries. Given today’s increasing diversity and complexity in the expatriate population, such sample characteristics further limit the generalizability of findings.

As Rigoberto’s final comments (Interview 2), being oneself is important in realizing full his or her potential during expatriation. In fact, previous studies have found both direct and indirect effects of lesbian and gay employees’ disclosure decisions on their job performance (Badgett et al., 2013; Day and Schoenrade, 2000; Ragins et al., 2007). For instance, Ragins et al. (2007) found that the decision to disclose sexual orientation at work was associated with greater participation and engagement of work. They also reported that concealment of sexual orientation in the workplace was significantly associated with greater psychological distress and dysfunction. However, a strong association between disclosure and LGBT employees’ job performance has been poorly studied in the context of expatriation. Hence, future studies should attempt to explore the potential effect of disclosure on lesbian and gay expatriates’ performance during international assignments.

In the present study, we found that lesbian and gay SIEs’ disclosure decisions and international work experiences are shaped by their personal context, the MNEs’ internal context, and the external context of the host country. In addition to these three contexts, there is still much to be understood about how different contexts affect LGBT expatriates’ experiences and their disclosure decisions during expatriation. For example, LGBT expatriates’ commonality, such as whether they are men or women, young or old, married or single, may significantly impact their international work decisions.

In particular, the experiences of lesbian expatriates from an international assignment may be different from those of gay expatriates, because in many corporate contexts, female expatriates are more likely to encounter gender-based challenges and restrictions (Adler, 1984; Forster, 1999; Gedro, 2010; Insch et al., 2008), i.e., the glass ceiling (Hymowitz and Schellhardt, 1986). Therefore, beyond the first layer of discrimination on the grounds of their sexual orientation, lesbian expatriates, as homosexual women, tend to face a second layer of discrimination based on gender, which can further reduce their motivation and commitment to an international assignment. Gedro (2010) similarly posited that lesbians can struggle with the double stigma of being homosexual and female. Although Gedro (2010) called for more studies about lesbian expatriates and the effects of commonality of gender and sexual orientation on international assignments, to date, only a few studies have been done (e.g. McNulty, 2015). In the same vein, gay expatriates who are members of racial or ethnic minority groups may experience additional “double” discrimination because of their intersectional identity as both homosexual and racial or ethnic minority. More research is clearly needed to investigate the effect of “hidden” contexts as well as “layered” contexts that impact on lesbian and gay expatriates international assignment experience, including their disclosure decisions. Doing so will give practical and actionable solutions to MNEs in their pursuit of a more diverse global talent pool.

References


Further reading


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