

COMMENTARIES

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## **Extending Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Supportive Organizational Policies: Communities Matter Too**

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LAURA G. BARRON  
*University of Wisconsin-Stout*

MICHELLE R. HEBL  
*Rice University*

Like King and Cortina (2010), we believe that there is a social and economic imperative for organizations to support their lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) employees. We would extend King and Cortina's argument, however, and propose that to recruit the best employees, employers ought to be concerned not just with the climate within their organization but also with the climate within their local communities.

It is, no doubt, of major importance for employers to foster equal opportunity within the bounds of their organizations. But employers who write an LGBT antidiscrimination policy into their handbooks and diversity training seminars, offer domestic partner benefits, and even offer LGBT support groups should not consider themselves done.

### **The Importance of Community Climate for LGBT Employees**

Ultimately, even the most devoted employees do not live at work. LGBT individuals who are considering whether or not to accept a job are apt to be influenced not only by the policies of their prospective employers but also by the policies of the surrounding area. LGBT individuals need to consider where they will be living the other approximate 128 hours a week when they are not working. As most people live relatively close to their workplaces, LGBT individuals need to ask themselves questions about these communities. "Is it safe to be 'out' in the community?" "Will my neighbors be accepting?" "Will my partner and I be stared at if seen together in public?" Particularly in locales where sexual orientation discrimination is legal, the answer may be "no." Hence, even if an organization has succeeded in creating a thoroughly inclusive and accepting organizational climate, prospective LGBT employees contemplating a position with that organization may need to think hard if that position is located in one of the many U.S. jurisdictions without sexual orientation antidiscrimination legislation.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Laura G. Barron.  
E-mail: barronl@uwstout.edu

Address: Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin-Stout, 323 McCalmont Hall, Menomonie, WI, 54751

Laura G. Barron, Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin-Stout; Michelle Hebl, Department of Psychology, Rice University.

If a national employment antidiscrimination law (i.e., ENDA) were to pass, the domestic partners of LGBT employees would likely find it easier to secure jobs with other area employers. Beyond this, however, government antidiscrimination policies ought to extend legal protection to cover housing, public accommodation, and other nonwork spheres as well. Although these nonwork protections are afforded on the basis of gender, race, and other classes covered under the Civil Rights Act, the most recent version of the ENDA bill does not include any legal protection outside of work.

### **Employers as Stakeholders**

Research shows that prospective employees certainly consider the community location when deciding whether or not to accept a position. As such, when making corporate location decisions organizations strategically consider community amenities that will attract (or repel) prospective employees (Glaser & Bardo, 1991; Grainger & Blomquist, 1999). The broader diversity literature suggests that minorities make geographic relocation decisions so as to avoid areas where they expect community hostility and discrimination (Burr, Potter, Galle, & Fossett, 1992; Krysan, 2002), and perceived city climate for intergroup relations has shown to negatively relate to job search intentions among minorities (McKay & Avery, 2006). Although it remains an empirical question, the fact that LGBT individuals disproportionately live in areas with antidiscrimination laws (Klawitter & Flatt, 1998) seems to suggest that similar concerns over community discrimination and climate likely exist for LGBT individuals as well (see also Murray, 1996).

### **The Role of Employers in Affecting Change**

We believe employers have a unique ability to affect change in their local communities that private individuals, be they LGBT or allies, lack. Organizations often

have tremendous sway in their communities because their local communities depend on them as a vital source of employment for area residents. As such, cities, counties, and states often go out of their way to meet organizational interests in order to prevent an employer from relocating, offering, for example, tax incentives, financing, and training partnerships to benefit employers (Bartlett & Steele, 1998).

Many employers already have begun to have an impact in affecting community change. For example, contested debate over local sexual orientation antidiscrimination laws in Dallas, Texas, mobilized many evangelical religious organizations to protest. Fortunately, American Airlines, a major area employer, also mobilized and spoke out on the importance of such protections ("Dallas Officials Adopt Measure," 2002). This Dallas antidiscrimination measure passed, and research from our lab demonstrates the effectiveness of this measure in improving the interpersonal treatment of gays and lesbians. In a field study, we found reduced interpersonal discrimination toward gay and lesbian job applicants in Dallas and Fort Worth relative to neighboring cities without such laws (e.g., Arlington, Mesquite), even after controlling for community demographics and organizational policies (Barron, 2009).

More proactive, ongoing external organizational efforts are also needed to create more supportive communities. For example, the Human Rights Campaign has begun to track organizational efforts such as choosing LGBT-supportive suppliers and distributors, philanthropy to LGBT-supportive nonprofits, and LGBT marketing and event sponsorship (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2009). Although public efforts may not be without risk of backlash in more conservative communities, when led by major area employers, or coalitions of area employers, we especially believe these efforts can have an impact in successfully altering community norms toward greater LGBT acceptance.

In conclusion, we look forward to a future in which employees can reach their

personal, social, and professional potentials regardless of their sexual orientations. We believe that King and Cortina articulate the importance of organizations building inclusive workplaces. We importantly add, however, that organizations must focus on their local communities too.

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