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You Bring Yourself to Work: An Exploration LGB/TQ Experiences of (In)Dignity and Identity

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YOU BRING YOURSELF OF WORK:
AN EXPLORATION OF LGB/TQ EXPERIENCES OF (IN)DIGNITY AND IDENTITY

by
Sara J. Baker

A DISSERTATION

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YOU BRING YOURSELF OF WORK:

AN EXPLORATION OF LGB/TQ EXPERIENCES OF (IN)DIGNITY AND IDENTITY

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University of Nebraska, 2014

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The workplace can be a hostile space for people who perform their gender, sex, and sexuality in ways that differ from heteronormative expectations. These employees are often met with messages that are particularly undignifying, thereby denying desires for respectful communication with others and damaging an individual’s sense of self-worth and value. Therefore, the goal of my project was to learn about the experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer individuals in the workplace and what kinds of interactions either affirm or threaten workplace dignity, their strategies for resistance, and how the communication of (in)dignity influences processes of LGB/TQ identity work.

Guided by a workplace dignity approach, I interviewed 36 LGB/TQ working adults for the purposes of gaining a deeper understanding of the communication of (in)dignity and identity in the workplace. Through in-depth, structured interviews, I examined their experiences of dignity and performances of identity in the workplace. These individuals discussed their experiences of (in)dignity; its relevance to gender, sex, and sexuality; responses to dignity threats; and the performance of their sexual identities in the workplace.

Analysis revealed several important insights regarding the communication of (in)dignity and identity in the workplace. First, dignity can be affirmed through
communicative practices that recognize personal LGB/TQ identities and through organizational acts of solidarity. Second, dignity can be threatened through denials of solidarity and (ambiguously-attributed) threats to security. Third, when dignity is threatened, LGB/TQ employees deploy sensemaking strategies in the forms of responses and political acts of resistance. Finally, the communication of (in)dignity in the workplace prompts processes of LGB/TQ identity work. Specifically, four identity work strategies emerged in conversation with (in)dignity: the Passer, the Professional, the Compartmentalizer, and the Valued Token. These findings contribute to the literature on workplace dignity, resistance, and identity work. These findings also point to several suggestions for human resource management practices. I propose a series of interventions designed to foster respect and inclusivity during anticipatory socialization and through the inclusion of LGB/TQ advocacy groups within the organization.
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DEDICATION

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.

Preamble, United Nations Declaration on Human Rights

This project is dedicated to anyone who has ever been denied the inherent right to bring themselves to work.
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A doctoral education is a team sport, and while there are a couple of Is in dissertation (two to be exact), this project is not an individual effort by any means. It is a collaboration between advisers, faculty mentors, colleagues, family, and friends.

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To quote Marcel Proust, “Let us be grateful to the people who make us happy; they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom.” Thank you to all of my gardeners both near and far.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGB/TQ) persons account for an estimated 7 million private sector employees, 1 million state and local employees, and 200,000 federal employees (Bedgett, Lau, Sears, & Ho, 2007), investing significant amounts of their time, talent, and energy in their respective organizations. Unfortunately, organizational life is not always kind to LGB/TQ employees. While incivility, bullying, abusive supervision, gossiping, and ostracism plague many employees on a daily basis, these kinds of problematic exchanges may be even more pervasive and severe for individuals who identify as LGB/TQ. People who perform their gender, sex, and sexuality in ways that differ from heteronormative expectations often are met with messages that are particularly undignifying—denying desires for respectful communication with others and damaging their sense of self-worth and value.

In this chapter, I present a case for exploring the experiences of LGB/TQ individuals in employment organizations through a workplace dignity lens. First, I describe ways employment organizations are hostile places for LGB/TQ employees. Next, I outline how hostile employment organizations can have detrimental effects for LGB/TQ employees and the organizations that employ them. Third, I explain how a workplace dignity lens can provide an important framework for furthering understanding of these problematic experiences. In particular, I am interested in exploring LGB/TQ employees and their experiences of dignity threats in the workplace. I am interested in understanding how dignity threats are negotiated and resisted by LGB/TQ employees in the pursuit of achieving a positive sense of self.
Conceptualizing Work as a Hostile Space for LGB/TQ Employees

Workplaces can be hostile spaces for individuals who identify as or are perceived to have a non-heterosexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual) or who perform gender in ways that do not conform to heteronormative expectations (transgender, queer) (Lewis, 2009). In my study, I use the acronym LGB/TQ with a slash separating sexual orientations and sexual identities from gender identities and expressions. This is an important distinction to make because sexual orientations/identities are often separated from gender identities and expressions in terms of available legal protections. Also, experiences of workplace (in)dignity vary based on performances of sexual orientations/sexual identities and gender identities/expressions. I recognize that there are a myriad of “non-normative” performances of gender, sex, and sexuality, however, I chose to position this study using the broad LGB/TQ acronym, which reflects a more fixed categorization of identities. This reflects the same classification system that is used to outline policies (e.g., non-discrimination clauses, protected categories) and procedures (e.g., inclusive benefits, access to health care, recognition of family) that regulate gender, sex, and sexuality. In addition to the LGBT identification categories, I include queer in an attempt to account for more fluid performances. The bottom line is this: non-heteronormative employees are often targeted in the workplace and disciplined through organizational and individual acts of discrimination, as well as communicatively aggressive acts such as bullying, harassment, jokes/taunts, and ostracism. I seek to draw attention to these problematic workplace experiences by exploring the perspectives of individuals who self-identify as LGB/TQ.
Workplace Discrimination

LGB/TQ individuals frequently experience discrimination in workplace. Discrimination is demarcated by actions that unfairly treat people based upon their membership in certain social groups (United Nations, 2012). Workplace discrimination based on gender, sex, and sexuality can be formally instituted through policies and practices, as well as informally instituted through organizational activities. It includes prejudicial treatment that affects material outcomes including decisions about hiring, firing, job assignments, promotion opportunities, and fringe benefits (Lewis, 2009). It is estimated that as many as one in ten LGB/TQ employees have experienced some form of discrimination on the job (Bedgett et al., 2007), while 27% of LGB and 78% trans* employees report experiencing some form of discrimination or harassment in the workplace (Sears & Mallory, 2011).

Formally, workplace discrimination is communicated through official organizational policies. For example, the recently repealed Don’t Ask Don’t Tell policy (1993-2011) implemented by the U.S. military, institutionalized discrimination against LGB/TQ service members. Anyone who was outed for being homosexual was discharged from duty and denied access to benefits otherwise earned through previous years of service (e.g., medical care, retirement pensions). Institutionalized discrimination can also be found in the public and private sectors as well. Public and private employment policies that offer medical insurance, life insurance, relocation assistance, educational benefits, et cetera to employees’ spouses discriminate against LGB/TQ employees with same-sex partners (in states where same-sex marriage is not recognized).
Complicating matters further is the lack of legal protection for individuals based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression (Lewis, 2009). While 17 states and Washington, D.C. protect sexual orientation and gender identity for all forms of employment, on the other end of the spectrum, 17 states offer no protections whatsoever for LGB/TQ employees with the rest of the states falling somewhere in between (Human Rights Campaign, 2014). These protections matter. Without them, LGB/TQ employees have no legal recourse for material and other damages experienced due to discrimination.

Informally, LGB/TQ employees can be discriminated against through organizational activities. For example, Lewis (2006) found that when colleagues extended invitations to LGB/TQ employees for social gatherings, the invitations were addressed to the employee and their “guest” compared to heterosexual colleagues whose “family” or “spouse” was invited. Furthermore, when LGB/TQ employees do attend company functions, they often feel pressured to engage in behavior monitoring to downplay their LGB/TQ identities (Lewis, 2006, 2009; Spradlin, 1998).

**Communication in Hostile Workplaces**

LGB/TQ individuals experience a range of hostile communication in the workplace that can create hostile workplaces. First, they are often *bullied* because of their performances of gender, sex, and sexuality. Bullying at work is defined as:

repeated, health-harming mistreatment of a person by one or more workers that takes the form of verbal abuse; conduct or behaviors that are threatening, intimidating, or humiliating; sabotage that prevents work from getting done; or some combination of the three. (Namie & Namie, 2009, p. 1)

Nearly one in five gay or lesbian employees in Great Britain have been bullied by colleagues based on sexual orientation (Hunt & Dick, 2008). This affects roughly 350,000 members of the British workforce. Additionally, 13% of the British workforce
(about 4 million persons) have witnessed verbal homophobic bullying while 4% (1 million) have witnessed physical homophobic bullying (Cowan, 2007).

Second, LGB/TQ individuals are *harassed* at work based on their performances of gender, sex, and sexuality. Harassment is defined as psychologically abusive acts that reflect social stigmas manifested in organizational cultures regarding sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity (Meyer, 2009). Harassment of LGB/TQ employees is communicated through sexual orientation harassment and harassment based on gender nonconformity. In terms of sexual orientation harassment, 3% of openly gay males and 2% of openly lesbian women reported harassment at work (Das, 2009). An additional 5-7% of men and women in that study reported harassment at work coupled with some report of same-gender/sex sexual activity or interest. Finally, 22-31% of transgender employees reported experiencing harassment based on gender nonconformity (Bedgett et al., 2007). While these statistics may seem low, it is important to note that the data comes from employees who openly identify as LGB/TQ or report some same-gender/sex activity or interest, and are willing to report harassment based on their LGB/TQ identities. Previous research has shown that many LGB/TQ employees choose to conceal their sexual orientations, sexual identities, and gender identities/expressions (Lewis, 2009; Spradlin, 1998). It is possible that these processes of behavior monitoring extend to survey report data as well.

Third, LGB/TQ individuals can also experience the communication of *hurtful jokes and taunts* based on gender, sex, and sexuality. These jokes and taunts can be classified as ambient experiences of heterosexism. Ambient experiences are defined as “actions that take place within the environment, but are not directed at a specific target”
(Silverschanz, Cortina, Konik, & Magley, 2008, p. 180). These actions include the telling of anti-LGB/TQ jokes and taunts that can be overheard by anyone in the organization. Silverschanz et al. (2008) found that more than half of the LGB/TQ employees they surveyed reported heterosexism on the job: 53% experienced direct harassment while 47% reported ambient experiences through anti-LGB/TQ jokes and language.

Finally, LGB/TQ individuals are often ostracized from their workplaces and from their coworkers based on gender, sex, and sexuality. Ostracism is a process through which certain organizational members are deemed outcasts and thus banished from the group (Sias, 2009). This process is both physical and social in nature. Physical ostracism is defined by placing the targeted outcast in an isolated or solitary location (Sias, 2009). Social ostracism is defined as “being ignored, avoided, excluded, rejected, shunned, exiled, banished, cut off, given the ‘cold shoulder,’ given the ‘silent treatment,’ and feeling invisible” (Williams, 1997, p. 134). An ethnographic study of a baked goods company in the southwestern United States revealed that 15% of participants interviewed reported attitudes towards LGB/TQ employees that favored exclusion either of the topic of homosexuality or of the individuals themselves (Embrick, Walther, & Wickens, 2007). These participants stated that they would have nothing to do with a LGB/TQ coworker again, effectively supporting the practice of ostracism.

The Detrimental Effects of Hostile Workplaces

A hostile work environment can have detrimental effects for individuals and organizations. Individuals can experience negative consequences physically, psychologically, and through the emotional demands of passing and stalled career
development. Organizations are negatively impacted by direct and indirect organizational costs.

**Individual Consequences**

Hostile workplaces can trigger damaging physical consequences. These negative consequences include an increased risk for physical ailments. For instance, abusive communication has been linked to physical consequences such as headaches, upset stomachs, and ulcers (Lucas, 2011b; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003b; Sutton, 2007), chronic physical ailments (Allen, 2000), heart disease (Das, 2009; Sias, 2009; Thompson, 2003), and an increased likelihood of injury (Rospenda, Richman, Ehmke, & Zlatoper, 2005). In extreme cases, hostile workplaces can impact individuals’ attitudes and behaviors regarding suicide, as the prevalence of long-term workplace abuse has been linked to increased thoughts and acts of suicide (Sias, 2009).

There are also psychological consequences that can impact individuals’ well-being. These negative consequences impact individuals’ self-esteem, stress levels, reports of anxiety, and experiences of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Individuals who are consistently abused experience elevated levels of anxiety, which places them at a higher risk of depression (Das, 2009; Sias, 2009; Thompson, 2003). Finally, long term workplace abuse has been linked to post-traumatic stress disorder (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002).

When the perceived basis for abuse is a person’s gender/sex/sexuality, it is sometimes possible to avoid the abuse by hiding an invisible identity (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005; DeJordy, 2008). Therefore, some LGB/TQ employees also experience personal costs associated with passing (Spradlin, 1998). Individuals who engage in
passing practices exert a significant amount of time and energy concealing their LGB/TQ identities (Lewis, 2009). This can lead to a decrease in individual productivity as sometimes employees must exert more energy to pass than to perform their job. Additionally, people who pass may suffer emotional consequences linked to presenting an inauthentic identity (Clair et al., 2005; DeJordy, 2008; Spradlin, 1998).

By spending a significant amount of time making sense of their organizational experiences, LGB/TQ employees endure a series of negative outcomes that can stall long-term career development. LGB/TQ employees’ mental energies at work can be consumed with understanding or dwelling on these experiences, which can distract an employee from their work responsibilities (Allen, 2000). Therefore, in addition to negative physical and psychological consequences in hostile workplaces, individuals may also experience detrimental effects in terms of stalled career development.

The long-term process of stalled career development begins when an employee starts to ruminate about organizational experiences. These sense making processes can consume a person’s thoughts on the job. It can begin when an employee misses out on taking on new projects and responsibilities, producing lower quality work, and passing up opportunities to be mentored. This negatively affects an employee’s development within the organization. LGB/TQ employees can struggle with issues surrounding commitment and productivity (Keashly & Neuman, 2005; Tepper, 2000). First, commitment to an organization is negatively impacted when employees have to hide their LGB/TQ identities (Lewis, 2009). Then, productivity can be affected as stigmatized individuals exert their time and energy on making sense of being targets of abuse, rather than being
able to focus on their job, their purpose within the organization (Allen, 2000; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003a).

Discrimination also negatively impacts LGB/TQ employees’ career development in formal and informal ways. Formally, the lack of federal protection for sexual orientation and gender identity means that LGB/TQ employees may be fired from their jobs. This formal discrimination protects workplaces from legal claims from fired LGB/TQ employees. Informally, LGB/TQ employees may be prevented from being hired by the organization or experience derailed promotion paths. In interviews with managers, Embrick et al. (2007) found that 90% of management would not hire someone who was gay or lesbian, nor would they consider that person to be the first choice among all of the job candidates. If these managers had seen or hired LGB/TQ employees in the past, they reported that they would not do it again.

Discrimination is also manifested in workplace bullying behaviors. These bullying practices can stall career development by “rebranding” the target as problematic to the organization (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003a). Once an individual is labeled a “troublemaker,” it is hard for that particular employee to repair his or her image (Namie & Namie, 2009). Furthermore, it has been suggested that the only way for targeted employees to free themselves from being bullied at work is to leave the organization (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003a, 2006). Even if this is a voluntary on the part of LGB/TQ employees, it still serves to stall their career even if temporarily while they seek out new employment.
Organizational Consequences

Individuals are not the only ones who suffer negative consequences stemming from communication in hostile workplaces. Organizations also navigate the consequences of discrimination, bullying, harassment, hurtful jokes, and ostracism. Organizations navigate these consequences through direct and indirect costs. Direct costs include medical and legal expenses, while indirect costs are experienced through decreases in productivity and quality of work, and increased costs in absenteeism and employee turnover.

In terms of direct costs, organizations spend money on medical and legal expenses. Medical expenses include increased expenditures for disability and workers’ compensation claims as well as medical costs incurred by a decrease in physical and mental well-being for employees (Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002). Legal expenses are incurred from combating lawsuits for wrongful termination, discrimination, and harassment (Yamada, 2005). In terms of gender, sex and sexuality, organizations that do not have anti-discrimination policies may be sued by individuals in attempt to implement these policies. Furthermore, even organizations that do have policies regarding discrimination based on sexual orientations and gender identities are still susceptible to legal actions by individuals seeking compensation for discrimination (Lewis, 2009). This can occur when organizations merely pay “lip service” to anti-discrimination policies instead of creating cultures of respect and inclusivity.

Indirect costs are absorbed by organizations in addition to direct medical and legal costs. Indirect costs are calculated in terms of productivity, quality of work, absenteeism and employee turnover. Hostile workplaces negatively impact the organization overall
through reduced productivity and quality of work with an increase in absenteeism and turnover (Hoel & Cooper, 2003). Merkin (2008) found that Latin American employees who were sexually harassed based on gender/sex were more likely to express intentions of leaving the organization and to engage in more absenteeism. Additionally, Lewis (2009) discovered that anti-LGB/TQ work environments, both real and perceived, reduced the number of talented applicants for employment with those organizations. In a separate study, Lewis (2006) found that lesbian police officers self-selected departments that had reputations for respect and inclusivity. The price of passing was too much for these police officers to endure by working in anti-LGB/TQ environments. This selectivity not only reduces the talent pool of LGB/TQ persons, but other minority groups as well who tend to steer clear of hostile organizational cultures (Lewis, 2009).

**Dignity as a Framework for Understanding Hostile Workplaces**

Dignity can be an important framework for understanding hostile workplaces due to its ability to focus on the quality of work life by drawing attention to systematic inequalities that impact experiences of work. According to Hodson (2001), “dignity is the ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to appreciate the respect of others” (p. 3). As such, there are two core dimensions through which dignity is achieved: personal (self-worth and self-respect) and social (respect of others) (Hodson, 2001). Personally, individuals can achieve dignity by being in control of themselves, exercising autonomy, and crafting a positive self-identity related to their job role (Bolton, 2007; Buzzanell & Lucas, 2013; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Sayer, 2007). Socially, individuals achieve dignity when others communicate respect to them by allowing them the space to work and to be themselves (Sayer, 2007). As such, the destructive practices described
above can be viewed collectively as denying personal dignity (decreasing the value
LGB/TQ employees perceive they have in the organization) and social dignity (being
disrespectful). In short, hostile workplaces can deny individual dignity, which can lower
self-esteem through threats to personal identity and self-worth (Lucas, 2011b; Sayer,
2007).

In organizational contexts people must see each other as unique individuals
instead of instruments of the organizational bottom line, thus “to have one’s dignity
recognized is to be treated as an end in oneself” (Sayer, 2007, p. 568). This is especially
important for LGB/TQ employees who struggle to express their identities of gender, sex,
and sexuality in hostile workplaces and oftentimes conceal these identities in order to
protect themselves from destructive communication socially enacted in organizations.

By adopting a dignity lens, the disparate research on LGB/TQ employees’
problematic experiences in the workplace can be organized under a central theoretical
framework. According to Sayer (2007), inequalities are still present in the workplace in
terms of social identities such as race, class, and gender. These inequalities make it more
difficult for employees from marginalized social identities to maintain their dignity and
respect. Managers and superiors may demand respect while simultaneously denying
individual employees the respect they also deserve. Thus, it is important to understand
experience of (in)dignity as it relates to those employees whose performances of gender,
sex, and sexuality are considered “non-normative” in organizations.

**Research Objectives and Significance of Study**

The goal of my study is to explore how (in)dignity is communicated in U.S.
workplaces as it relates to the experiences of LGB/TQ employees. I am interested in
understanding how LGB/TQ employees in the United States make sense of and resist threats to their dignity while attempting to negotiate a positive sense of self in the workplace. Thus, I am guided by three main research objectives. My first objective focuses on how (in)dignity is communicated on the job to LGB/TQ employees. Organizational communication research directly addressing issues of workplace dignity has positioned (in)dignity as an inherently communicative phenomenon (Lucas, 2011b; Lucas, Kang, & Li, 2013; Steimel, 2010). Therefore, it is important to explore the communicative aspects of (in)dignity as it pertains to LGB/TQ employees who have nondominant social identities in the workplace. These explorations can uncover salient dignity threats as experienced by LGB/TQ employees, as well as explore the ways in which dignity can be affirmed through constructive communication. My second research objective draws attention to how LGB/TQ employees respond to and resist dignity threats. Dignity research has highlighted how employees resist management by withholding efforts and citizenship behaviors (Hodson, 2001; Karlsson, 2012) or through legal claims of discrimination (Lewis, 2009). I seek to expand on this burgeoning focus by including the voices of LGB/TQ employees in conversations of resistance in the workplace. Finally, I explore how LGB/TQ employees engage in ongoing processes of identity work as they construct positive professional identities for themselves in the face of dignity threats.

This line of research is significant for its theoretical as well as its practical contributions. In terms of theory, I approach the study of workplace (in)dignity through a communication-centered framework. As such, my project contributes to organizational communication studies that explicitly investigate issues of workplace (in)dignity. Dignity
has been conceptualized as a subjective phenomenon that impacts individual well-being. However, more work must be done to include the voices and perspectives of those facing challenges and threats to dignity. My study achieves this goal by privileging LGB/TQ voices in the understanding of workplace (in)dignity. Furthermore, the results of my study inform human resource management practices by drawing attention to processes of anticipatory socialization and highlighting the role of LGB/TQ advocacy groups in the workplace.

**Summary and Overview of Research**

It is vital for theoretical and pragmatic reasons that researchers continue to investigate (in)dignity as experienced by LGB/TQ employees. The purpose of this introduction has been to establish a case for studying LGB/TQ individuals and their workplace experiences. This area of inquiry is important due to the hostile nature of workplaces for LGB/TQ individuals. This hostility is manifest in acts of discrimination, bullying, harassment, jokes/taunts, and ostracism. Hostile workplaces can have detrimental effects on both individuals and organizations. Individuals experience negative consequences in terms of physical and psychological health and well-being as well as the emotional demands of passing and stalled career development. Organizations experience detrimental effects through direct (e.g., medical and legal expenses) and indirect (e.g., decreased productivity and quality of work, increased absenteeism and employee turnover) costs.

To begin, in Chapter Two, I present a review of literature that examines workplace dignity as an important framework for understanding contemporary workplace issues, acts of resistance in the workplace, and processes of identity regulation and
identity work. In Chapter Three, I outline the methodological approach to my study, which includes a discussion of my (meta)theoretical positionality followed by an outline of my specific procedures for this research project. In Chapter Four, I explore the communication of (in)dignity as experienced by LGB/TQ employees. This is followed by a discussion of responses and resistance strategies deployed by LGB/TQ employees when faced with dignity threats. In Chapter Five, I outline how mechanisms for achieving dignity present a series of tradeoffs that affect LGB/TQ employees’ strategies of identity work. Finally, in Chapter Six, I present a summary of findings, discussion of theoretical and practical applications, limitations, and directions for future research.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, I present a case for studying the experiences of LGB/TQ individuals in employment organizations through a workplace (in)dignity lens. First, I outline key dimensions of workplace dignity research and guiding assumptions. Then, I discuss how LGB/TQ employees can be made susceptible to dignity threats on three levels: macro, societal discourses, meso, organizational structures and policies, and micro, destructive communication. Next, I outline agency and resistance through the deployment of micropractices against the organizations. Finally, I discuss the concepts of identity regulation and identity work from a dignity perspective and outline the complexities of negotiating LGB/TQ identities in the workplace.

Workplace Dignity Overview

Dignity serves as an important framework for understanding contemporary workplace issues. Bolton (2007) describes dignity as “a holistic lens through which workplace issues might be examined” (p. 7). In this study, dignity provides a holistic lens for understanding problematic workplace encounters as understood by LGB/TQ employees. At its core, dignity is concerned with two primary dimensions: the personal and the social.

Dimensions of Dignity

Personal Dimensions. Personal dimensions of dignity are concerned with an individual’s self-worth, value, and esteem. This core concern focuses on the discursive strategies that individuals use to create and maintain positive identities in the face of dignity threats. These discursive strategies have been shown to be especially salient in the context of health care and dirty work. For instance, Chiappetta-Swanson (2005) explored
how nurses who assist in pregnancy terminations create and maintain positive professional identities as nurses. These nurses highlighted the important physical and psychological care-giving aspects of their work. They believe that it took a special kind of nurse to be able to competently perform the duties of nursing in the face of occupational stigma. Additionally, Stacey (2005) examined (in)dignity in the context of health care and dirty work by studying low-wage home care providers. Home care workers downplayed their low wages by discussing the benefits that this occupation afforded them such as autonomy, the development of health care skills, and a personal sense of pride that comes from taking care of others.

Examinations of discursive strategies of (in)dignity in terms of personal dimensions have also been studied in conjunction with socio-economic status. Purser (2009) highlights how immigrant men working as day laborers experience (in)dignity. This ethnographic examination intersects socioeconomic status with constructions of gender/sex identities of men and masculinities. Specifically, this study focuses on how men discursively create positive gender/sex identities without the comfort and safety of long-term employment. Furthermore, Lucas (2011a) explores socioeconomic status in terms of blue-collar workers and discourses of social identities. Blue-collar workers engage in discursive strategies to maintain a positive image not only for themselves, but to advocate for dignity for all workers. These discourses were constructed through comparisons of high and low-status outgroups.

**Social Dimensions.** As a social dimension, dignity is concerned with communicating respect. The social nature of communicating respect is important for maintaining a positive individual identity. Sayer (2007) highlights social dimensions of
dignity by drawing attention to the importance of daily interactions. Respectful communication is vital to these everyday micropractices, which must recognize individuals as unique human beings. According to Sayer (2007), “pleasantries are not trivial” (p. 569) and as such they should not be overlooked.

Unfortunately, pleasantries are often overlooked. For example, Dufur and Feinberg (2007) describe social dimensions of dignity through their study on the National Football League’s player recruiting system. They describe the process of player recruitment as an artificially restricted labor market, which leads to the use of degrading and demeaning procedures. Players described this system as a “meat market” and drew comparisons to practices associated with the slave trade. Furthermore, Steimel (2010) examines the communication of (in)dignity in terms of pink-collar work and how dignity is established and threatened. Dignity is established through active listening and verbal appreciation, while being threatened through abusive communication. Finally, studies examining employment termination processes have captured the importance of social dimensions and everyday pleasantries. Research by Stuesse (2010) and Wood and Karau (2009) have demonstrated the importance of respectful interactions during the termination process. Employment termination can negatively impact a person’s sense of self-worth and self-respect, so it is vital that it is communicated in respectful, humanizing ways. In sum, this focus on social dimensions of workplace dignity demonstrates the role of communication in enabling and constraining the achievement of workplace dignity.

Key Assumptions of Workplace (In)Dignity

There are several key assumptions that guide theorizing and research on workplace (in)dignity (Lucas, 2013). First, dignity is best understood by its absence not
its presence in organizational life. In terms of understanding dignity based on this assumption, it is important to highlight communicative processes that threaten or destroy dignity. Dignity threats can be communicated through verbal abuse by supervisors, organizational gossip, public reprimands, chronic disrespect, and incivility (Hodson, 2001). Research projects have focused on highlighting the communication of dignity threats in organizational life. Fleming (2005) examined how paternalistic organizational cultures threaten the dignity of adult workers who equated their experiences in the workplace to being in kindergarten. Lucas et al. (2013) discuss how Foxconn, as a total institution, threatens and destroys dignity by controlling the lives of its employees 24/7. Furthermore, the aforementioned studies of positive identity construction, dirty work, and the health care industry (Chiappetta-Swanson, 2005; Stacey, 2005) are placed within a context of occupational stigma, which serves as a threat to personal dignity.

Building off of the first assumption that dignity is best understood by its absence, is the second assumption that all employees are vulnerable when it comes to dignity (Lucas, 2013). This vulnerability is not uniformly felt by all individuals, but varies based on occupation, position within the organization, personal anxieties, and career choice (Buzzanell & Lucas, 2013). This supports Sayer’s (2007) argument that the construction of dignity relies on individuals being seen as unique human beings within their organizations and that this humanizing process must be expressed respectfully by other organizational members. Sayer draws attention to the tension between the construction of dignity and the nature of work, which positions people as instruments hired as means to the organization’s ends. This tension is expressed in Durfur and Feinberg’s (2007) study of the NFL’s player recruitment process. Stuesse (2010) also explores this tension
through an examination of Latino immigrant poultry plant employees who suffer humiliation through the dehumanizing experience of employment termination due to the vulnerable nature of their immigrant status.

The final assumption is that dignity is a subjective, individual experience (Lucas, 2013). This assumption is connected to the personal dimension of dignity, and Hodson’s (2001) definition that dignity is personally understood as a sense of self-worth and self-respect. It is vital that dignity research continues to focus on the self and the personal dimensions of dignity as well as the power of social interactions. However, most research to date has focused on the researcher as the interpreter of experiences of (in)dignity. These lines of research rely on researcher interpretations to make sense of and describe problematic workplaces in terms of destructive communication (Dufur & Feinberg, 2007; Fleming, 2005), stigma (Chiappetta-Swanson, 2005; Stacey, 2005), and the impact of organizational structures (Hodson, 2001; Lucas et al., 2013).

Research is beginning to privilege employee voice in explorations of experiences and meaning making regarding workplace dignity. These studies foreground employee voice in terms of experiences of (in)dignity through their focus on understanding discursive strategies enacted by participants to create and maintain positive identities. Lucas (2011a) highlights how blue-collar workers use the discourses that all jobs are important and valuable, dignity is based on the quality of work performed not the status of the job, and that dignity is created by the way people are treated and in turn treat others in everyday organizational life. These discourses were used by blue-collar workers to maintain a positive and dignified workplace experience and identity. Expanding on this work, Lucas (2011b) defines three central dimensions of workplace dignity based on
focus group research with participants from a wide variety of occupations and backgrounds. These voices described three communicative dimensions of dignity: respectful interaction, recognition of competence, and acknowledgment of value to the organization. Finally, Steimel’s (2010) narrative analysis of pink-collar workers revealed how (in)dignity is communicated through everyday organizational micropractices.

**Mapping the Terrain of Dignity Studies in Organizational Communication**

The terrain of dignity studies aligns with previous theorizing in organizational communication research, but it also carves out a distinct area of its own. Dignity studies compliment previous theorizing and research in two ways. First, dignity studies focus on the relationship between organizational life and processes of (re)constructing identity. Organizations are sites where individuals come to understand at least part of their identity through work (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; du Gay, 1996). For instance, research focusing on workplace bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008), authenticity in the workplace (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Spradlin, 1998), and the discursive nature of gender, sex, and sexuality (Ashcraft, 2005; Tracy & Scott, 2006) all explore how identity is threatened in the workplace and highlights processes by which employees negotiate their identity and seek to create a positive sense of self in the workplace. What these lines of research have in common with dignity is an appreciation for the influence of organizational life in terms of how individuals come to define and describe themselves (du Gay, 1996). These studies also reveal the social nature of understanding identity (re)construction by emphasizing the processual nature of communication and the interplay between everyday micropractices, organizational structures, and macro discourses.
Second, dignity studies can be included in the broader discussion of processes and consequences of destructive communication in the workplace. This line of research focuses on what goes wrong in organizational life by exploring “incivility, harassment, and abuse of power, among other things” (Lutgen-Sandvik & Sypher, 2009, p. 1). Dignity studies are certainly concerned about these problematic experiences in the workplace (Fleming, 2005; Hodson, 2001; Lucas et al., 2013) and, as such, complement previous research focusing on workplace bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003a, 2006, 2008; Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie, & Namie, 2009), sexual harassment (Dougherty, 2001, 2009; Dougherty & Smythe, 2004), and incivility (Gill & Sypher, 2009; Sypher, 2004). Dignity aligns with this body of research through efforts to explore threats and denials to dignity, which can be communicated through verbal abuse by supervisors, organizational gossip, public reprimands, chronic disrespect, and incivility (Hodson, 2001). Furthermore, research efforts focused on destructive communication have drawn attention to the presence of identity and identity work when faced with problematic experiences in the workplace (Allen, 2000; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Spradlin, 1998).

Where dignity differs from other theorizing in destructive communication is through its potential to be affirmed in addition to denied and threatened. Affirmations of dignity are communicated through messages that reinforce an individual’s sense of self-worth and self-respect (Hodson, 2001) while other forms of destructive communication (e.g. bullying, sexual harassment, and incivility) do not necessarily have this potential to also raise an individual’s self-esteem and through its communication reinforce a person’s perceptions of value to an organization. For instance, Steimel (2010) highlighted how dignity could be communicated in pink-collar employment through active listening and
verbal appreciation. Buzzanell, Shenoy, Remke, and Lucas (2009) explored how individuals and groups could communicatively construct resilience in an effort to make sense of problematic experiences in the workplace. Therefore, dignity studies have the potential to draw attention to constructive ways of communicating in the workplace as well as the destructive ways. From this perspective, dignity can be used as a way to united disparate experiences of destructive communication in the workplace. A dignity approach draws attention to why the quality of work life matters and why organizations should be concerned about these matters. Dignity studies can become a central nexus for understanding the quality of life in organizations and advocating for the importance of seeing employees as unique human beings rather than instruments of the organization (Sayer, 2007).

There are, however, key distinctions between the communication of dignity and other forms of destructive communication, namely sexual harassment. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2014) defines sexual harassment as “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature” (para. 1). From an organizational communication standpoint, Dougherty (2009) positions sexual harassment as “a discursive focus” which “places communication at the core of sexual harassment” (p. 205). By conceptualizing sexual harassment as a discursive construction, researchers are able to draw attention to how communication in organizations constructs the workplace as gendered/sexed.

While both lines of research draw attention to the gendered/sexed/sexualized nature of work, these messages are communicated in different fashions. While both are social in nature and function to create hostile work environments, the ways in which
these forms of communication are manifest differ. The communication of sexual harassment is a social construction that makes gender/sex visible in the workplace through language that draws attention to a target’s gender/sex/sexuality or that of a generalized other (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2014). This notion of visibility is what distinguishes studies of dignity threats that target gender, sex, and sexuality from studies of sexual harassment. Dignity threats regarding gender, sex, and sexuality can operate in ways that seek to render “non-normative” sexualities invisible in the workplace (Lewis, 2009; Spradlin, 1998). Messages can be communicated that LGB/TQ sexualities should be indiscernible in the workplace in order to uphold heteronormative standards (Lewis, 2009; Rich, Schutten, & Rogers, 2012; Spradlin, 1998). This can be reflected in the literature on invisible social identities (Clair et al., 2005) and passing practices (Spradlin, 1998).

Furthermore, while their opportunities are still potentially constrained in the organization, a target of sexual harassment has more recourse than someone who may be experiencing denials or threats to dignity. That does not mean that these formal policies prevent sexual harassment, but it is an important step in combating the occurrence of these experiences in the workplace. These policies and procedures have brought up the inclusion of sexual harassment training in organizations. Dougherty (2009) notes that sexual harassment training has been a fruitful avenue for correcting sexual harassment in the workplace. She described working with an organization that invested a great deal of money and energy into sexual harassment training for its managers. She reported that the managers were well versed in being able to identify and label sexual harassment.
The inclusion of sexual harassment training in the workplace opens the door for other discussions of gender, sex, and sexuality in organizations. These discussions could be framed using dignity as a holistic lens for understanding the destructive communication in the workplace and emphasizing the quality of work life. By accentuating workplace dignity in organizational training sessions, cultures of respect and inclusion can be fostered. Also, members of the organization have a common language in identifying practices that support employees’ sense of self-worth and value and also practices that are destructive. While it may not be possible to create a formal policy that regulates dignity, like that of sexual harassment, this concept can be integrated into organizational cultures as to make sense of hostile work environments. It can also be used as a way to highlight micro and meso practices that foster respect and inclusion for all employees and improve the quality of work life.

Theoretical and practically, the study of dignity matters in organizational communication research due to its ability to draw attention to the quality of work life through the communication of affirmations and threats. Attention is placed on the ways that dignity can be affirmed in the workplace as well as the ways that it can be denied/threatened through destructive communication and hostile work environments. This concern for the quality of work life is reflected in identity research as well as scholarship in destructive communication. Practically, discussions of dignity can be a way of engaging in dialogue related to the quality of work life in organizations. It can be a talking point for addressing destructive communication in inclusive and respectful ways, while also drawing attention to the potential communication to affirm dignity.
In summary, workplace dignity is indeed similar to other prominent lines of organizational research—from bullying to sexual harassment to incivility—particularly in terms of its focus on construction of positive identity and how identity is influenced by destructive communication practices. At its core, it is concerned for the quality of work life. However, it differs in important ways. By encompassing both threats and affirmations, it enables researchers to gain understanding into both destructive and constructive communication. Likewise, because it is more inclusive in the sense that it encompasses experiences that may fall outside narrow legal definitions of sexual harassment, it allows for a broader picture of hostile or destructive workplaces. Therefore, a dignity lens can provide a more robust and nuanced account of organizational life for LGB/TQ employees than other kinds of destructive communication.

**Susceptibility of LGB/TQ Employees to Dignity Threats**

As described in Chapter One, LGB/TQ employees are highly susceptible to dignity threats based on identity expressions regarding gender, sex, and sexuality. Of particular note are threats based on gender, sex, and sexuality alone—both when threats devalue LGB/TQ employees’ contributions to the organization (thereby raising questions of personal dimensions of dignity) or when they contribute to a climate where communication interactions with organizational others is disrespectful (thereby denying social dignity needs). These threats are experienced at macro, meso, and micro communicative levels.
Macro-Level Dignity Threats

At the macro-level, dignity can be threatened through societal messages that stigmatize LGB/TQ performances of gender, sex, and sexuality. Heteronormativity serves as a powerful macro-level discourse for stigmatizing LGB/TQ performances of gender, sex, and sexuality. Heteronormativity is conceptualized as the ways in which “social institutions and policies reinforce the presumption that people are heterosexual, that gender and sex are binaries” (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007, p. 13). The prevalence of heteronormativity in sociocultural discourses continues to marginalize and stigmatize LGB/TQ identities by favoring performances of heterosexuality and gender/sex as binaries. Heterosexuality serves as a prime example of how sexuality can be thought of as not only “sex acts and sexual identities, but also an arrangement of meanings associated with these acts and identity” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 10), thus positioning heterosexuality as a vital mechanism for controlling life. According to Foucault (2000), sexuality operates as an “especially dense transfer point for power relations” (p. 102). Butler (2004) describes heterosexuality as a performance that relies on the production of homosexuality in order to preserve heterosexuality as the approved performance. As such gender is simultaneously taken for granted while still being “violently policed” (Butler, 2004, p. 98).

For example, Rich et al. (2012) explored how the U.S. military barred LGB/TQ soldiers from service under Don’t Ask Don’t Tell (DADT) by discursively inverting assumptions regarding predator and prey dynamics. This inversion is particularly threatening to masculinity and heterosexuality because “the soldier is predator, not prey; invulnerable, not vulnerable; the penetrator, not the penetrated” (Rich et al., 2012, p.
There are two key societal messages that helped the U.S. military to construct this predator/prey inversion. First, gay men are associated with the feminine and, therefore, cannot adequately embody masculinity. Second, gay males are constructed as hypersexual predators that see heterosexual males as objects of desire to be preyed upon. These societal messages create a paradox of gay male performance this is simultaneously too gay and too straight for service. Furthermore, discussions of lesbian service members were absent from the conversation despite being three times more likely to be discharged under DADT, the U.S. military’s policy barring open service by LGB/TQ persons (Rich et al., 2012).

**Meso-Level Dignity Threats**

LGB/TQ individuals are also highly susceptible to dignity threats through heteronormative organizational cultures. Organizational structures and processes are not neutral of gender, sex, and sexuality, but are instead geared towards male bodies and performances of hegemonic masculinity (Acker, 1990). At the meso-level, organizations attempt to control performances of gender, sex, and sexuality by removing sexuality, emotion, and procreation from organizational discourse and logic (Trethewey, 1999). This perpetuates a false pretense that organizations are asexual configurations that are “neutral” in regard to gender, sex, and sexuality (Acker, 1990; Rich et al., 2012). Despite this presumption of neutrality, LGB/TQ employees experience dignity threats on a meso-level through heteronormative organizational rituals and policies.

First, heteronormative organizational cultures devalue LGB/TQ individuals through organizational rituals. Organizational rituals are activities that have a reoccurring element to them that create a guidebook for organizational behavior (Alvesson & Billing,
Rituals in organizations include actions and orchestrated events that create organizational cultures (Alvesson & Billing, 2009). Examples of workplace rituals include procedures for conducting meetings and activities such as happy hours, holiday parties, company picnics, and other social activities. Often these actions and events can serve to marginalize LGB/TQ employees’ experiences and integration into organizational cultures. Lewis (2009) draws attention to rituals like displaying family photos, wearing wedding rings, and social activities that stigmatize LGB/TQ employees. Social activities are especially important organizational rituals for perpetuating heteronormativity in organizational cultures. Lewis (2006) highlights how lesbian police officers would receive invitations to events that were addressed to the employee and their “guest.” This practice would be less of a problem if it was extended to all employees instead of just a practice for LGB/TQ employees. Instead, invitations for heterosexual employees were addressed to “family” or “spouse.”

Second, organizational policies can marginalize LGB/TQ employees. Organizational policies often are designed to uphold heteronormativity by privileging heterosexuality and perpetuating binaries of gender/sex (Alvesson & Billing, 2009). These policies include benefit allocation systems, discrimination policies, and organizational socialization procedures. First, in terms of benefit allocation systems, many LGB/TQ employees are denied domestic partner benefits (DPB). Lack of DPBs makes it difficult for LGB/TQ families to secure health insurance or retirement benefits for their partners and non-adopted children (Lewis, 2009). In organizations that do offer DPBs, LGB/TQ employees must jump through numerous hoops to receive these benefits. LGB/TQ employees often have to disclose their sexuality, prove cohabitation, and
extensively document their relationship in order to receive these allocations. While seemingly well-intentioned, these procedures can hurt LGB/TQ employees sometimes more than they help.

LGB/TQ employees must also navigate organizational policies that are structured to prohibit access based on gender, sex, and sexuality. These policies can be found in processes of hiring, promotion, and termination (Lewis, 2009). First, LGB/TQ individuals’ access to an organization may be restricted during the hiring process. For instance, Embrick et al. (2007) described how a large baked goods company in the southwest used the hiring process to limit LGB/TQ individuals’ access to the organization. This access was limited through a network hiring system and the organization’s interview process. Interviews with workers and managers revealed that 90% of respondents would not either hire anyone who they thought might be gay nor would consider that person a first or top choice for an open position. Furthermore, managers who had seen or personally hired gay or lesbian employees stated that they would not do it again. Second, LGB/TQ employees’ access can be limited through organizational policies regarding promotion. LGB/TQ employees are vulnerable to restricted job duties, withholding promotion, and denied rewards (Lewis, 2009), all of which can prohibit an employee from upward mobility in the company. Finally, LGB/TQ employees’ access can be limited through termination policies. Sexual orientation and gender identity are not federally protected categories; thus, LGB/TQ individuals are not federally protected from employment termination. Furthermore, protections vary state-by-state and from one organization to another so LGB/TQ individuals do not enjoy uniform workplace protections.
Finally, organizational socialization processes can threaten LGB/TQ employees’ experiences of dignity. These socialization processes include during orientation and training. Lewis (2009) found organizations that offer DPBs may not spend time during the training sessions presenting material and information on specific policies. It is assumed that most new employees are not LGB/TQ and therefore do not need to hear about DPBs. This lack of inclusion during an employee’s first experiences as an organizational member sets an important tone regarding the culture of inclusion in the organization. By not including same-sex partner benefit coverage in orientation sessions, LGB/TQ employees are given subtle “don’t ask don’t tell” messages about sexuality. Lewis (2009) found that LGB/TQ employees are likely to assess and determine their organization’s acceptance levels during employee orientation and use this information to guide future organizational behavior.

**Micro-Level Dignity Threats**

Dignity threats experienced at the macro-level through discourses of heteronormativity and the meso-level with organizational rituals and policies influence destructive interpersonal communication that threatens LGB/TQ employee dignity on the micro-level. For LGB/TQ employees, destructive organizational communication is experienced as “the devastation of stigma and discrimination and the resulting discomfort” (Lewis, 2009, pp. 184-185). These micropractices are carried out in dyadic or small group interactions through personal and generalized group attacks.

First, LGB/TQ employees experience destructive communication through personal attacks that specifically target a certain individual based on their performance of gender, sex, and sexuality. Personal attacks may be particularly threatening for LGB/TQ
employees because the content of these attacks are not based on an individual’s role at work, but are based on their identity. For instance, an individual may be directly confronted by other employees who view homosexuality as a personal choice. Lewis (2009) found that in some cases coworkers would attempt to force heterosexuality on LGB/TQ employees. This can be threatening based on the extent to which an LGB/TQ person is out at work. For example, LGB/TQ employees who are open about their sexuality may fear an increased likelihood of experiencing not only more personal attacks, but physical attacks as well. Conversely, LGB/TQ employees who engage in passing practices may be threatened by personal attacks because they are not fully out at work. They, too, may fear an increased likelihood of more personal attacks and potential physical assault despite the fact that they conceal their sexuality at work. Personal attacks as organizational micropractices are difficult for LGB/TQ employees regardless of whether they reveal or conceal their sexuality.

Second, LGB/TQ employees experience destructive communication through generalized group attacks that position LGB/TQ identities as weak or inferior. This is specifically communicated through the use of gay taunting language. Gay taunting is defined as the use of verbal language to harass or accuse another individual of a performing a gay sexual identity, and is linguistically captured by using terms such as such as “gay,” “faggot,” “fag,” “homo” or “queer” (Baker, 2009). Typically, gay taunting language is used to describe objects or people as being “dumb,” “weak,” and “inferior” (Baker, 2009; Pascoe, 2007). While gay taunting language is not explicitly used as a personal attack, it still associates LGB/TQ identities with negative, undesirable attributes.
Furthermore, generalized group attacks can be viewed by employees as harmless communication, just something to do to pass the time. For instance, Thompson (2003) explored micropractices of “busting” in a manufacturing plant between production workers. Busting involved making jokes and playing pranks based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, mannerisms, physical appearance, family, friends and organizational status (Agassi, 1986). The men who initiated the busting described the jokes and pranks as “all in good fun,” or remarked that people were being overly sensitive and “making a big deal out of nothing” (Thompson, 2003, p. 22). However, through focus group research, Thompson (2003) discovered that either the men themselves or a friend of theirs had been personally hurt by busting.

This analysis of the literature regarding workplace (in)dignity as a framework for understanding contemporary workplace issues regarding LGB/TQ employees leads me to pose the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How is dignity experienced by LGB/TQ employees in the workplace?

**RQ2:** What are the most salient dignity threats experienced by LGB/TQ employees in the workplace?

**Resisting Dignity Threats in the Workplace**

While LGB/TQ employees are susceptible to dignity threats in the workplace, they are not passive victims. Dignity can provide a cohesive way to examine how LGB/TQ individuals employ agency and resistance when faced with destructive communication in hostile workplaces. Agency is defined as “the active and creative performance of assigned roles in ways that give meaning and content to those roles beyond what is institutionally scripted” (Hodson, 2001, p. 16), while resistance is the act
of taking back one’s dignity (Hodson, 2001). Agency and resistance are important to discuss in terms of workplace dignity due to the dominant model of unilateral management of power prevalent in the United States. This model has resulted in consistent patterns of mismanagement and abuse, which is a central threat to achieving dignity (Hodson, 2001).

The presence of mismanagement and abuse in organizations has served as a catalyst for acts of resistance and creativity. Hodson (2001) discovered that even in hostile workplaces, individuals still find ways to enact resistance. Resistance is a two-step process consisting first of the defense of basic human rights as well as taking action which demands respect from others. This process can be enacted in both active and passive ways; however, most acts of resistance are performed in subtle ways. These subversive acts are carried out not for the purposes of radically overhaul the organization, but for the purposes of specifically attacking an aspect or component of the organization (Cleaveland, 2005; Fleming, 2005). This battle for dignity is waged through daily acts of resistance and micropractices which can include confrontations, cynical counter-narratives, and counter institutional communication.

First, Cleaveland (2005) found that women who were working low-wage, temporary labor positions would resist dignity threats by confronting their supervisors. Confrontations would take place over working conditions, subservient tasks, and unfair treatment. These confrontations would result in decreased productivity and commitment, an increase in absenteeism, petty theft, and exiting the organization. However, these acts, while valuable for reclaiming dignity and fostering agency, did not challenge the status
quo of the organization, they only challenged a particular aspect, in this case it was the employee-supervisor relationships that was resisted.

Employees challenge particular aspects of their organizations through the use of cynical counter-narratives. Fleming (2005) found that employees in paternalistic workplaces used cynicism to enact resistance by creating counter identities. These employees would combat paternalism by constructing counter identities that reinforced their adulthood. The purpose of these narratives was not to change the organization as a paternalistic entity, but was instead focused on individual employees’ well-being. The goal of these cynical counter-narratives was to penetrate the social conditioning of the organization and reclaim a sense of agency and adulthood for employees.

Third, employees resist organizational threats to dignity through the use of counter institutional websites. These websites serve as a space for disgruntled employees and frustrated customers to voice their displeasure. At the time of their study, Gossett and Kilker (2006) had uncovered more than 1,095 counter institutional websites, which provided space for individuals to discuss topics that may be considered “taboo” in the confines of the workplace. This form of resistance can be especially empowering, as employees and customers can publicly voice their concerns and opinions, but with a decreased chance of retribution and termination thanks to the anonymous format. Counter institutional websites, while public and open, still hide the identity of threatened employees and serve as a subtle micropractice of organizational resistance.

This analysis of literature regarding resistance to dignity threats has led me to pose the following research question:
RQ3: In what ways do LGB/TQ employees respond to and resist threats to their dignity at work?”

Communicating Identity at Work

The construction of identity continues to provide a vital area of inquiry for organizational studies. These lines of research explore identity as an ongoing process of creating self through both personal and social dimensions (Lucas, 2011a; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Watson, 2008). Social dimensions of identity include: extra-individual forces (e.g., senior management, professional organizations, structures), organizational discourses (e.g., socialization narratives about the organization), and sociocultural discourses (Alvesson et al., 2008). To date, researchers have devoted a significant amount of attention to personal constructions of identity; however, this area of inquiry can be enhanced through more concerted efforts to examine the social as well as the personal aspects of identity. By examining both of these dimensions, researchers can more adequately explore darker aspects of organizational life related to issues of power and control.

Identity Regulation

Identity regulation is comprised of meso- and macro-level processes that control and discipline individual constructions of identity. On a macro-level, identity is regulated through sociocultural and political discourses that discipline the creation and performance of identity. Heteronormativity serves an important macro-level function for regulating identities regarding gender, sex, and sexuality. For instance, Rumens and Kerfoot (2009) discovered that while gay men working in the United Kingdom felt empowered by gay-friendly workplaces, they still felt constrained by larger discourses of heteronormativity
that separated sexual and professional identities at work. For these gay men, professional identities were enabled by gay friendly workplaces, but these identities were also disciplined through heteronormativity.

On a meso-level, organizations regulate identity through managerial inspired discourses that limit individual constructions of identity within the context of the organization (Alvesson et al., 2008). According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002) employees are “managed identity workers” (p. 619) and as such managerial messages and discourses blend with individual constructions of self, creating a perception of self-control that is merely a product of organizational regulation. Examples of organizational identity regulation include ongoing socialization processes such as hiring, training, and developing employees. Identity regulations regarding gender, sex, and sexuality are present in these organizational processes, which informally discriminate against LGB/TQ employees (Embrick et al., 2007; Lewis, 2006; Spradlin, 1998). Thus, identity regulation becomes a repetitive form of organizational power and control constantly (re)creating ways to calibrate individual performances of identity especially in regard to LGB/TQ identities.

LGB/TQ identities in the workplace can be regulated and controlled through managerial inspired discourses of authenticity. Authenticity is conceptualized as being true to oneself by blurring the line between home and work life (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). These discourses discipline displays of authenticity through cultural control, which is the “attempt to wed the interests of workers with those of the corporation through shared values and conformity” (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011, p. 182). Conventional forms of normative control have been shown to decrease authenticity in organizational
life, so the discourse of “just be yourself” was created as a variant of normative control and identity management working to increase employee’s displays of authenticity while maintaining control.

Organizations go to great lengths to support authenticity while maintaining control. For instance, Fleming and Sturdy (2011) found that when employees were encouraged to be true to who they were, the discourse did not to liberate employees, but instead distracted them from conventional cultural controls. Employees were still homogenized in the workplace especially in terms of social identities. These value-based discourses are especially problematic because they operate to divert workers attention and keep the organizational from truly advancing authenticity in organizations. Control and employee commitment blend into a hybrid where seemingly well intentioned practices like fun and empowerment are co-opted for organizational control (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011).

Authenticity discourses are purportedly designed for the purposes of bridging the public/private, work/life divide, but in actuality, “just be yourself” can be even more derisive to these tensions creating a fracturing of true and fake identities. Fleming and Spicer (2003) found that workers began to feel inauthentic when forced to identify with the company and express specific feelings and beliefs that aligned with an organizational agenda. This created a conflict between the inner and outer selves. The inner self was viewed as more authentic and true than the outer self, which was designed to be a good organizational citizen and “play the game.”
Identity Work

Even though meso organizational processes and macro-level discourses attempt to control employees through identity regulation, individuals are not passive victims, but use active identity work as a form of resistance (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). When identities are threatened or disrupted by organizational and discursive regulations, individuals engage in identity work, which is defined as continual sensemaking processes that seek to reconcile tensions between personal and social constructions of self (Watson, 2008). This push/pull between the personal and the social are “caught up in contradictions and struggles, tension, fragmentation, and discord” (Watson, 2008, p 124).

Identity work is triggered by increased levels of stress and strain on an individual, as well as specific events, encounters, and experiences in the workplace (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). This work is consciously constructed as a result of self-doubt experienced by an individual when social dimensions are not congruent with personal sense of self. Thus, it is important to focus on the social interactions that prompt individuals to engage in identity work for the purposes of (re)creating coherent, distinct, and positive selves.

Certain social interactions can create a crisis of identity. These extreme cases are often caused by trauma and/or stigma and form a distinct type of identity work, intensive remedial identity work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). This is a distinct form of identity work for three key reasons (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). First, intensive remedial identity work is triggered by an increase in an individual’s level of anxiety. Second, this form of identity work is explicitly goal-oriented with individuals strategically attempting to repair positive and coherent constructions of self. Finally, this form of identity work is more
mentally taxing for individuals and can lead to negative physical, psychological, and career consequences. For instance, Lutgen-Sandvik (2008) examined intensive remedial identity work in response to the trauma of workplace bullying as a critical event for identity construction. This study found that intensive remedial identity work is caused by social dimensions in the workplace and as such organizations should address meso- and macro-level causes in order to empower individuals within the context of work.

**Strategies for Communicating LGB/TQ Identities at Work**

Identity work becomes especially salient for LGB/TQ individuals in their quest to attain dignity. Like identity, dignity is dependent on the self and other through respectful interactions. These respectful social interactions can become particularly treacherous to achieve when individuals possess *invisible social identities* in the workplace. Invisible social identities are less discernible to the naked eye (e.g., sexual orientation, dis/ability, social class), but are always present in organizational life. As a result, individuals with invisible social identities are often asked to choose between passing as a member of the dominant, visible identity or reveal their invisible social identity (Clair et al., 2005).

Furthermore, the decision to conceal or reveal invisible social identities is not a one-time disclosure, but an ongoing process that marks the overall extent to which an employee is out at work.

To pass or not to pass can be a difficult decision for LGB/TQ employees. This decision provides unique challenges for constructing authentic LGB/TQ identities at work. The presence of discrimination and destructive interpersonal communication in the workplace can specifically target LGB/TQ employees and negatively affect their experiences of dignity. Thus, if LGB/TQ employees are targets of discrimination and
destructive interpersonal communication in the workplace, passing may protect these individuals from dignity threats.

Passing can be either unintentional or intentional (Clair et al., 2005). Unintentional passing occurs when a person is unconsciously categorized as a member of the dominant social identity. This occurs when LGB/TQ employees are perceived to be heterosexual. This is a common practice in transaction-based workplace interactions, but today’s nature of work calls for more teamwork and knowledge-based interactions (DeJordy, 2008). This redefined nature of workplace interactions makes it virtually impossible to maintain transaction-based interactions. Thus, most passing practices are intentional and as such LGB/TQ employees who attempt to pass consciously work to be perceived as heterosexual by members of the organization. Intentional passing requires that LGB/TQ employees perpetually monitor their behavior (Clair et al., 2005). Behavior monitoring most readily occurs in the context of the workplace, but can also follow an employee home and can dictate decisions in their personal life as well.

Spradlin (1998) identifies six forms of intentional passing performed by LGB/TQ persons: distancing, dodging, distracting, denying, deceiving, and disassociating. Distancing involves removing oneself from conversations that would require the exchange of personal information (e.g., avoiding break rooms or other spaces where employees informally gather in an attempt to opt out of personal conversations). Dodging occurs when the conversation is steered away from personal topics (e.g., directing questions back to the person that was asking rather than answering them). Distracting is used to provide confusion regarding an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity (e.g., presenting aspects of identity that contradict LGB/TQ stereotypes). Denying is
accomplished by withholding personal information regarding sexual orientation or gender identity (e.g., concealing same-sex relationships). Deceiving is the intention creation of messages the give the impression that an individual is heterosexual (e.g., reversing gender pronouns to describe an opposite sex interaction). Finally, dissociating occurs when individuals purposefully separate themselves from LGB/TQ communities (e.g., avoiding judgments by not associating with LGB/TQ community members).

While these six passing practices can spare LGB/TQ employees from certain experiences of indignity at work (such as direct harassment or bullying), Spradlin (1998) notes that passing practices come at a cost. According to Spradlin (1998), passing prevented her from developing personal relationships at work and from being a social and active member of the organization. Personally, she experienced lower self-esteem and integrity as well as increased emotional labor. Socially, passing prevented her from achieving authentic, healthy work relationships. Passing practices constitute a form of identity work and can increase an individual’s emotional labor, complicate identity work, and present challenges to authentic expressions of identity.

Passing is risky because it could serve to sequester authentic identities (Clair et al., 2005). If an individual continues to engage in passing practices, interpersonal relationships within the organization may suffer. Relationships may become strained when LGB/TQ employees must keep people at a distance and guard against disclosing aspects of their social identities. This has a two-fold implication. First, it prohibits LGB/TQ individuals from networking and mentoring practices that could assist in career development (Lewis, 2009). Second, strained interpersonal relationships can negatively impact a person’s ability to resist dignity threats. Strained interpersonal relationships may
prevent employees from developing communities of coping that can offer social support. Hodson (2001) cites that it is important to establish a positive and supportive climate at work in order to enact resistance. Coworker relationships are central, but this can be difficult to achieve for LGB/TQ individuals especially when they are engaging in passing practices.

Alternatively, LGB/TQ employees can reveal aspects of their gender, sex, and sexuality. Clair et al. (2005) describe three revealing strategies for “coming out” at work: signaling, normalizing, and differentiating. Signaling is used to subtly disclose sexuality through hints, clues, and ambiguous language. Normalizing involves revealing a LGB/TQ identity, but downplaying the difference. And finally, differentiating is used by individuals to highlight their LGB/TQ identities and embrace them as important markers of difference. Differentiating as a revealing strategy is often associated with attempts to change organizational perceptions of LGB/TQ identities.

But, like passing, revealing LGB/TQ identities at work comes with a price. By revealing, LGB/TQ employees could expose themselves as targets of dignity threats and experience negative effects in relation to physical, psychological, and career consequences. Thus, it is important to engage LGB/TQ voices in understanding these identity dilemmas. It is important that these questions of authenticity in terms of LGB/TQ identities at work are explored from a workplace dignity perspective to understand the tradeoff between avoiding certain indignities while simultaneously experiencing others.

Choosing to pass or reveal an invisible social identity is a process that depends on the context and the individual (Clair et al., 2005). Context includes the organizational culture, professional environment, and interpersonal relationships while individual
characteristics are defined by personality traits, personal motivations, and the characteristics of the invisible social identity. Thus, contextual and individual characteristics operate as a tension working in conjunction with one another to inform decision making processes. Individuals often choose to conceal or reveal invisible social identities based on a cost benefit analysis similar to social exchange theories.

This analysis of literature regarding identity regulation, identity work, invisible social identities, and authenticity in organizations has led to the proposal of the following research questions:

**RQ4:** What identity work strategies do LGB/TQ employees practice at work regarding gender, sex, and sexuality?

**RQ5:** What are the implications of these identity work strategies for the achievement of dignity?
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The goal of my project is to explore how LGB/TQ employees experience the communication of (in)dignity, their strategies for responding to and resisting dignity threats, and the implications for processes of identity work. As outlined in Chapter Two, workplace dignity provides a central framework for interpreting the results of my study. Specifically, I am interested in exploring how dignity is communicated through affirmations and denied through threats that target gender, sex, and sexuality. Additionally, I am interested in understanding how LGB/TQ employees make sense of these threats through responses and resistance strategies. This exploration of the communication of (in)dignity also contributes to understanding the processes of LGB/TQ identity work. With these goals in mind, it is important to articulate a research design that includes my positionality and ethical responsibility as a researcher as well as my plans for recruitment, data collection, and analysis. In the sections that follow, I address the implications of an interpretive-critical approach to this research project. Then, I discuss the procedures for this study: (a) participation and recruitment, (b) data collection, (c) ethical implications, and (d) data management and analysis.

Positionality and (Meta)theoretical Implications

I approach this project from an interpretive-critical meta-theoretical perspective. I foreground the interpretive perspective to focus on meaning making and the ways that individuals make sense of the world around them through communication. But, I include the critical perspective to put interpretive sensemaking processes into conversation with emancipatory goals. Both perspectives have much to offer, but these contributions are not without costs. As such, I seek to use both of these approaches as a meta-theoretical
tension to develop my project more fully. Below, I outline assumptions of interpretive and critical approaches to organizational communication research. I then explain why my project draws and the orientations of both approaches.

First, however, I outline my author positionality. I identify, from among other social identities and standpoints, as a white, heterosexual woman. While I have experienced dignity threats in the workplace regarding gender/sex, my sexuality has not been a target of destructive communication and dignity denials and threats. It is possible for me to “come out” as heterosexual in the workplace and be open and visible about my sexual identity. Furthermore, my sexuality is recognized on an organizational level. I can gain access to partner benefits and health care due to my opposite sex partner. My experience of work regarding sexuality is vastly different than that of my participants and I am sensitive to that difference. As such, I seek to conduct myself as someone who is operating in solidarity with LGB/TQ experiences, but recognize the privileged standpoint I possess based on my sexuality. As such, I wish to highlight their voices and experiences in an effort to socially reform the workplace in a way that is respectful of all performances of gender, sex, and sexuality.

**Assumptions of Interpretive Research**

For the purposes of this study, I choose to foreground discourses of interpretive research and, more specifically, qualitative approaches to organizational communication. As such, it is important to understand the underlying assumptions of qualitative interpretive research. According to Putnam (1983), interpretive approaches are marked by several major tenants: plurality, meaning making, deep structures, and context. These tenants are valuable for my study. First, plurality looks beyond the singular interests and
voices of management to seek out the perspectives of a wider variety of organizational members (Putnam, 1983). I seek to engage in plurality by interviewing LGB/TQ employees about their experiences in the workplace to develop a more complex picture of organizational life. Second, interpretive discourses highlight the importance of meaning making (Comstock, 1982; Deetz, 2001; Putnam, 1983). My project seeks to understand how individual members make sense of their experiences of (in)dignity in the organization and how this impacts their construction of LGB/TQ identities. Third, I connect meaning making to deep structures embedded in heteronormative organizational cultures in order to highlight the social constructionist role of communication in creating and perpetuating heteronormativity in organizations (Cheney, 2000; Comstock, 1982). Finally, context is highlighted and broadened from just the organization to include macro contexts such as economics, social order, and political implications (Putnam, 1983). The goal of this approach is to seek out and explain the complex communicative nature of organizational life as it relates to matters of workplace (in)dignity and LGB/TQ experiences.

Assumptions of Critical Research

While I foreground the interpretive approach for my study, I connect it with critical perspectives in organizational communication as well. There are several key assumptions that demonstrate the importance of critical perspectives in regards to my project: power as dialectic, micropolitics of everyday life (Cheney, 2000), and praxis (Deetz, 2005). First, critical researchers position power as tension-filled, back and forth processes between domination and resistance (Mumby, 2000). According to Mumby (2000), individuals are not passive dupes, but are complex and contradictory social actors
that operate in a multiplicity of ways. It is this focus on contradiction and paradox this important in terms of my study. I am interested in understanding how LGB/TQ employees engage in resistance as well as how they enact their identities in the workplace. The tension between concealing and revealing can compromise LGB/TQ employees’ ability to enact an authentic identity at work.

Second, critical researchers examine the politics of everyday life (Mumby, 2000). By adopting a constitutive approach to communication (Deetz, 1994), critical researchers can highlight subtle, power-laden processes that create individuals and organizations (Deetz, 2005). Critical researchers offer an important perspective by situating individuals and organizations within macro-contexts. Specifically, my study is interested in capturing the complexities of everyday organizational life as it relates to LGB/TQ employees. I am interested in capturing how dignity threats, resistance, and identity work transpire at the micro-level, and then situating these processes within the broader context of heteronormativity in organizations.

Finally, praxis is an important critical assumption especially in relation to my project. Praxis in communication research focuses on providing forums and engaging voices in critical dialogue (Deetz & Simpson, 2006). The goal is to uncover methods for disrupting power relations to create new communicative spaces for resistance. I am interested in how LGB/TQ individuals are enabled and constrained through experiences of workplace (in)dignity and how these experiences influence identity work and spark acts of resistance.
Interpretive-Critical Perspectives on Organizational Communication

Both approaches have much to offer the study of LGB/TQ experiences regarding workplace (in)dignity. As such, I have chosen to position these two meta-theoretical frames as a both/and relationship. By adopting a dialectic approach, I can draw on the strengths of interpretive and critical research and use these approaches to counter balance one another.

Interpretive research is important for my project due to its focus on voice and plurality in organizations, but these strengths are counterbalanced by important critiques. While interpretive research is concerned with understanding multiple voices in organizational contexts, these voices are still channeled through a singular voice, the researcher. As such, critical theorists such as Deetz (2001) draw attention to this singular voice as it relates to reflexivity and researcher responsibility. Interpretive researchers are not immune from bias in analyzing and reporting research results. With a goal of creating a unified picture of an organizational culture (Deetz, 2001), interpretive research is not guided by a desire to disrupt the organizational culture’s status quo. This is a major drawback for the sole use of interpretive approaches. While these studies do seek to address illegitimacy and meaninglessness, the communicative focus is on understanding social order, not necessarily changing it. Thus, I position critical perspectives in a contrasting, yet complementary tension with interpretive approaches to account for this weakness.

It is important that I am reflexive in terms of the elite/a priori implications that are tied to discourses of critical research (Deetz, 2001). I approach this project from an a priori position that workplaces are shaped through discourses of heteronormativity that
favors men, masculinity, and male bodies while seeking to sanitize sexuality and render it invisible (Acker, 1990; DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007; Trethewey, 1999). My goal in approaching the project in such a way is for the purposes of forwarding emancipatory outcomes. It is my hope that results from this study can be used to advocate for more inclusive and respectful workplaces. Thus, it is important to show that gender, sex, and sexuality are present in organizational life and can, based on real or perceived assumptions, negatively impact some employees’ quality of work life. To that end, I believe that it is vital to include a critical orientation to this project.

By positioning interpretive and critical perspectives to organizational communication as this both/and approach, the ethical concerns posed by this project can be more fully addressed. First, through a pursuit of interpretive scholarship, I seek to provide an outlet for LGB/TQ employees to voice their experiences of workplace dignity. I would, however, be remiss if I did not expand on this contribution by also focusing on social justice and emancipatory goals. Therefore, my project expands from strictly an interpretive perspective to also include a critical approach. I seek to challenge the heteronormative status quo of workplaces and organizational culture in order to reconstruct these spaces as safer, more caring organizational environments for all employees regardless of sexual orientations, sexual identities, and/or gender identities/expression. I address my critical positioning by seeking to develop knowledge regarding resistance practices as performed by LGB/TQ employees. Therefore, my meta-theoretical perspective is a push/pull between interpretive practices of local/emergent knowledge and practical application and critical approaches that develop theoretical
contributions regarding workplace dignity and LGB/TQ experiences, knowing that these contributions do come with elite/a priori assumptions.

**Procedures**

I take an interpretive-critical approach to this interview-based study designed to examine LGB/TQ employees’ experiences regarding workplace (in)dignity and the communication of identity. The overarching purpose of my study is to understand how (in)dignity is communicated to LGB/TQ employees in U.S. workplaces and how these messages and mechanisms influence processes of identity work. In this section, I discuss the: (a) participants, (b) structured interview process, (c) ethical considerations, and (d) procedures for data management and analysis.

**Participants**

In order to meet the goals of my study, participants had to share a few key features. The selection criteria included: (a) they must identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, and/or queer, (b) they must be employed full-time, and (c) they must be at least 25 years old. In total, 36 working adults volunteered for the study. Participants ranged in age from 23-59 with an average age of 39. In regards to gender, sex, and sexuality, the majority of participants identified as gay men, but other participants identified as queer women, bisexual, lesbian, gay woman, queer, pansexual, and trans*. These working adults represented a range of U.S. occupational industries: education, for-profit, non-profit, and government work. Thus, it is important to note that the findings presented in this study represent U.S. perspectives regarding dignity and the workplace. For a complete breakdown of demographic characteristics see Table 3.1.
### Table 3.1
Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>LGB/TQ Identity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Industry</th>
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</tbody>
</table>

* To protect participants’ confidentiality, pseudonyms are used.

I reached out to participants through a sampling methodology that included internet outreach, contact with local, regional, and national LGB/TQ interest groups, and participant referrals. First, I posted announcements of the study on Facebook, which were further shared by individuals in my social network. Additionally, I posted announcements of the study on an LGB/TQ research forum and had a research webpage linked to my graduate student information on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s Department of Communication Studies website. Second, I reached out to local, regional, and national LGB/TQ interests groups with information on my study. Several groups forwarded my announcement and a link to my study’s website posting to their membership. In addition, I also directly contacted the leaders of these groups to introduce myself, provide information on my study, and ask them to share the announcement with members. Finally, in the case of referrals, several participants forwarded my contact information to their personal networks through a process of snowball sampling. See Appendix C for copies of recruitment materials.

My initial contact with participants was primarily via email. Once participants contacted me, I screened them to ensure that they met the selection criteria. Most often it was to verify that they were employed full time and could answer questions about experiences in the workplace. I did allow one individual to participate even though they were under the age of 25 because of their full time work experience and non-student
status. After I verified that participants met the selection criteria, I requested dates and times that would work well for the participants and gave them a list of options for the location of the interview. These options included a secure research lab on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s campus, a location of the participant’s choosing, Skype, or phone. I also attached a copy of the informed consent document to my email response for participants to review and ask questions about prior to the interview (see Appendix A). Interviews were conducted in secure research labs on the UNL campus, my office on campus, coffee shops, in homes, workplaces, restaurants, Skype, and by phone. Most of the interviews were conducted in person (n=20), while 14 were conducted on the phone, and 2 were conducted through Skype. All formats revealed equally rich data.

**Data Collection**

I conducted in-depth, structured interviews with each participant. Questions focused on: (a) experiences of (in)dignity at work (e.g., defining dignity, describing a time when they experienced dignity at work, describing a time when their dignity was threatened, and discussing their response to the dignity threat), (b) the perceived relevance of gender, sex, and sexuality in their workplace (e.g., describing their gender, sex, and sexuality, discussing relevance to experiences of work), and (c) communicating identity (e.g., do they see themselves breaking expectations of gender, sex, and sexuality?; do they take any actions to protect their gender, sex, and sexual identities in the workplace?; do gender, sex, and sexuality impact their perceptions of dignity?). The full interview protocol is located in Appendix B. In total, I collected 36 interviews. Most interviews were one-on-one with participants, but I did interview two couples together. In
total, interviews produced a little over 28 hours of recorded talk, and on average, each interview lasted 47 minutes.

**Ethical Considerations**

Due to the contested nature of gender, sex, and sexuality in the workplace, it is imperative that I consider my ethical responsibility as a researcher. I draw upon Madison’s (2005) articulation of ethics as a moral commitment to human beings carried out in a compassionate, considerate, and heartfelt way. I am guided by a Levinasian perspective (1987) of the Other, which emphasizes the necessity on the part of the researcher to respond to and be responsible for their research participants. According to Levinas (1987), “prior to any act, I am concerned with the Other, and I can never be absolved from the responsibility…to see a face is already to hear ‘Thou shalt not kill’” (pp. 78-79). Thus, it is my responsibility to treat participants with care and concern throughout the research process.

My ethical responsibility became salient during the data collection process. There are several measures that I took throughout this process that were designed to provide ethical care. First, this process of care began with the logistics of conducting interviews. I presented participants with a variety of options for taking part in the interview process. I offered participants a safe and secure space on the campus of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, which is used for conducting qualitative research. I also offered participants the opportunity to choose their own location. In addition to face-to-face interviews, I conducted Skype and phone interviews for participants that were out of my geographic area and also those who felt more comfortable with that option.
Second, I took steps during the interview process to uphold my ethical responsibility. Before we discussed the questions in the interview protocol, I advised participants of their options throughout the interview process. I let them know that they could withdraw at any time and that their participation was voluntary. I also asked their permission to record the interview and demonstrated how to turn off the recorder if they so desired. Furthermore, I let them know that they could stop the interview at any time, and that they should answer questions as they saw fit, which could mean answering only a part of the question or choosing to skip the question. I also informed participants that they did not need to give specifics (e.g., name of their workplace, their title, names of people that they work with) to answer these interview questions, but also that they should speak freely. I informed them that I would assign them pseudonyms and take out any identifiable information in my reporting of the results. It was my intent to make it clear that I would take care of their stories and protect their identity. I explained to each participant that they held all the cards during the interview.

Finally, ethical considerations were also extended to protect participants’ identities and stories in the reporting of results. LGB/TQ employees are especially vulnerable in organizations. They can be targets of discrimination and destructive communication. Furthermore, LGB/TQ employees vary in their degrees of concealing and revealing LGB/TQ identities in the workplace making protection important for a wide variety of reasons. As such, I was discreet with my processes of data management and the reporting of results. I used a numerical coding system to label participants’ interviews and transcriptions. These documents were kept separate from the informed consent documents. Thus, it is difficult to connect individuals to specific recordings and
transcriptions. Furthermore, the reporting of the data included: the use of pseudonyms for the participants’ names, removal of any personally identifiable statements in the results, and presenting the data in ways that did not disclose identifiable company information. Furthermore, I kept records on my personal computer, which is password protected. Data files were kept in a locked box in my home office.

**Data Management and Analysis**

After the interviews were completed, I engaged in processes of data management in order to organize these materials and prepare them for analysis. I personally transcribed all of the interviews I conducted. I transcribed using a “near verbatim” approach (Lucas, 2006). I did not transcribe vocal disfluencies (e.g., um, uh, like) and side conversations. I did transcribe the exact words that they used, but I inserted punctuation in order to improve the readability of the results. Furthermore, I reviewed the transcripts to ensure accuracy. In total, transcriptions totaled 330 pages of single spaced text.

After transcribing the interviews, I began processes of data analysis. The first step was to load all of the transcribed interviews into Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis program. After that, I began conducting a thematic analysis of my data starting with opening coding (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I started this process by coding “chunks” (e.g., whole responses to each question on the interview protocol). My coding scheme was guided by my research questions as well new codes that emerged from the data. I also consulted my memo file throughout the open coding process. I assigned at least one code to every “chunk” of data in the transcriptions. This resulted in 122 open codes.
Once I completed the open coding process, I went back to the data and processed them using an axial coding strategy. I engaged in axial coding to make sense of the open codes in such a way as to clarify and summarize key concepts and themes (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I began this process by systematically examining the open codes and grouping them into higher-order categories. I made this move from open to axial coding by creating code families in Atlas.ti. Code families allowed me to group a series of open codes together and look at these responses in conversation with one another. For instance, I created a code family labeled “Communicating Dignity,” which contained 44 open codes (ex: coworker support, LGB/TQ important/not important, mismanagement, recognition of the personal, social dignity, you bring yourself to work). In total, I was able to merge my open codes into 8 code families: communicating dignity, costs, dignity affirmations, dignity threats, identity, LGB/TQ, protection, and resistance.

Once I had my code families in place, I was able to process the data by looking for semantic relationships among the codes (Spradley, 1979). I examined each code family by looking for patterns, connections, and contradictions. This also enabled me to collapse similar codes and eliminate redundant codes. For example, I classified venting, use of sarcasm/humor, and leaving the organization as responses to dignity threats. As I was processing my data, I went back on numerous occasions to revisit these stories in a more holistic manner. I would read through interview transcripts, review certain questions, and return to my memos. I also had a data session with my adviser to discuss emerging themes. We reviewed the content of participant’s quotations, tested the accuracy of the codes, examined relationships between codes, refined themes, and created strategies for continuing the analytical process.
In sum, through the methodological process I have outlined above, I was able to identify several major themes that answer my study’s research questions: (a) affirmations of dignity, (b) threats to dignity, (c) responses and resistance, and (d) processes of LGB/TQ identity work. In the next two chapters, I present my study’s findings. Chapter Four discusses the communication of (in)dignity at work, which includes outlining affirmations and threats to dignity as well as responses and resistance to dignity threats. Chapter Five outlines the communication of identity at work by articulating processes of LGB/TQ identity work.
CHAPTER 4: COMMUNICATING (IN) DIGNITY AT WORK

In this chapter, I explore the communication of workplace (in)dignity as experienced by LGB/TQ employees. I examine their definitions of dignity, their experiences of (in)dignity, and their strategies for responding to and resisting dignity threats. Specifically, I asked “How is dignity experienced by LGB/TQ employees in the workplace?” (RQ1), “What are the most salient dignity threats experienced by LGB/TQ employees in the workplace?” (RQ2), and “In what ways do LGB/TQ employees respond to and resist threats to their dignity at work?” (RQ3).

Participants indicated that they shared broad experiences of (in)dignity at work that aligned with experiences previously reported in research on communicating workplace dignity (e.g., affirmations and/or denials of dignity based on respectful interactions, recognition of competence, acknowledgement as a valued member of the organization; see (Lucas, 2011b). Still, they reported unique experiences related to their performances of gender, sex, and sexuality in the workplace. So for the purposes of this project, I focus on experiences of (in)dignity as related to the performance of real or perceived LGB/TQ identities in the workplace. I believe that this perspective is necessary to understand given the conditions of heteronormativity that can dominate the workplace (Lewis, 2009; Spradlin, 1998). Below, I detail (a) affirmations of dignity, including affirmations of personal LGB/TQ identity and organizational acts of solidarity that create cultures of respect and inclusion. Then, I describe (b) salient dignity threats, including denials of organizational solidarity and (ambiguously-attributed) threats to security. Finally, I identify (c) participants’ strategies for responding to and resisting dignity threats.
Affirmations of Dignity

Dignity is communicated on the job through affirmations, which are defined as interactions that reinforce an individual’s sense of personal worth and value (Lucas, 2011b). For LGB/TQ employees, affirmations of dignity do more than just acknowledge their competence and/or instrumental value to the organization. These affirmations should also specifically acknowledge their personal LGB/TQ identities. By specifically affirming personal identities, it becomes possible for what heteronormativity typically renders invisible, visible in the workplace. This visibility can be communicated through two interpersonal affirmations of dignity: affirmations of personal LGB/TQ identity and organizational affirmations that communicate a culture of respect and inclusion.

Affirmations of Personal LGB/TQ Identity

In one of my first interviews, I asked Cameron, a 40-year-old graduate assistant if he felt like his gender, sex, and sexuality was relevant to how he experienced work. He responded emphatically, saying, “Yes. It’s what you bring to work. […] You always bring who you are to the workplace.” In subsequent interviews, this notion of bringing yourself to work was a common thread among other participants’ understanding of identity in the workplace. By bringing yourself to work recognized that an individual’s expression of a personal LGB/TQ identity was a central and integral part of personal identity. It was not something that could be left at the door when an individual entered the workplace. Thus, one of the ways that dignity was communicated on the job for LGB/TQ employees was through interactions and/or conditions that recognized and affirmed their self-worth by valuing personal identities. These affirmations can be communicated through messages
of acceptance and respect for LGB/TQ individuals and by acknowledging their partners and families, when appropriate.

First, affirmations of acceptance and respect were explicitly communicated through messages that promote a sense of self-worth and self-respect for LGB/TQ individuals. Respect for LGB/TQ individuals can be communicated through messages that affirm and value the salience of an individual’s LGB/TQ identity in the workplace. This visibility, however, should be communicated in respectful and authentic ways. As Bailey, a 33-year-old attorney said “I don’t need some special prize for being in a lesbian relationship.”

Respectful dignity affirmations are communicated in the everyday micropractices that inform how members of an organization interact with one another. It is important that these interactions are respectful in nature and do not spotlight difference in terms of gender, sex, and sexuality. For instance, Blake, a 33-year-old graduate assistant, discussed how one of his first interactions with the office manager at his workplace was affirming to his trans* identity. As Blake recalls:

There was just some conversation that she had to have with me about what did my driver’s license say and how did it connect to the draft, but we sorted it out. It wasn’t a conversation where it was like “Hey are you a man or a woman?” but it was more like “Hey there’s these documents and I need to know what they say, because I need to know what this other document should say.” There was a place of dignity. I felt like it was handled with tact and discretion. I felt like I didn’t get asked any weird questions like what I have down my pants or who I am sleeping with. It was just bureaucracy and form filling and things like that.

These interpersonal affirmations were not only found in the everyday interactions between coworkers, but also demonstrated by support for attending LGB/TQ social events. For example, Jessy, a 59-year-old receptionist, connected experiencing dignity to his coworkers’ encouragement and support of LGB/TQ social activities:
I think I know simply because if I tell them I am going to the gay bar they are encouraging of that and I have had friends from work come with me to the gay bar, go to gay pride in the summer. I think that that’s a good thing.

In addition to the recognition of personal identities, dignity can also be affirmed through messages that recognize an LGB/TQ employees’ partner and family. This sense of inclusion can be communicated by specific references to partners and families as explained by Kasey, a 50-year-old non-profit administrator:

The executive director […] asks about my partner and how are we doing and all of that kind of stuff so there’s that makes it so much more relaxed and open.

Kaceys explained that this openness was not always the case in his current workplace. He described his previous boss as “incredibly homophobic.” It was affirming to Kacey’s dignity that this new boss supported his personal identities and valued them.

Partners Phoenix (32-years old) and Quinn (26-years old), both graduate assistants, echoed the importance of superiors recognizing their partners. Phoenix and Quinn have a unique experience in that they share a workplace so they have the same supervisors and colleagues. Their dignity was affirmed when their workplace valued their relationship on a personal level. When Phoenix experienced a death in the family, the leadership reached out to both her and Quinn to offer their support. Phoenix said:

Quinn [wasn’t] being held to a difference standard. It would be similar to how emails went out; cards went out to other individuals in the department.

In addition to interpersonal conversations, acknowledging partners and families can also be more formally communicated by members of the organization. For instance, Finley, a 44-year-old government employee, experienced dignity when she received a prestigious award in recognition of her performance on-the-job. The local police chief
presented her with the award at their annual banquet and it was an emotional experience for her. As she describes:

When the chief handed me the award in front of the mayor, in front of everyone who was gathered there and said, said something very nice. About having been not just a great employee, but also that I was a good example for a lot of different reasons. Not just because of what you do as your job, but because of the kind of person you are, the kind of family you have, and there’s my kid and my partner taking pictures. He’s like “I’ve met your parents, I’ve met your spouse, I’ve met your child, and this is for all of that. And everything to our department and how important that’s been for our department’s conversation about the issues of the community that you belong to.

Xavier, a consultant, also experienced a public affirmation of his LGB/TQ identity. While on this honeymoon, his office changed the name on his door to reflect his partner’s name, which he had taken:

When we got married in 2004 and I changed my last name, took [my husband’s] last name, and when I went back to work the name had been changed on the door of my office. I just felt like I was whole and it was very validating for me.

This more formal acknowledgement can also be extended to social activities organized by the workplace. Logan, a 46-year-old IT manager, discussed the dignity he felt when his relationship was recognized at a work party:

There was a dance floor. My husband and I were sitting at a table with my team and everyone knew that we are sort of ballroom dancers. Everyone in the company was like “Go on. Go dance.” There was never any self-consciousness about it. I can’t say, maybe there was somebody in the company who won’t be receptive or those types of things. But it was very inclusive and just because of the same-sex it doesn’t mean anything.

Overall, interpersonal affirmations of personal LGB/TQ identities reinforce an individual’s sense of personal worth and value and enable LGB/TQ individuals to bring themselves to work. These affirmations recognize personal LGB/TQ identities and create spaces for respectful visibility. Dignity is communicated through constructive messages that recognize the personal aspects of individuals in the workplace. As noted by Hodson
support from coworkers can be key to combating dignity threats. When coworkers and superiors informally and publically recognize personal LGB/TQ identities it can create conditions to enable these employees to combat other potential threats to dignity more effectively. These affirmations also support Sayer’s (2007) articulation of dignity as being treated as an ends unto yourself, which fosters conditions for affirming inherent dignity (Hodson, 2001).

Organizational Affirmations that Communicate a Culture of Respect and Inclusion

Dignity can be affirmed not only through micropractices within the organization, but through acts of organizational solidarity that reflect larger socio-cultural LGB/TQ concerns and, in turn, seek to create cultures of inclusivity and respect. Inclusive and respectful cultures can be communicated to LGB/TQ employees in the form of organizational messages that tells the employee that “we have your back.” Messages of support act as organizational confirmations of the worth and value of LGB/TQ identities on both a personal and social level. As a collective, these dignity affirmations are reflected in process, procedures, and language that explicitly recognize the presence of LGB/TQ employees in the workplace. Previous research has articulated the difficulties of making LGB/TQ identities visible in the workplace (Lewis, 2009; Spradlin, 1998), but dignity affirmations of inclusivity and respectful cultures can create spaces for visibility.

One of the ways that organizations acted in solidarity was through the recruitment, hiring, and retention of LGB/TQ employees. It was important to not only actively seek to hire new LGB/TQ employees, but to affirm dignity by integrating the hiring of LGB/TQ employees and a diverse workforce in general into the natural hiring process. This communicated a message to LGB/TQ employees that they were not the first
in the organization and that their personal identities were respected and included. As Gavin, a 45-year-old museum director, explained:

But there were always people in the museum—some of them in great positions of power and some just sitting behind some desk somewhere—who were gay and lesbian. It was so ordinary. […] I think that our dignity and our place there was so completely normalized within that institution. […] So I think in that way just that that provided all of us with a kind of a sense of dignity and belonging that you weren’t the first. You never had the sense that I’m the first gay person to ever. Well, no, there have been hundreds.

This affirmation of not being the first was also echoed by Isaac, a 28-year-old admissions manager. Isaac connected this sense of belonging with his organization’s overall commitment to diversity and difference:

We have diversity as one of our four core values. We have a black, lesbian president, a black provost, gay director of student services, there is one other gay admissions manager of five, and a lot of gay people on the staff just in general. We definitely embrace diversity on all levels, not just sexual orientation.

Thus, organizations can affirm LGB/TQ employees’ dignity by integrating these identities into the workplace beginning with human resource processes of recruiting, hiring, and retaining a diverse workforce. It is important, however, that these hiring practices do not spotlight difference and position diversity as a numbers game (Allen, 2010), but instead respectfully include LGB/TQ employees within the organization.

Once LGB/TQ employees enter the organization, dignity can be affirmed through organizational policies and practices that include LGB/TQ identities. Examples include offering domestic partner benefits, and health benefits/medical insurance for partners and families, and the presence of LGB/TQ support groups when needed. For example, Sam, a 47-year-old graduate assistant, mentioned the value of inclusive organizational benefits. A previous employer offered domestic partner benefits, which was affirming to Sam’s dignity due to the fact that she had a same-sex partner at the time. Furthermore, Charlie, a
47-year-old hotel sales manager, discussed how changes in ownership led to inclusivity of benefits for LGB/TQ individuals. Charlie described this dignity affirmation by saying:

I am very fortunate here. The new company actually offers domestic partnership. We actually have all of the domestic partner benefits when it comes to health, when it comes to medical leaves, even with maternity leave.

Logan, an IT manager, discussed how his organization offered domestic partner benefits despite the federal definition of marriage as the time as between one man and one woman:

I think another part of dignity is having acceptance and equality. I tend to think that my husband is treated in the exact same way as if I had a wife. Offering to, even though we are not recognized federally, my company still gives full benefits. [...] They go the extra mile to ensure that even though our government doesn’t recognize it, they do.

It is important that if organizations wish to communicate respect to LGB/TQ employees that they offer policies and practices that are inclusive. This inclusivity can be further extended by organizational practices that create spaces for LGB/TQ-specific support groups when needed. Some participants expressed that, for the most part, their organizations were inclusive and respectful, and therefore, a support group was not needed at that time. But they did see the value in such organizations when workplaces needed it because for other participants, it was needed to combat workplace cultures of heteronormativity that did not include LGB/TQ identities. For instance, Neal, a 31-year-old financial analyst, said:

At [my previous job] they had an auxiliary group for LGBT people that I was part of. They wanted it to be comfortable for someone who wasn’t out in the workplace and they could still participate in this group. It would be confidential. You wouldn’t out anyone. That I really, really enjoyed.
Neal was not out in his day-to-day workplace, but through the auxiliary group he was able to be out to other individuals in the workplace who were employed in other departments and at other locations.

Acts of organizational solidarity that affirm dignity through human resource processes and organizational policies and practices operate in conjunction with micropractices that reinforce these meso-level cultures. One way that dignity can be affirmed through organizational micropractices is through the use of inclusive language. Language becomes inclusive regarding gender, sex, and sexuality when it has become neutral and constructed in ways that do not reflect heteronormative assumptions. It becomes a matter of practice for all individuals, not just LGB/TQ employees. For instance, Alex, a 35-year-old graduate assistant, described how people at her previous workplace used gender/sex neutral language and spoke in more ambiguous, fluid ways:

Even just little tiny things like people using the word partner, like everyone. It’s ambiguous. Just that the ambiguity was there. It was like a presumption that “partner”—we don’t know what that means. But that ambiguity. Everyone’s comfortable with it.

Phoenix echoed the importance of partner as a matter of practice, describing how it was important in terms of being introduced and included in everyday interactions:

Being introduced to new people, being introduced as partners versus this is Phoenix and Quinn or this is two different graduate students. Because the culture very much in this experience has been family-wise. When they introduce, what we have noticed at functions, they introduce based on the relationship that you have with the other person. So we haven’t seen our relationship being ignored because it’s not heteronormative.

Gael, a 23-year-old high school teacher, described how inclusive language had become a normal part of the everyday conversation among his colleagues. As one of the newest and youngest members of the teaching staff, Gael was worried about how his
LGB/TQ identity would be interpreted by his peers. In this particular instance, his dignity was affirmed through the use of inclusive language:

[My dignity is affirmed] when they will try to engage with me non-judgmentally and try to get to know me. For example, we [a colleague and I] were having a conversation. I think he figured out probably pretty soon that I was probably gay. And just asked, “So are you seeing anybody?” Not “are you seeing a girl?”, “do you have a girlfriend?”, but “are you seeing anybody?” That created an opening for us to have that discussion that I think he wanted to have, that he was comfortable having, without pressuring me to do so. It was really nice.

Avery, a 26-year-old retail manager, explains how inclusivity has become a routine part of everyday interactions with his coworkers. In fact, his coworkers recognized when they were being exclusive and worked against making such statements in the future:

Every once and awhile I’ve had people slip up. They look at me and they are like, “I really apologize. That is insensitive.” And we move on from there. I never felt like somebody was singling me out because of my sexuality or anything like that.

Finally, organizations affirmed LGB/TQ employees’ dignity at work by providing demonstrations of support. These acts explicitly showed that the organization had an LGB/TQ employee’s back. For example, Alex explained how colleagues offered support when her teaching practices were questioned in a group meeting:

This professor was like, “well the way I structure my class, I’m just giving my students objective knowledge and I am not trying to push an agenda.” I was frozen in that moment. […] I was like “I know what this ‘your agenda’ is.” I get what he is calling me out on there. […] I was frozen and he’s a tenured faculty, higher rank, also totally straight, white, and male. I’m just a grad student, instructor. […] The room went crazy. From so many different spaces and people saying, “I don’t see how that’s pushing an agenda.” I felt like ok. I felt like alright I’m not alone in thinking “screw you.” There’s nothing wrong with my syllabus. There’s nothing wrong that we look at marriage instead of just same-sex marriage. That’s not a problem. It’s not a gay agenda. […] It was nice to be supported. It was awesome.
Walter, a consultant, discussed his previous experiences as an openly gay police officer. He explained the difficulties he faced coming out at work and the subsequent treatment by his fellow officers: “People were afraid to ride with me. People didn’t respond and back up. There were a lot of things. I felt for my safety and well-being and the harassment that went on with that.”

Ten months after he came out at work, Walter experienced a deeply personal tragedy. He was shot and, during that incident, his boyfriend was killed. After being out of work to recover from his injuries and deal with the search and trials of the killer, Walter was nervous about how his return to the force would be received. Walter’s dignity was affirmed when his fellow officers demonstrated their public support when he returned to the force. Walter described his first night back on the job:

My first night on the job I was very fearful about what would happen. Were people going to respond or not? Was I going to get the support of my fellow officers? And during my shift that night there was a break-in in a school. I was that first to arrive. I saw movement in the school and I was the first one to call out for backup. I ran in and began pursuit through the school, out through the woods, and apprehended the two suspects. When I was coming back out, there were about 15 police cruisers and half that city was there for backup. That to me felt like dignity.

Affirmations of dignity reinforce a sense of self-worth and self-respect for an employee (Lucas, 2011b). For LGB/TQ employees these affirmations not only recognize competence and contribution to the organization, but these messages also recognize employees’ performances of gender, sex, and sexuality and are affirming to an individual’s inherent dignity. Dignity is affirmed interpersonally through recognitions of personal LGB/TQ identities and by bringing the private into the workplace. Dignity is also affirmed through organizational acts of solidarity that are reflected in meso-level organizational processes that are reflected in human resource processes, policies and
procedures, and the use of inclusive language. These affirmation work together to convey a sense of security to LGB/TQ employees through messages that the organization has their back. This can be powerful for assisting in the deflection of dignity threats (Hodson, 2001) that may occur due to performances of gender, sex, and sexuality in the workplace.

Furthermore, affirmations recognizing and affirming inherent dignity based on gender, sex, and sexuality defies the way that U.S. workplaces have typically been constructed. Traditionally, workplaces have been constituted in ways that favor male bodies and hegemonic masculinity, while seeking to render organizations as asexual institutions (Acker, 1990; DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007; Trethewey, 1999). In the U.S., work can best be understood as a masculine institution (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007). Even though the form of work has shifted across time, Acker (1990) notes that jobs have still been segregated based on gender/sex. The jobs that male bodies perform are more valued than those deemed female and feminine. Thus, to recognize all employees’ inherent dignity based on their gender, sex, and sexuality draws attention to work as a gendered/sexed social institution and seeks to move the workplace from being thought of as an asexual construct to one where sexuality is made respectfully visible.

**Threats to Dignity**

Threats to dignity were communicated as interactions or conditions that undermined LGB/TQ employees’ sense of self-worth and self-respect (Lucas, 2011b). Threats were acts that individuals and organizations perpetuated in order to inflict harm on someone’s sense of self-worth and value. For LGB/TQ employees, these dignity threats targeted not only personal identity, but were also political in nature, and as such threaten LGB/TQ social identities as a general group. A threat to the overall group
identity may not specifically target an LGB/TQ employee, but nonetheless, it can be perceived as a personal attack against the individual. As such, threats to dignity included denials of solidarity and (ambiguously-attributed) threats to security that at times were explicitly personal and at times uncertain and tenuous.

**Denials of Solidarity**

Denials of personal solidarity refused to acknowledge either full or certain aspects of an employee’s LGB/TQ identity. Thus, these denials were captured by what was left unsaid in organizational conversations and highlight the personal costs of LGB/TQ identities in the workplace (Clair et al., 2005; DeJordy, 2008; Spradlin, 1998). Examples included explicitly excluding sexuality from workplace conversations and ignoring the presence of LGB/TQ identities. For instance, Bailey discussed repeated interactions with her office manager, who for quite some time would not mention her partner by name:

This office manager for years and years would be like, “Is your roommate coming to the Christmas party?” And I would be like, “Are you asking about my girlfriend?” And she was like, “Yes.” […] I don’t think she was being hostile on purpose. I just think that the heteronormative was so deep with her that her brain rejected it. […] But it’s changed. Now she just says [my girlfriend’s name].

Eventually the office manager did begin to call Bailey’s partner by her name. She even went as far as to start including her in the stockings that the office manager made for everyone and their families each Christmas. It was difficult for Bailey because this process took considerable time to work itself out.

This elongated refusal to recognize an employee’s same-sex partner was palpable in Phoenix’s experiences with a previous boss. Phoenix described how her dignity was denied by this boss who would consistently challenge Phoenix’s identification as a bisexual and, in doing so, downplayed her relationship with her partner Quinn:
Phoenix: My previous boss made it very vocal [that] because of me being bisexual and identifying that way that I’m not really gay. I’m just with Quinn until a decent penis come around. […] This was said on multiple occasions.

Quinn: [The boss] would say it in very public places. I remember being [at a work event] and he’s saying it just out loud. We are all eating, he’s saying it out loud, and people are turning around. That makes me feel really belittled almost like oh well I’m just a placeholder almost until something better comes along. […]

Phoenix: The first interaction we had we went to a Chili’s and there was the comment that we needed to go out afterwards after the team had gone home. […] He decided to drop the kids off and I thought we were going to pick up food and drinks for the kids and he drives to a strip bar and is like “Are you really gay?”

These denials can also be made visible by the use of disparaging remarks such as gay slurs and off-color jokes that attack an individual based on either a real or perceived disclosure of an LGB/TQ identity (Baker, 2009; Pascoe, 2007). For instance, Jordan, a 29-year-old marketing professional, discussed the use of gay slurs when he worked in a rural office of a large agricultural company:

Another time I guess when [my dignity] would have been compromised was when I was a translator/interpreter. […] But I would hear occasional slurs about my sexual orientation and things like that. The management team was mostly men and one woman and I would hear these things from these guys who are kind of rough necks, kind of macho, out there in the warehouse. It’s like you guys are fools because what I do here and my function here is to ensure that you and your coworkers are safe.

Rory, a 37-year-old retail sales clerk, also discussed the repeated use of disparaging remarks at a previous job at a restaurant:

It was one of my first jobs where I was open at work about it. […] There was a group of Hispanics that worked there that I think it was. In some of the minority communities they are not very accepting of homosexuality. They had a specific name for me. I don’t know too much about Spanish, but they called me “Bonita,” which was their term for pretty boy. But it was never really used in a nice, welcoming connotation. As soon as I would walk in the door that’s what I heard.

Furthermore, dignity may be threatened when organizations deny personal LGB/TQ identities for fear that recognition of these social identities would be read as a
political statement. For example, Alex explained this personal-political tension as a threat to dignity. Specifically, Alex discussed her time spent working the night shift at a 24-hour diner after high school. She was also going to college and Alex noted that her manager was “very supportive.” Alex said, “Sounds like a small thing, but it wasn’t.” But this support was not all inclusive. Alex’s manager was not very supportive when a group of kids from high school began harassing her at work. According to Alex, “there were these kids that came in for a time [...] and yell ‘fag’ at me.” But her manager “would not kick them out.” To Alex, this act of yelling in a public space was a safety concern not an LGB/TQ specific concern. Alex said:

Let’s say people came in, high school kids, and they started yelling “cheese,” we would kick them out. You can’t just sit in a restaurant and yell “cheese.” There was something about it being “fag” that I think she took it as like I am making a political statement by saying you can’t call people fag here or something like that. And I think she felt like she couldn’t send that message on behalf of the restaurant. From my perspective, I thought well, you aren’t necessarily sending that message.

Alex did have a one-on-one conversation with her manager who made it clear that she was not going to kick out the disruptive patrons. She “expressed that it was like this company can’t take a stand on that issue.”

In sum, one way that LGB/TQ employees experienced dignity threats in the workplace was through denials of solidarity. These denials were communicated by other members of the organization through their refusal to recognize all or certain aspects of LGB/TQ identities. Thus, LGB/TQ employees are not able to bring themselves to work all of the time (Spradlin, 1998). These dignity threats sought to make LGB/TQ identities invisible and indiscernible in the workplace thus denying an LGB/TQ employees’
potential to achieve inherent dignity. This is reflected in the heteronormative nature of the workplace.

**(Ambiguously-Attributed) Threats to Security**

This second category of threats to LGB/TQ employees’ dignity at work focused on threats to security. Security threats denied dignity due to the real and perceived insecurities surrounding the workplace and the job. At times, threats were explicitly and indisputably because of an individual’s gender, sex, and sexuality (e.g., being fired because of sexual orientation and/or gender identity). Other times, however, threats were ambiguously-attributed (e.g., a sense that sexual orientation and/or gender identity had something to do with it). Thus, threats can explicitly target LGB/TQ employees or be manifest in ambiguous attributions.

LGB/TQ explicit threats to security directly targeted individuals based on real or perceived assumptions of their sexuality. Threats to security included job loss (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003a, 2006) as well as physical and/or psychological harm (Allen, 2000). In other instances, threats were disruptive to individuals’ perceptions of job security and performance, creating a sense of uneasiness regarding their respective roles within the organization (Lewis, 2009).

In an extreme case, one participant was fired due to his sexual orientation. Cameron discussed the time that he was fired from his job at an amusement park, in part, due to his personal LGB/TQ identity. Cameron explained that he had worked his way up in the company becoming a managerial supervisor before he was 21 years old. One day a coworker confessed to Cameron that he had stolen “$2,600 from his job at the front gate.” Cameron reported this offense to his supervisor and assumed that he had taken the
appropriate action. The coworker, in turn, accused Cameron of “sexual harassment.” This accusation brought Cameron’s LGB/TQ identity to light for upper management and the “big wigs” at the company. The Director of Personnel discussed the outing of his LGB/TQ identity with Cameron saying that “it kept coming back to the gay issue.”

Cameron reported:

And she was like, “yeah, but you know it’s the whole” and the gay issue kept coming up a couple of times about the salaciousness of it. It kept cycling up over and over again. And finally I said, “Is that the problem?” And she was like, “No, we have lots of gay people who work here. They work in shows mostly.” I was simply in the wrong job, right?

The consequences of his firing were extensive. Not only did he lose his job, but he was forced to drop out of college as well. Furthermore, this threat to his job security lingered with Cameron after he moved on to another workplace. He reported that “it left a legacy that was problematic. It did affect me as I went forward.”

In terms of threats to physical and psychological security, Walter, the first openly gay police officer on his city’s police force, discussed the explicit threats he experienced after coming out at work:

The first day that I came out it spread like wildfire through the department. The next day when I walked down the hall—typically I walked by several other divisions and I typically wave and say “Hello,” I did that and people either turned away, didn’t say anything, or people saw me coming and by the time I got down there they were nowhere to be found. By the time I went into the roll call and went to go sit down, people got up and sat away from me. Car assignments where several people […] refused to ride with me. I would be out on patrol either […] and call for backup and backup wouldn’t arrive or would be extremely late. Or if I was calling out information with the radio at that time people would cut into the radio transmission so all of my call would not be brought through. Therefore all the information would not come through so I’d have to call it over and over again. That would be some of the things that would happen.

While these threats were explicit in nature and personally attacked and LGB/TQ employee, dignity threats were also ambiguous in nature and targeted employees’
perceptions of job security. These threats did not explicitly draw attention to personal LGB/TQ identities, but gave individuals the sense that that sexuality could be a factor. These messages subtly denied LGB/TQ identities by ostracizing and isolating these employees. That is, it was often difficult for LGB/TQ employees to tell if the threat was due to their gender, sex, and sexuality or for some other reason. For example, Ryan, a 32-year-old graphic designer for a religious organization, interpreted negative feedback and reviews from his boss as an attack on his LGB/TQ identity, but he could not say for certain:

I don’t know if it was related in any fashion to, to my sexuality. This was about two, two-and-a-half years ago where I was feeling like I was doing a superb job with what I was doing. Out of the blue, to be called in my boss’s office, she’s basically giving me an ultimatum of you need to make all of these corrections or you’re terminated. I had never had any bad feedback from her before that. It was just this black and white. [pause] Still to this day it’s as if there had been something that I had happened that I was not aware of. Whether that has any correlation to my sexuality, I don’t know. Whether that was other people who said, “Well, I told Ryan that he needs to correct these things.” Because I am not always working directly with my boss so the people that I work with report to her. I never probably will understand that one.

Gael discussed how a student threatened his security when he pushed back against Gael’s zero-tolerance language policy. Again, Gael could not directly attribute it to knowledge of his LGB/TQ identity, but it still felt personal:

I have a very clear stance that I don’t like students using the word “gay” or “retarded” in a derogatory way. […] I remember I said this [my zero tolerance stance on derogatory words] and there was a student who was obviously trying to test me and would say it [gay] and then when I would look over he would be like, “Oh, sorry.” But clearly he was trying to get me to get riled up a little bit. […] But I don’t know if that student knew, the students know, that I am gay. So it’s clearly affecting my ability to feel dignified, but I don’t know if they are necessarily targeting me.

Furthermore, threats to security can be implemented as an attempt to make the LGB/TQ employees so miserable that they decide to quit the organization. Thus, the
organization does not have to fire the employee, opening themselves up to potential lawsuits and costs of unemployment if the employee leaves on his or her own accord. For example, Xavier discussed his previous work experience at a large corporation. He works in a state where sexual orientation and gender identity are protected categories. But that did not stop members of the organization from threatening Xavier’s job security.

In the beginning, Xavier was treated with dignity and respect as the corporation’s newest senior financial analyst. He said “I was respected as the new guy.” According to Xavier, his colleagues read him as a “white male” when he began working there. However, a couple of months on the job, he began the coming out process. His partner sent him flowers for Valentine’s Day and from that point on he would refer to him as his partner. He would not shy away from discussing weekend plans or his family with coworkers. He said that when he “contributed” his bosses would “close down” and exchange “glances.” Xavier noted that he “went from being the white male new senior financial analyst to the ‘gay guy.’” He described his bosses’ behavior this way:

They basically went above and beyond to try to make me so miserable that I would leave. To give you an example, there was going to be an offsite training for a new software system that we had developed. It was an hour away. I had some coworkers come up to me and say, “How are you getting there tomorrow?” And I said, “How am I getting where?” They said, “An offsite training.” I knew nothing about it. They kept me completely out of the loop. The CFO, who was my boss’s boss, he would come in on say a Monday morning and he would stop at everyone’s office. “How was your weekend? How were the kids? How was your husband? How was your wife?” He would go to everyone’s cubicle, everybody’s office, and then walk right past my door and go into his office that was directly next to mine. Not a word to me. And that was just the beginning. It just snowballed from there.

Sawyer expressed a similar threat to security at restaurant that he eventually picketed:

At the restaurant I was completely treated like I was nothing, like I could be replaced the very next day. I would’ve been easier to replace if they wouldn’t
have had to pay my unemployment and stuff like that. A lot of the treatment I got at [the restaurant] was to get me to leave rather than fire me on the spot.

These threats can be lobbed not only in reference to employment security, but can also be used to prevent LGB/TQ employees from moving into different roles or follow certain career paths (Lewis, 2009). These threats to security can create a “glass closet” that directs LGB/TQ individuals to certain “gay-friendly” occupations and employment opportunities (Rumens & Kerfoot, 2009). For instance, Ryan experienced the restrictions of the glass closet within his organization. Ryan reported experiencing dignity in relation to the design work that he is tasked to do. He said that his coworkers would joke that “that’s just the gay side of me that’s coming out.” This support, however, did not translate to his discussions with the church pastor regarding Ryan’s career options:

I have been contemplating going back to school to go for my masters of divinity. I went and talked with the senior pastor. He’s helped other people that I know of that have went and talked to him about going to get their master in divinity. [...] His response to me was very cold, which surprised me for the senior pastor. Everyone else I talked to about how they have been very excited for me, but he on the other hand just has brushed it off or at least it has felt like he has brushed it off. [...] There’s a certain level of, part of me says he’s accepting to a certain point and I don’t think he thinks that people in the gay community should be pastors. Maybe I am reading into it, but it’s hard not to. I have really tried to weigh it out in the realm of, is that something that he’s subconsciously doing or is that I don’t think we should help him figure it out so he doesn’t go to seminary.

Ryan’s instrumental value as an LGB/TQ employee was limited to certain roles and tasks within the organization, but when he sought to branch out he felt like his choices were not supported by members of the organization. This is similar to research that has explored matters of difference in organizations (Allen, 2000) and workplace bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003a; 2006) in regards to stalled career development.

Treats to dignity deny an employee’s sense of self-worth and self-respect and are communicated as disrespectful interactions (Lucas, 2011b). In terms of threats to the
dignity of gender, sex, and sexuality in the workplace, LGB/TQ employees reported experiencing denials of solidarity and (ambiguously-attributed) threats to security. Like affirmations, these threats corresponded with affirmation of dignity in that both are communicated interpersonally and organizationally. For instance, dignity can be affirmed through recognition of personal LGB/TQ identities and conversely denied through interpersonal communication.

**Responses and Resistance to LGB/TQ-based Dignity Threats**

In this section, I shift the focus from how (in)dignity is communicated on the job to how LGB/TQ employees respond to and resist dignity threats. When I asked participants to talk about times when they felt like their dignity was threatened, I followed-up by asking about how they responded to that situation. Did they do or say anything? Did they talk to anybody? Did they do anything in retaliation? Is there anything they wished they would have said or done? From these interviews, a series of responses emerged that ranged from acceptance of indignity to acts of resistance. First, I present the responses and then discuss resistance as a specific type of response.

**Responses to Dignity Threats**

LGB/TQ individuals constructed responses that helped them make sense of dignity threat(s). These responses were communicated through venting, deflecting, and exiting. First, venting occurred both inside and outside of the organization. Inside the organization, it was important for LGB/TQ employees to have a trustworthy person to vent to. For example, Ryan discussed the importance of having an ally within the workplace:
Whether it is sexuality or not, it’s good to have someone who you can trust in the workplace that you can vent to. I think that is what has made it, made my sanity capable in my current workplace.

Venting, however, usually occurred outside of the context of work. Venting outside of work may be considered a safer space for expressing frustrations regarding gender, sex, and sexuality. For example, Alex turned to social media to connect with other educators and vent frustrations:

> There wasn’t anything in the workplace to be recovered. It was just sort of like, okay, here are the limits of my relationship with my workplace. They are concerned this far, but not over here. […] This Facebook group has been really helpful. People are like I have a paper and I’m having trouble grading it. Should I give it to someone else? Should I take a walk? How do I respond? How can I give constructive comments instead of “fuck you” like I want to write on there. Venting those kinds of frustrations.

In addition to venting, LGB/TQ individuals responded by offering deflections against dignity threats. These deflections can take the form of humor, sarcasm, and comebacks. For instance, Phoenix described how she would use sarcasm as a strategy for deflecting her boss’s dignity threats:

> I, I don’t handle conflict well so I would address things in a sarcastic way. […] I would spar back and, I guess, I don’t know how much of that made it seem like it was okay. […] Because I don’t like conflict and me joking and being sarcastic, set a precedent that that kind of joking was okay.

Charlie also deflected threats to his dignity by using humor to respond to attacks:

> The first thing that came to my mind was to throw something back, but that doesn’t get you anywhere. […] Life’s difficult for a lot of kids who are gay. So if you are funny and you’ve got a good sense of humor, a lot of times you can change things that way. I just joked about it and kind of threw it back at him as a joke and started looking for another job right away and left.

Falon, a 59-year-old automotive technician, would use his LGB/TQ identity to provide some humor and lighten the mood at work:
As long as I am comfortable with where I am at, people around me should be able to notice that. It’s like the other night, this one guy was being a bit obtuse and he said, “I just don’t give an F.” I said, “Fine bend over and let me drive.” And nothing was ever said after that. It’s not like they were shocked by it. But they didn’t get offended either.

Finally, LGB/TQ employees may choose to exit the organization as a response to dignity threats. This was a response that was commonly heard throughout the interviews. For instance, Xavier discussed how a closed door meeting about his sexuality and his family led him eventually to leave the corporation:

I was only there a year. [...] When I did make it clear to everybody that I was gay, [we had another offsite meeting] and everybody got to invite their families. I said that I was going to invite my partner and our daughter. The way that was received was that they had to have the VP of Sales and Marketing, all the direct staff, and all that senior level management have a closed door meeting about the fact that I would be bringing my family. That was humiliating. I never actually went on the offsite because I ended up leaving. It was received as fine, you can do that, whatever, but when I found out that they had to have a closed door meeting to discuss it, I thought “Really?”

Charlie discussed how the use of a disparaging remark led him to leave a restaurant where he was waiting tables:

Many years ago at another job, I had the head chef turn around and call me a “faggot.” Very loudly, very outspoken and in front of about 15 other people, very loudly with the total malice behind it too. My boss said, “That’s a problem between you two. That’s not anything we have to deal with. You figure it out.” Needless to say, I didn’t work there much longer.

After his negative experiences with the senior pastor and a series of problematic reviews, Ryan has begun to ponder exiting his current workplace:

Given some of the workplace scenarios, things that have been going on around there, things have really changed for me in the four years that I was hired to the point where I’m just wanting to get out of there right now.

Exiting the organization is not necessarily a new phenomenon when individuals feel like they are not being respected for who they are. Lutgen-Sandvik (2003a, 2006)
draws attention to exiting as one of the only real viable responses to being the target of workplace bullying. Furthermore, research reports that employees’ commitment and productivity decrease after they experience dignity threats in the workplace (Keashly & Neuman, 2005; Tepper, 2000).

In sum, responses to dignity were used as a way for individuals to make sense of threats to their dignity. These responses took on a variety of forms including venting both in and outside of the organization, deflecting threats, and exiting the organization.

**Resisting Dignity Threats**

Responses to dignity threats reflected personal sensemaking strategies regarding the disruption and denial of LGB/TQ identities. Expanding upon this understanding of responses, I discuss resistance as a politically motivated response to dignity threats. LGB/TQ employees engaged in acts of resistance on the job by advocating, calling out, and disrupting the workplace.

First, LGB/TQ employees resisted dignity threats by being advocates for LGB/TQ inclusivity. This particular act of resistance usually occurred outside of the workplace and was seen as a way to channel their energy productively. For instance, after facing a dignity threat in being fired from a job due to his sexual orientation, Cameron chose to become an LGB/TQ volunteer and activist:

> I did channel a lot of my energy into volunteerism and work like that. […] That’s a productive place to actually go pay out your frustrations.

Gavin’s experiences in a small organization impacted on his views of advocacy as a resistance strategy. According to Gavin, “I feel like what [this workplace] has taught me, to some extent, is that you don’t get anything unless you are a god damn nudge.”
Walter began volunteering after he came out at work. His advocacy experiences eventually led him and his partner, Xavier, to start a consulting business. Walter described his path to advocacy:

I began volunteering a little bit and I was asked to speak at a few different events. […] I also started a couple of community groups. After that, a few jobs within the LGBT community working with homeless gay youth. [And finally] working in the education department with HIV/AIDS prevention within communities of color. It just meshed into our consulting company now. I expand to diversity as well. We do education and training now along with policy development and a whole range of issues.

Another method of advocacy outside the workplace was to be present in the public by attending meetings, discussions, and forums. Elliott, a 34-year-old music director, conveyed the importance of his presence at church meetings when the subject of LGB/TQ inclusion was up for discussion:

There were several meetings that were led by our pastor and church leadership explaining what the votes were and opening it up to questions. […] I always made a point to attend them. My comment is to say if someone wants to stand up and say that they hate gay people, I think that there should be a gay person in the room. If that’s your opinion you are welcome to say it, but if you are not willing to say it to my face you should rethink your opinion.

While advocacy was a method of resistance used primarily outside the organization, sometimes it was necessary to deploy resistance within the context of the organization. One way that this occurred was through confronting other employees and calling them out. For example, Finley shared a time when it became necessary to call out a colleague for his use of disparaging remarks against LGB/TQ identities:

He comes in one night and I’m like, “Dude. These are things that I am hearing, what’s up?” He said, “What business is it of yours?” And I’m like, “I’m a lesbian you…nimrod! That’s not cool.” And he’s like, “Really?” and I’m like, “Yes and there are other people that you work with who are gay, who are in the closet or who are not, and you are offending them. All of them. In or out.”
Quinn described the importance of correcting people’s language in regards to incorrect perceptions of an individual’s identity category:

We were both called lesbians in front of a group of peers. You know for individuals who don’t understand a lot of queer theory or gender theory that’s kind of okay, but neither one of us prescribes to that [label] at all. Phoenix is bisexual and I’m pansexual. I was like, “But we are not lesbians. I’m pansexual and she’s bisexual.” I made a point to draw that out, which kind of took the person who said it sort of aback.

Jordan recalled a time when it became necessary to address overtly the disparaging language that was being used in his workplace:

I would call them out specifically. [...] One time when I just thought that it was a little bit too blatant and they had like their non-discrimination policy in Spanish and in English both posted up on the wall. The interaction was usually over lunch hour because everyone would be in the same lunch space. So I just took those down and I said, “You know, I can read this Spanish one. I know you can’t, but I am going to give you this English one and see if you can read anything here. I know you think that you really have a handle out there on things in the warehouse, but we are all doing the same thing here. We are all working together and this policy and this company is bigger than you are. I wouldn’t be pushing this anymore if I were you.” After that, in time, I got to know them a little bit. And it’s funny too because, during like pay day, I didn’t have any supervisory or managerial, but I was just at the front desks, so I would hand out paychecks. By then they just get nice. Something about them getting their check from you, you know.

And finally, LGB/TQ employees can enact resistance in the workplace through disruption. Disrupting as a resistance strategy was defined by political acts that disturb the heteronormative and homophobic status quo. Sawyer discusses how he disrupted the restaurant that threatened his dignity by picketing outside the workplace:

I ended up picketing the place for like six weeks. That’s where I think I was really activated me to come out politically. I have been involved in local politics ever since then. Whether it’s launching somebody’s campaign or even just standing outside with a sign that says, you know, “I deserve equal rights.” I publicized as much of the negativity as I possibly could on the internet, people that I would talk to, anything. After I left, they hired a bunch of gay people.
Charlie also discusses how he disrupted a restaurant that fired an LGB/TQ individual based on sexual orientation:

Another restaurant in town blatantly fired a member of the wait staff for being gay. So we had three weeks of sit-ins. It was just their policy. They were very upfront and forward that, “Yes, that’s why. We have a group of regular customers that will no longer eat with us if we have gay people who are working for us.” Okay, fine. You aren’t going to have one working for you, but you are going to have a whole restaurant full of us for a long time.

In addition to engaging in acts of visible disruption at that restaurant, Charlie was also able to resist at his own restaurant as well:

What made it fun was that we had the same group that came into our restaurant too. I have to admit I turned up the flame a little bit when they were around. It’s like you are going to run out of restaurants.

Xavier described how he kept a paper trail outlining the threats he experienced at work. Eventually, he took these records to the company’s Vice President of Human Resources. This act of disruption lead to Xavier’s supervisors being reprimanded and Xavier receiving a promotion of sorts. It all started when Xavier received an unjustifiable performance review from his manager citing that his work performance and his work ethic were “poor.” Xavier asked for documentation, but his manager “refused.” At that point, Xavier made the decision to keep documentation at work in order to present at case to human resources:

Unbeknownst to them, I kept a journal of everything. I wrote a 6-page letter to the VP of HR and I basically turned them in. I know that they did it probably more to cover their own ass. But at the same time, these were people who liked me, who knew me, knew the stuff that was coming from these two guys was a load of crap. […] I said to my manager in that closed door meeting that he had with me, I said, “The only reason why you are doing this right now is because I’m gay and you don’t like it.” And he said, “I don’t have a problem with…” and he couldn’t get the word out, homosexuals. “I just never worked with one before.” I said, “You never worked with one what?” And he just didn’t know what to say. So I put that in the letter.
According to Xavier the VP of HR was “mortified” and “handled it appropriately.” Then Xavier met with the VP of HR, the company’s CEO, and Treasurer. They offered him a position working for the Treasurer. Xavier noted that “they assured me that they would address the situation.” After transferring out of the department, Xavier said “I got my dignity back.” He worked there for another four years and started working with the company’s President.

Finally, Logan discussed how a picture of his husband became an act of disruption his first day on the job:

My first day on the job, I got to my desk and put out a picture of my husband. Of course everybody came by and said, “Oh, is that your brother?” And I was like, “No that’s my husband.” There were some very religious people there who took offense to it and had actually asked one of my supervisors, coworkers, to take it down because it was offensive.

Despite his coworkers’ claims of offense, Logan left the picture up. His reason for it was because he “wasn’t the only gay person on the floor at the time.” And he felt like he needed to take a stand and leave the picture up to show solidarity with other LGB/TQ employees. Logan said:

I was validating that those who were gay and lesbian had come up and said, “Oh my god. I can’t believe you left that up. That’s fantastic.” […] A lot of people would say, “It’s your first day on the job. Don’t you think that it should be about your performance not your sexuality?” I looked at it as no this is my work environment and if I can’t be comfortable in my work environment then I don’t want to be in this environment. […] I tend to think that people may not be as accepting because they think they haven’t met anyone. There are 5 or 10% of us on the floor who were gay, then those who think that gays and lesbians are only in the corners or whatever their preconceptions are, you challenge them by being out, open, and honest, comfortable and well adjusted.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the first two research questions addressed the communication of (in)dignity as experienced by LGB/TQ individuals on the job and examined responses
and resistance to indignity. The first set of research questions examined how dignity was affirmed on the job (RQ1) and then how dignity was threatened (RQ2). Results reveal that dignity can be affirmed in ways that have unique implications for LGB/TQ employees through interpersonal and organizational affirmations. Interpersonal affirmations communicated respect for personal LGB/TQ identities and also explicitly acknowledged partners and families. Furthermore, organizations played a key role in affirming dignity by creating respectful and inclusive workplaces that recognized the larger struggles of the LGB/TQ community. Specifically, organizational affirmations encompassed acts of solidarity that were reflected in human resources processes, benefit packages, use of inclusive language, and demonstrations of public support. In sum, affirmations recognized that the personal was important (e.g., you bring yourself to work) and can, at times, be political. In total, these affirmations outline a map for workplace dignity that includes specific recognition and incorporation of expressions of gender, sex, and sexuality on micro- and meso-levels.

In addition to exploring the communication of dignity, the results of this study reveal salient dignity threats in the workplace in regards to gender, sex, and sexuality. The use of the term threat is strategic as it implies malice or harm against LGB/TQ identities. Specifically, two salient LGB/TQ-specific dignity threats emerged. The first was the denial of personal solidarity, which individually targeted LGB/TQ employees. The second dignity threat involved threats to security. These threats either targeted LGB/TQ individuals explicitly for their gender, sex, and sexuality (e.g., “I was fired for being gay”) or were ambiguously attributed to gender and sexuality. These attributions were murky to navigate because individuals could not say for sure if their LGB/TQ
identity factored in, but they certainly felt like it did. In total, the focus on LGB/TQ-specific dignity threats demonstrated that while LGB/TQ employees do face universal denials of dignity common to all workers (e.g., mismanagement and abuse, overwork, denials of competency), they also face unique threats at work. These threats, either real or perceived, threaten security on the job. Furthermore, the unique dignity threats as experienced by LGB/TQ employees served to further the case as to why formal policies and protections continue to matter in the workplace.

Finally, the third research question addressed the responses and strategies for resistance that were deployed by LGB/TQ individuals on the job. There were three primary responses: venting (usually outside of the workplace), deflecting, and exiting the workplace. In addition to responses, acts of resistance were also deployed. These acts included: advocating (usually outside of the workplace), calling out, and disrupting the workplace. In total, these responses and resistance strategies reveal that LGB/TQ individuals have a myriad of communicative options at their disposal when faced with dignity threats. These options can range from personal sense making to political acts.
CHAPTER 5: COMMUNICATING IDENTITY AT WORK

In this chapter, I explain how strategies of identity work regarding gender, sex, and sexuality were negotiated by LGB/TQ employees and how, in turn, their negotiations impacted the achievement of dignity at work. Specifically, I asked “What identity work strategies do LGB/TQ employees practice at work regarding gender, sex, and sexuality?” (RQ4) and “What are the implications of these identity work strategies for the achievement of dignity?” (RQ5). In the sections that follow, I begin by explaining the connection between identity work practices and the pursuit of dignity. Then, I detail four common strategies of LGB/TQ identity work and explain how these strategies created dignity tradeoffs. These strategies include: (a) The Passer, (b) The Professional, (c) The Compartmentalizer, and (d) The Valued Token.

Identity Work and Dignity

In the workplace, the construction of identity is positioned as a push-pull between an individual’s sense of self and an organization’s collective purpose (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). In this context, the creation of identity is an active, ongoing process of sensemaking that an individual negotiates in conversation with a variety of organizational discourses (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004; Deetz, 1992). These discourses “‘fix’ identities” (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005, p. 71) in ways that merge personal performances of self with the interests and goals of the organization.

As described in Chapter Four, organizational discourses and interpersonal interactions often threaten the dignity of LGB/TQ employees at work—from denials of solidarity to threats of security. Therefore, while all workers tend to engage in a range of identity work activities, identity work takes on a particularly significant role for LGB/TQ
employees. Identity work may reduce immediate threats or bolster affirmations of dignity, as tied to their gender, sex, and sexuality. But, all too often, any immediate gains are offset by other tradeoffs to dignity. One important way to view this connection is by understanding the two central mechanisms of dignity: inherent dignity and earned dignity (Hodson, 2001). First, inherent dignity is the value accorded to an individual for the sake of being a human being. This perspective is tied to the Kantian notion that all humans should be treated as an ends unto themselves rather than a means unto an end (Sayer, 2007). Second, earned dignity is a valuation based on the instrumental worth that individuals bring to the workplace through their work efforts (Castel, 1996). In this sense, people’s dignity is tied not to their personhood, but to an organizational performance or contribution. While these two dimensions coexist, the distinction becomes important when examining the implications of different identity work strategies and what it means for achieving dignity at work.

**The Passer**

The first identity work strategy was “the Passer.” Individuals who employed the Passer strategy concealed personal information about their gender, sex, and sexuality. This identity work strategy was in line with previous research on passing, which suggested that in contemporary workplaces, passing can be a conscious and deliberate act on the part of LGB/TQ employees (e.g. Clair et al., 2005; DeJordy, 2008; Spradlin, 1998). Due to the invisible nature of sexual identities, LGB/TQ employees may intentionally conceal those aspects of their identities through behavior monitoring, such as distancing, distracting, deceiving, and deflecting (Spradlin, 1998). LGB/TQ employees
primarily engaged in behavior monitoring by controlling their speech acts and bodily performances—either in response to direct or perceived dignity threats.

For instance, Harper, a 59-year-old government supervisor, adopted the Passer as an identity work strategy due to the direct threats he experienced because he was gay. These threats began six-months into his over 30-year career. At that time, his officemate outing him to their colleagues. After that, colleagues would openly mock Harper. He described walking in on a group of colleagues “telling fag jokes.” It was clear that the jokes were in reference to Harper, which ostracized him from his colleagues. The ostracism lead Harper to believe that he was “not always as included in some of the other activities or accepted as well by the other supervisors.”

The outing at work and subsequent ostracism was not the only time that Harper’s sexuality had become salient at work. A year prior to our interview, a subordinate threatened to out Harper to their boss. The subordinate was losing her job and tried to leverage Harper’s sexuality against him in order to keep her job. The subordinate, however, quit before she could “out” Harper.

These experiences led Harper to take actions at work to protect himself from dignity threats such as verbal abuse, taunting, and disrespectful interaction. For example, Harper used the label “roommate” to refer to his partner at work. Furthermore, he distanced himself from conversations that would lead to personal disclosures. According to Harper:

I don’t go into a lot of aspects of my personal life at all to be honest with you. I really don’t talk to any of the staff. When they talk about their family and friends, I kind of just stand there and listen. I don’t really say a lot about my personal life. I guess in some ways I am still somewhat uncomfortable talking about it.
By engaging in behavior monitoring through distancing, it was difficult for Harper to develop personal relationships at work. His ability to get to know his colleagues on a personal level was constrained in the workplace. This is particularly distressing given the fact that Harper has been employed at the same workplace for more than 30 years.

In addition to verbal behavior monitoring, Harper also controlled his bodily performances at work in order to distance himself from stereotypical portrayals of gay men. Harper explained, “Most of my friends that are gay now seem to think that I don’t really present myself as a gay person in the sense that I am not flamboyant, I guess.” This allowed Harper to blend in at work and created conditions that would allow him to pass at work.

In contrast to Harper, who reacted to direct dignity threats, Yancey, a 32-year-old manager at a manufacturing plant, adopted the strategy of the Passer at work because he perceived that his dignity would be threatened if he was open about his sexuality at work. Thus, Yancey engaged in behavior monitoring in order to protect his sexuality from becoming visible. Yancey was not open about his sexuality at the plant and actively concealed that with his speech acts. In conversations with colleagues, he framed his personal life in such a way as to conceal his partner. According to Yancey “they think I’m single.” He explained:

[I’m] not out in general at work in my day-to-day workplace. I do actively conceal that. If they ask me what I did this weekend and I was out the whole weekend with my boyfriend on a trip, I will say I went on a trip with friends or something like that. Sometimes I’ll name the place or activity, but I won’t say “with my boyfriend.”
In terms of his bodily performances at work, Yancey engaged in behavior monitoring by distancing himself from LGB/TQ stereotypes. When asked if he broke any expectations regarding gender, sex, and sexuality, Yancey responded:

I don’t think that I’m an effeminate person. I don’t have like, I don’t have a lot of hand gestures. [pause] I guess when I go into work, I don’t assume that people think I am a homosexual based on my appearance and my demeanor.

It is important to note that while Yancey concealed his sexuality in his workplace, he was out to his family and to LGB/TQ colleagues that worked in the corporate offices. Therefore, his identity work strategy of Passer was specifically and only for protecting his workplace dignity.

Yancey did not disclose his sexuality at the plant for two reasons. First, he was unsure about how that disclosure was relevant to the job. And second, he feared that his coworkers, and more specifically the technicians he supervised, would not respect him if they knew he identified as a gay man. Yancey explained:

I didn’t, you know, put up a rainbow flag like that and let everybody know. I have a high concern that people won’t have respect for me. […] I had one colleague who actually on a one-on-one basis I have a great relationship with, but he’s constantly talking politics, very extreme Republican politics that typically don’t gel well with the homosexual agenda. It’s a topic [LGB/TQ politics] that never comes up. He never talks about gay marriage, but everything else political is about Republican stuff. So I’m like if I came out to him what would he think?

Yancey admitted that he was not certain that he would be disrespected at work if he disclosed his sexuality, but he still feared the possibility. As Yancey explained “they already don’t treat me, some of them don’t treat me, like the technicians are disrespectful.”

Put into dignity terms, the Passer strategy presented implications for the achievement of dignity at work. While it is understandable for individuals to seek
protection from hostile communication at work (Clair et al., 2005; DeJordy, 2008), these practices can create conflicts of inherent dignity. The Passer was deployed as a way to protect LGB/TQ employees from direct threats to dignity, either real or perceived. By making invisible their gender, sex, or sexuality, they could avoid injuries to inherent dignity caused by gay jokes, ostracism, and general disrespect. Yet, while there are short-term benefits, the Passer strategy is not a panacea as it impedes the full achievement of inherent dignity. In the case of Passers, their inherent worth as a human being is not valued unconditionally. Instead, their value is (or is perceived to be) conditional upon altering or rendering invisible a fundamental aspect of themselves. It is the partial person—one who is absent gender, sex, and sexuality—that is valued. If an organization and its members do not value an employee’s whole self, it can be more difficult to communicate messages that validate the individual as a human being (Spradlin, 1998). In turn, this lack of visibility also presented challenges for achieving organizational affirmations of dignity. It can be more difficult to advocate for cultures of inclusivity and respect if an organization and its members continue to operate under heterosexual assumptions.

The Professional

The second identity work strategy was “the Professional.” Individuals who practiced the Professional strategy adhered to heteronormativity in ways that disciplined their personal performances of gender, sex, and sexuality. The Professional engaged in identity work by controlling their bodies in ways that allowed them to be out at work, but by conforming to heteronormative ideals of gender, sex, and sexuality (e.g., monogamous
relationship, children, conforming to traditional binaries of gender/sex. These “out-but-straight” performances were described by Cameron, a 40-year-old graduate assistant:

The right kind of gay is two people who get married. [...] You are going to see in corporate offices, guys with suits with pictures of the partner with the Hawaii scene behind it and maybe the kid. But you aren’t going to see a picture of a guy and his partner dressed in drag.

It is important to note that the Professional as an identity work strategy is different from passing. Passing has been defined as attempting to identify as a member of the dominant social group (Clair et al., 2005). In this case, LGB/TQ employees were not necessarily attempting to pass as heterosexual, but performed their personal LGB/TQ identities in ways that sanitized their sexualities and adhered to heteronormative performances of gender and sex. The Professional identity work strategy also is different from the identity work done by straight employees who perform a more professional identity in the workplace than they do outside of work. In addition to being more formal, more polite, or more polished—as would a straight employee—the LGB/TQ Professional also must engage in a highly gendered performance of professionalism. So this performance is not a “better” version of themselves, but a fundamentally different version of themselves.

For instance, Sam, a 47-year-old graduate assistant, adopted the strategy of the Professional at work. Sam explained that in general she performed gender, sex, and sexuality in a “more masculine way” and did not “stick to any stereotypes of what is woman.” However, when she entered the classroom as the instructor, she controlled her body by adhering to heteronormative binary constructions of gender/sex:

I wear lipstick. I wear full on face makeup in my organization when I go to work, when I go to school. That’s generally when I perform a more feminine style when I’m at school where I am teaching. Not necessarily when I am in class [as a
student]. I am generally laid back as a student, but when I am in class [as the instructor] I perform a more professional look, more feminine with the makeup on. [emphasis added]

Recently, Sam had gone to class in jeans and a t-shirt and “performed a more masculine, butch style in the classroom.” She reported that “nothing happened” and that “no one commented on the way that I looked.” The students gave Sam the “same respect that they always did.” When asked if she would continue to dress like this for class, Sam responded that she was “hesitant” because she had been performing a “more feminine identity” for a long time. She said, “I felt more connected to them and less in this role of I’m the teacher and I’m going to give my lecture in those professional clothes.”

The out-but-straight Professional as an identity work strategy controlled LGB/TQ employees’ bodies in ways that sanitized their sexualities. These individuals were not attempting to pass as heterosexual at work, but did perform gender, sex, and sexuality in ways that conformed to heteronormative ideals. Thus, these processes impacted the achievement of dignity at work. Much like the Passer, the out-but-straight Professional performance allowed LGB/TQ employees to protect themselves from direct threats to inherent dignity, but raised concerns about their full self being valued. Moreover, the Professional identity work strategy also included silence as part of being professional. This silence is particularly problematic in terms of dignity, because typically it is expected that people will be able to defend their dignity when it is threatened. However, remaining silent as a component of being professional, it is preventing LGB/TQ employees from reclaiming their dignity and could potentially be enabling ongoing, similar dignity threats.


The Compartmentalizer

The third identity strategy was “the Compartmentalizer.” Individuals who practiced the Compartmentalizer made an effort to separate their sexuality from their work identity. The goal for the Compartmentalizer was to make gender, sex, and sexuality a “non-issue” on the job. This was achieved through a fixation with work and a denial of the salience of their gender, sex, and sexuality to the workplace context. For instance, Dylan, a 35-year-old professor, did not believe that his sexuality was relevant in the context of work. Dylan explained:

I think the issues come sometimes when we try to lead with a part of our identity that isn’t that critical to our day to day job functioning. Maybe some people will disagree with me. They would say, “Oh my sexual identity is an important part of my work identity, of who I am.” But for me it simply is not.

This strategy of separating instrumental contributions from personal identities was also evident in the advice that Dylan offered for younger LGB/TQ individuals who were entering the workforce. He explained that it was important to first be seen as a valuable asset to the organization before sexuality could be brought into the conversation. Dylan explained:

Give people a reason to want to keep you around that has nothing to do with your sexual identity. Be a stellar worker. Show that you’ve got a phenomenal benefit to an organization and you have skills that can make it strong. What I think happens is when people get to know you and they know that you are a strong, good, reliable member of the organization it’s very hard for them to uphold prejudices against you. Come to find out, “Oh Dylan is gay. Oh well. Dylan is great. That doesn’t matter.”

Bailey, a 33-year-old attorney, compartmentalized her sexuality when she entered the courtroom. She explained that this move was in large part due to the working relationships that she had with other attorneys. According to Bailey:
I am certainly much more restrained with my identity. If it came down to it I probably would be kind of fiercely aggressive about it. [...] I get a little like embarrassed. [...] I usually don’t give a shit what people think, but this dynamic with the prosecutors. It’s not about me, it’s about my clients. I have this obligation to do what I can for them, which is totally screwy way to live, but that is kind of the reality of my job. To some extent the happier they are with me the better things turn out.

While Bailey reported that her office environment was, for the most part, supportive of her sexuality she was cognizant that this may not translate to all contexts especially the courtroom. With that in mind, Bailey made a move to separate her sexuality from her working relationship with other attorneys. She put her clients first and, in turn, made her performance on-the-job top priority.

For the Compartmentalizer, identity work was a complex process, which favored achieving earned dignity through a compulsion for work and the separation of sexuality from work identities. This separation attempted to make gender, sex, and sexuality a non-issue at work, yet at times sexuality was salient. For the Compartmentalizers, the instrumental value that they brought to the organization through their work efforts was privileged over their inherent worth as a human. This focus on earned dignity was both a way to create a sense of workplace dignity and a possible way to deflect some of the threats LGB/TQ employees might otherwise face. By being a strong performer with high instrumental value, Compartmentalizers believed that they were more immune to interpersonal (e.g., harassment) and material (e.g., job loss) threats as related to their gender, sex, and sexuality. However, there is an inherent contradiction between inherent and earned dignity (Lucas, revise and resubmit). Again, inherent dignity is a valuation that is based on the Kantian notion that people are valued as an ends unto themselves and not simply as a means unto an end. Earned dignity is based on the extent to which people
are a means unto an instrumental end. While earned dignity can potentially bolster workplace dignity, when people compartmentalize, they deny themselves the human need for inherent worth beyond instrumentality.

**The Valued Token**

The final identity work strategy was “the Valued Token. This strategy allowed for LGB/TQ employees’ sexualities to become fully visible at work, but this visibility was motivated by the instrumental value that such identities possessed, rather than simple acceptance of them as LGB/TQ individuals. For instance, when Riley, a 33-year-old construction worker, was first hired as a salesperson for a car dealership, he clashed with his sales manager. Riley’s relationship with his boss improved after he came out at work. Once news of his sexuality trickled through the office grapevine, Riley was called into the sales manager’s office. Riley thought that the sales manager was going to “bash” him, but instead he gave Riley his support. According to Riley, his boss said “if anybody here says anything to you or makes you feel uncomfortable, you tell me. I will be after them. […] I’m here for you.” Riley went on to explain that the sales manager had worked with other LGB/TQ sales persons at previous dealerships and had become “friends with a lot of them.” According to Riley, after the disclosure of his LGB/TQ identity they “went from being enemies to being really good friends.”

But much of this “friendship” was linked to the extent to which the sales manager was able to leverage Riley’s LGB/TQ identity in ways that ultimately benefitted of the dealership. The instrumental value of Riley’s LGB/TQ identity was used by his boss to help improve the sales relationship with LGB/TQ customers. When presumably gay
customers entered the dealership, the sales manager would say to them, “Oh here’s Riley over here” and would pair them up in an effort to help sell more cars.

Neal, a 31-year-old financial analyst, also described taking on the role of the Valued Token. For Neal, the Valued Token strategy became salient when his company asked him to be the part of the recruitment team. As a member of this company-wide team, he helped recruit undergraduate and MBA students. However, one of his main tasks was to attend a national job fair for LGB/TQ individuals. As Neal explained:

You go out and answer questions for the company. We sponsored a lunch where people who were interested would sign up to come to our lunch. We were a sounding board for any of the questions. I did go through and interview people for internships and full-time positions from an MBA perspective. Obviously, they needed a gay man in finance. Now I don’t know if I was the only one, but nonetheless I got the gig.

Even though Neal recognized that it was his sexuality that got him the job, he still believed that the experience was a positive one, saying, “I took a lot of pride. I had dignity in being in charge of that.” It gave him the opportunity to hone his interviewing skills and provided him with networking opportunities. It also gave him some valuable mentoring time with the treasurer of the company. Neal explained “he gave me pointers for when I was out there. You could say this, but you can’t say that. There was good mentoring.” Even though his LGB/TQ identity was being leveraged by the organization, Neal, like Riley, was still able to perceive some personal benefit by taking on an instrumental role for his workplace.

The Valued Token strategy leveraged sexuality in ways that served organizational needs. While this strategy of identity work created visibility for sexuality in the workplace, dignity tradeoffs still existed. On one hand, the instrumental value that a person (and particularly their gender, sex, and sexuality) brings to a work role is
validated, creating a condition of earned dignity. Considering that LGB/TQ identities are frequently marginalized, it is at first glance a good sign to find circumstances in which those identities are privileged. On the other hand, an instrumental-only valuation of employees still raises concerns for inherent dignity. As a corollary to the Passer who is valued without a part of his or her identity, the Valued Token is valued for only one part of his or her identity. LGB/TQ employees were not being truly valued at work for who they were, but their “gayness” was valued because it could fulfill an instrumental purpose at work. While this process may seem inclusive given the visibility of LGB/TQ identities, these practices do not truly celebrate the inherent worth and value of a human being, but serve as a means for the organization’s ends.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, these research questions explored the identity work strategies that LGB/TQ employees practiced regarding performances of their gender, sex, and sexuality, and the implications that these strategies have for the achievement of dignity at work. These identity work strategies include the Passer, the Professional, the Compartmentalizer, and the Valued Token. Each strategy presented its own dignity tradeoffs regarding the achievement of earned and inherent dignity.

First, the Passer actively concealed sexuality in the workplace through behavior monitoring and modifying bodily performances. This strategy asked LGB/TQ employees to alter their performances of self in such a way as to render gender, sex, and sexuality absent from the workplace. By concealing their sexuality, the Passer created conditions that impeded their ability to fully achieve inherent dignity. Those who adopted the Passer at work were limited in by how much of themselves were valued in the workplace.
Second, the Professional adapted their performances of sexuality to conform to heteronormative ideals. This identity work strategy was highly gendered in its performance of what it means to be professional. Like the Passer, the Professional was an altered version of self. However, the Professional allowed for LGB/TQ sexualities to become visible in the workplace, but this visibility was only acceptable in so far as it conformed to heteronormative ideals. Furthermore, silence was an important component of the Professional strategy. Silence can be problematic for achieving inherent dignity. It can become more difficult for silenced employees to defend their dignity when threatened and can enable ongoing dignity threats.

Third, the Compartmentalizer separated sexuality from work identities. This identity work strategy favored the achievement of earned dignity through a compulsion for work, a compulsion that attempted to make sexuality a “non-issue” at work. By attempting to downplay sexuality, the Compartmentalizer instead perpetuated the salience of sexuality in the workplace. The Compartmentalizer privileged the instrumental value that they brought to the workplace over their worth as a human being. While these employees may have believed that they were immune to dignity threats based on gender, sex, and sexuality, this protection backfired and made them even more vulnerable to those threats.

And finally, the Valued Token made sexuality visible in the workplace, but in such a way as to benefit the organization as a whole and/or its members. The visibility of sexuality in the workplace created conditions for the achievement of earned dignity, but still challenged inherent dignity. For the Valued Token, dignity was based on only one part of a person’s identity, the part of their sexual identity that benefitted the
organization. This gives off the appearance of inclusivity, but in reality these practices fall short of truly celebrating the inherent worth and value of an individual.

It is important to note that the results of this analysis did not produce a category that understood the Disruptor as an identity work strategy. The Disruptor can perform LGB/TQ identities in the workplace in ways that draw attention to the paradox between the right and wrong kind of way to be gay. For instance, a disruptor may refer to their partner as their “lover” in workplace conversations and say it in such a way as to play up the sexual nature of that label. These performances of LGB/TQ identities reject certain agendas and movements that can be seen as heteronormative in nature such as the Human Rights Campaign’s emphasis on same-sex marriage. While the Disruptor did not appear in this reading of the data, it is possible that alternate readings of this data or other follow up methodologies may uncover this category.

In summary, inherent and earned dignity are mechanisms that coexist in the workplace, but become distinct when navigating the strategies for LGB/TQ identity work and the implications that these strategies present for the achievement of dignity. Collectively, these identity work strategies foreground the potential for achieving earned dignity, while creating conditions that challenged the full achievement of inherent dignity. While LGB/TQ employees may have engaged in these strategies to protect themselves from immediate threats to dignity, these practices were not a catch-all for protecting LGB/TQ employees in the workplace. By downplaying sexuality, LGB/TQ employees became more susceptible to dignity threats that targeted gender, sex, and sexuality. Furthermore, the deployment of these identity work strategies made it more difficult for LGB/TQ employees to combat and prevent dignity threats.
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

The purpose of my study was to explore how LGB/TQ employees experience the communication of (in)dignity and how they engage in identity work to (re)claim dignity in their working lives. In the sections that follow, I (a) summarize the key findings of the study, (b) highlight the theoretical implications of this line of research, and (c) describe several practical applications for improving experiences of workplace dignity for LGB/TQ employees, and (d) outline limitations and directions for future research.

Summary of Findings

My study emphasizes the dignity of identity at work through the exploration of how LGB/TQ employees experience (in)dignity and their processes of meaning-making. Previous organizational communication research has articulated three central dimensions of dignity in the workplace: respectful interaction, recognition of competence, and acknowledgement of value to the organization (Lucas, 2012). My study furthered this line of research by exploring the relevance of social identities in the workplace and more specifically, the negotiation of gender, sex, and sexuality. This approach to dignity research continues to draw attention to the inequalities that persist in the workplace regarding social identities and matters of difference (Sayer, 2007).

My findings are organized around four central themes: (a) affirmations of dignity, (b) dignity threats, (c) responses and resistance strategies, and (d) strategies of LGB/TQ identity work. First, LGB/TQ employees discussed how affirmations of dignity were communicated on interpersonal and organizational levels for the purposes of reinforcing individuals’ sense of self-worth and self-respect. Affirmations were communicated on the interpersonal level by recognizing personal LGB/TQ identities through messages of
acceptance and respect and by acknowledging and including, when applicable, LGB/TQ partners and families. Dignity was affirmed on the organizational level through acts of solidarity that reflected larger socio-cultural LGB/TQ concerns. These acts of solidarity created organizational cultures of respect and inclusion, which communicated the message “we have your back” to LGB/TQ employees. These organizational acts of solidarity were communicated through human resource processes, benefits packages, the use of inclusive language, and public support.

The second theme centered on the communication of salient dignity threats regarding of gender, sex, and sexuality in the workplace. Threats were communicated through interactions or conditions that undermined LGB/TQ employees’ sense of self-worth and self-respect, which targeted the personal as well as the broader socio-political connotation of these identities. Thus, a threat to the overall group identity may not specifically target an LGB/TQ employee, but can be perceived by that employee as a personal attack. Specifically, two types of dignity threats emerged. First, dignity was threatened through denials of solidarity that were communicated through refusals to acknowledge either full or partial aspects of LGB/TQ identities. This was often found in what was left unsaid in workplace interactions such as choosing not to talk about sexuality, ignoring LGB/TQ identities, or pretending that the organization did not have any LGB/TQ employees. Second, dignity was attacked through threats to an LGB/TQ employee’s sense of security in the organization. At times, these threats to security were explicit (e.g., being fired for being gay), but also could be ambiguously-attributed. These subtle threats were communicated in ways that made LGB/TQ employees feel like they
were being targeted because of their gender, sex, and sexuality, but they could not say for certain. It was, instead, a feeling that they could not shake.

The third theme examined LGB/TQ employees’ responses to and strategies for resisting dignity threats. Responses were classified as personal sensemaking strategies that employees deployed to help navigate dignity threats. Responses included venting (usually outside of the organization); deflecting threats through jokes, humor, and sarcasm; and exiting the organization. Resistance strategies, like responses, were about sensemaking, but these strategies were also political in nature. Resistance included advocating for LGB/TQ interests (usually outside of the organization), calling people out for being disrespectful of LGB/TQ identities, and disrupting the status quo of the workplace.

Ultimately, the communication of (in)dignity as experienced by LGB/TQ employees created a variety of dignity tradeoffs whereby LGB/TQ individuals were forced to make difficult decisions and to engage in identity performances that, while protecting one element of their dignity, prevented another element of their dignity from being fulfilled. These strategies of identity work included: the Passer, the Professional, the Compartmentalizer, and the Valued Token. First, the Passer actively concealed their sexuality in the workplace by carefully monitoring their behaviors and bodily performances. By concealing their sexuality, the Passer created conditions that limited their ability to fully achieve inherent dignity. The Professional adapted their performances of gender, sex, and sexuality in such a way as to conform to heteronormative ideals. This presented a highly gendered performance of what it meant to be professional in the workplace. This gendered performance served to silence non-
normative expressions of gender/sex, thus making it more difficult for achieving inherent dignity. The Compartmentalizer separated sexuality from work identities. This identity work strategy favored the achievement of earned dignity through a compulsion for work. Finally, the Valued Token made sexuality visible in the workplace, but only if it was beneficial to the organization and/or its members. The visibility of the Valued Token created conditions for achieving earned dignity, but simultaneously challenged the achievement of proper inherent dignity.

**Theoretical Contributions**

My project contributes to discussions of the communication of (in)dignity and identity in the workplace. Specifically, I advance two theoretical contributions by (a) offering workplace dignity as a unifying framework for understanding problematic workplace experiences for LGB/TQ people and (b) situating communication at the center of workplace dignity research.

**Workplace Dignity as a Unifying Framework**

My project makes a theoretical contribution to the field of organizational communication by proposing workplace (in)dignity as a unifying framework for understanding problematic workplace experiences for LGB/TQ people. The workplace can be a hostile space for navigating gender, sex, and sexuality (Lewis, 2006, 2009; Spradlin, 1998). A dignity approach highlights the personal and social costs of these problematic experiences. It also provides a theoretical explanation of the damages caused by a range of behaviors from harassment to bullying to ostracism to discriminatory policies and beyond. Destructive communication denies personal dignity by decreasing an LGB/TQ employee’s perception of value to the organization and also denies them
social dignity by failing to communicate respect. Furthermore, the communication of the dignity of identity in the workplace highlights how mechanisms of dignity influence the deployment of LGB/TQ identity work strategies. By adopting a dignity lens, the question is no longer about whether to simply conceal or reveal sexuality in the workplace, but is reframed to emphasize the ongoing negotiation of performances of gender, sex, and sexuality. These negotiations are influenced by tradeoffs between mechanisms of earned and inherent dignity whereby LGB/TQ employees deploy a variety of identity work strategies for communicating sexual identity. Spradlin (1998) notes that it is important to draw attention to these strategies of identity work as they shine a light on “the intense pressures that gay and lesbian individuals experience during organizational interactions” (p. 599).

LGB/TQ employees negotiate a complex set of choices in the workplace that go beyond the decision to simply conceal or reveal. By integrating discussions of dignity mechanisms with identity work strategies, the communication of the dignity of identity draws attention to these complex choices. For instance, some of the identity work strategies highlighted in my study created performances of sexual identities that were invisibly visible in the workplace. For instance, an individual who adopts the Professional as an identity work strategy is not attempting to pass as heterosexual, but nonetheless is conforming to heteronormative ideals in the workplace. Thus, their performances of gender, sex, and sexuality become sanitized in the workplace and present the individual with dignity tradeoffs. These processes make it possible for an individual to be out at work (i.e., reveal), but the results of my study show that this visibility is still constrained through gendered performances of professionalism, which impacts the possibility for full
achievement of inherent dignity. Furthermore, individuals who choose to conceal at work are not protected either. They still face active threats to their earned and inherent dignity. By researching and highlighting employee voices in the communication of workplace (in)dignity, my study demonstrates that this is a discussion that is inherent linked to identity in the workplace.

**Situating Communication at the Center**

Furthermore, my project places communication at the center of workplace dignity research, which to-date has been largely explored through research in sociology (Hodson, 2001; Hodson & Roscigno, 2004; Rodriquez, 2011) and management studies (Bolton, 2007, 2010; Fleming, 2005). While communication has played a role in some of these studies (Doherty, 2011; Lucas, 2011a; Lucas et al., 2013; Wood & Karau, 2009), my project places the constitutive nature of communication (Deetz, 1994) at the heart of understanding (in)dignity and identity in the workplace. Through the exchange of messages, individuals navigate and negotiate (in)dignity and identity. By analyzing messages that affirm and threaten dignity while exploring responses and resistance to threatening messages, a more nuanced understanding of how individuals are enabled and constrained by organizational communication can be brought to light. This nuanced understanding is expanded through explorations of identity work, which are directly shaped by the communication of (in)dignity.

The constitutive nature of communication is further highlighted by my project’s emphasis on the social dimensions of (in)dignity and identity. In the case of (in)dignity and identity, the personal and social dimensions operate in conversation with one another and can be understood as a both/and relationship. Results indicate that the messages
communicated by an organization and its members impacts how LGB/TQ employees
come to experience (in)dignity and perform identity. This presents a push/pull between
personal dimensions that are negotiated by the individual and the influence of
organizational communication. Individuals as well as organizations and their members
are all responsible for the construction and maintenance of dignity and identity. Thus, my
project affirms the centrality of communication as a constitutive phenomenon that creates
and maintains social worlds and the individuals who operate within them.

**Practical Applications**

In this section, I outline how the results of my project can be used to inform
organizational life. These results have direct implications for organizational
communication outlining specific interventions for creating and maintaining cultures of
respect and inclusivity in the workplace. These organizational cultures are distinctly
different from cultures of tolerance or discussions of diversity in the workplace. Instead,
these are organizational cultures that respect difference. Discourses of difference not only
seek to understand the experiences of non-dominant group members in the workplace,
but also shine a light on the privileges that dominant groups enjoy as well (Allen, 2010).

In order to reconstruct workplaces as safer and more caring entities for all
employees, it is important that organizations communicate messages that difference
matters. In the case of my study, difference matters in terms of gender, sex, and sexuality.
Cultures of respect and inclusivity should communicate to LGB/TQ employees that their
performances of gender, sex, and sexuality are not only recognized, but valued. It is
important, however, that these messages are understated and integrated into everyday life
within the organization. If overdone, the attempt to communicate messages that gender,
sex, and sexuality matters in the organization can be problematic and be read as spotlighting, which can further isolate and silence LGB/TQ employees. For instance, it is important that LGB/TQ employees are not called out or called upon to speak for the group they are assumed to represent. Thus, organizations need to create cultures that produce conditions that make it comfortable for LGB/TQ employees to “bring themselves to work” and integrate who they are into the everyday without assigning them an unofficial role of organizational LGB/TQ spokesperson.

My applications are a reaction to my study’s articulation of the communication of (in)dignity and the responses and resistance to dignity threats. Specifically, I would like to focus my interventions on how organizations can affirm dignity and address threats to dignity in an effort to mitigate the impact of responses such as exiting the organization and decrease the necessity for resistance. Specifically, I explore interventions designed to communicate the dignity of identity during anticipatory socialization and through the use of LGB/TQ advocacy groups within the organization as a way to affirm dignity.

**Organizational Anticipatory Socialization**

Organizational socialization refers to processes by which an individual enters into and becomes part of an organization (Allen, 2000; Kramer & Miller, 2014). In terms of interventions, I would like to focus my attention on the first phase, organizational anticipatory socialization. Organizations have their first opportunity to communicate the dignity of identity during this phase. Thus, it is vital that organizations are proactive in communicating messages that difference matters.

Their first opportunity is during the recruitment process. Participants in my study reported “doing their homework” when applying for employment to see if organizations
were LGB/TQ friendly. They searched for non-discrimination policies, partner benefits, family leave policies, and other human resources documents. Thus, it is vital that these organizational initiatives are easily accessible to interested audiences. First, organizations can disseminate this information when advertising employment opportunities. The organization can post this information in full on their job ad or provide access to where this information can be located so that LGB/TQ individuals can learn more about the organization and what they can expect. Second, organizations should reach out to their local LGB/TQ community and explore opportunities to become recognized as an LGB/TQ inclusive business. Participants in this study mentioned the importance of their organization being recognized by the LGB/TQ community. It was something that they took pride in. Also, for some organizations, it was a way to bring in new business opportunities by becoming recognized in the local LGB/TQ community.

After recruitment, organizations have a second opportunity to communicate that gender, sex, and sexuality matters during the interview process. This is a great opportunity for organizations to directly engage with potential employees. It is important that the interview is not only about the details of employment opportunity, but also used as a time for communicating dignity. This can be achieved in a few ways. First, when potential employees contact the organization with their application they should receive information on inclusive organizational initiatives. Then, if the individual makes it to the interview stage it is important that a safe space is created for questions about respect and inclusivity. Human resource managers can be proactive in beginning this discussion by asking if interviewees have any questions about the organization overall, its quality of
life, its culture. Or they can provide information that demonstrates the organizations commitment to valuing difference.

**Use of LGB/TQ Advocacy Groups**

As LGB/TQ newcomers become socialized into an organization, it is important that human resource management practices continue to foster respect and inclusion. One way that organizations can continue to communicate messages that difference matters is by supporting LGB/TQ advocacy groups within the workplace and listening to their concerns. Several of the participants in my study mentioned the importance of having such a group within their organization. At times, other participants mentioned that their organizations had these groups in the past, but now they were no longer needed. Their workplace, as a whole, fostered a culture of respect and inclusion, but they did note that the presence of those advocacy groups helped spark the momentum. Thus, I believe that the presence of LGB/TQ advocacy groups can serve as an important first step in fostering organizational conditions that support and maintain the dignity of identity in the workplace.

These groups can support the dignity of identity for LGB/TQ employees through three specific functions. First, they can provide a social outlet for individuals to meet other LGB/TQ employees and develop workplace relationships. These settings create conditions for achieving inherent dignity in the workplace, something that in other contexts may be lacking. Outside of getting to know one another, these groups present opportunities for professional development. By establishing professional relationships with other LGB/TQ employees, newcomers have an opportunity to be informally mentored by veteran employees. This can be a safe space for discussing issues of gender,
sex, and sexuality that could not take place in the day-to-day work environment. Furthermore, these opportunities would allow for mentoring to occur without necessarily having to out anyone.

Finally, advocacy groups present the opportunity for LGB/TQ employees to collectively organize and lobby on behalf of LGB/TQ interests in the workplace. It is my hope that the results of this study can be used to inform these efforts to push for meaningful change in the workplace. At its core, dignity is a sense of self-worth and self-respect, which can serve as a powerful talking point for equality in the workplace. To feel a sense of self-worth and self-respect is a desire that human beings can fundamentally relate to. This moves the conversation from being about just about gender, sex, and sexuality to recognizing the inherent worth of every human being and the importance of communicating that respect in the workplace and shifts dignity from being an “LGB/TQ issue” to an issue that impacts all individuals in the organization. Advocacy groups can stress the need for the communication of the dignity of identity when lobbying for organizational acts of solidarity such as non-discrimination policies, inclusive benefits, and respectful human resource management processes.

I would like to offer several talking points for advocacy groups to use when voicing concerns to management and the administration. First, groups can highlight the phenomenon of exiting the organization as a response to dignity threats. Then, the conversation can be framed around the organization creating conditions that communicate dignity in an effort to retain more employees. Second, groups can argue that while conditions in the workplace have improved regarding gender, sex, and sexuality, there are still more improvements to be made. This is evidenced by my study’s
exploration of processes of identity work that present a tradeoff between inherent and earned dignity mechanisms. This complicates an LGB/TQ individual’s ability to “bring themselves to work,” but if human resource practitioners are aware of this impediment they can implement interventions to foster respect and inclusion. Organizations can address this need by fostering cultures of respect and inclusion by promoting the importance everyday pleasantries. The results of this study show the value of the everyday pleasantries in affirming dignity (e.g., the importance of recognizing of the personal, acknowledging partners and families, using inclusive language, and standing up for one another). These acts of humanity go a long way to support dignity. I realize that this is a tall order, but one that I would argue for organizations to attempt to achieve.

**Limitations**

In this section, I identify the limitations of my study and offer suggestions for future research. The first major limitation is the lack of diversity among voices in the LGB/TQ community. The sample collected largely reflects the voices and perspectives of gay men. While gay men certainly experience threats to their dignity and engage in strategies of identity work, it would be wrong to assume that their experiences are representative of the wide spectrum of LGB/TQ individuals and the challenges they experience. Therefore, future research in this area must do a better job of capturing the diversity of experience by including more voices from lesbians and bisexual people, and from individuals with cis-, queer-, and trans-gendered identities.

The second sampling limitation is that over 90% of the participants in this study are white. As such, the voices of this sample overwhelming represent the dominant group in terms of race and ethnicity in the workplace. Thus, my results represent the
perspectives of white, LGB/TQ employees in terms of how they come to understand professionalism in the workplace and how they engage in identity work, and exclude the possibility for understanding how racial and ethnic identities intersect with gender, sex, and sexuality in the workplace. Again, to fully understand the experiences of LGB/TQ employees’ quest for dignity, a broader and more diverse range of employees must be heard.

A third sampling limitation is the lack of diversity among various employment sectors. My sample included voices from professional and business sectors, educational contexts, and government employees. These employment sectors represent a more white-collar or knowledge worker perspective, which is performed through professional, managerial, and administrative work, which typically commands higher salaries than other employment sectors. Furthermore, it is important to note that the sample is drawn from a U.S. population and as such reflects U.S. norms regarding the workplace.

Additionally, my participants were far better educated than the general public. Eighty percent of my participants had a bachelor’s degree or higher. In terms of advanced education, 15 (41%) had master’s degrees, 4 (11%) had doctorate degrees, and 1 (3%) had a law degree. All participants reported at least a year of college education. Together, their knowledge-based occupations and higher education contributes to a specific view of professionalism and likely impacts how identity work is performed. These qualities may also give them some class-based privileges that working-class LGB/TQ workers do not have—ranging from power conferred by organizational position, socioeconomic advantage, greater access to voice, and perhaps advantages conferred by more inclusive organizational cultures. Moreover, the preponderance of participants in higher education
(92%)—especially given the areas of their scholarly inquiry—may give them a particular vocabulary for making sense of their experiences that is not necessarily available to LGB/TQ workers in other occupations. Therefore, to understand fully LGB/TQ workers’ experiences of (in)dignity on the job, future research should query workers that are representative of the working population as a whole, especially those in blue-collar and service industries whose dignity threats may be exacerbated by hypermasculine workplaces or low-status jobs, respectively.

A second major limitation of this research is that the stories and experiences that are captured are retrospective in nature. Therefore, it raises several questions—from the accuracy of recollections of a specific dignity threats (are participants remembering incidents incorrectly?), to biases within the recollections (are they making problematic assumptions about others’ motivations or perceiving threats that were unintended?), to the current relevancy of a particular kind of threat (are they recalling problems that are no longer issues in today’s workplace?). On one hand, because dignity is personally experienced and judged and because sensemaking is retrospective by its very nature, a retrospective approach was necessary in this study. But on the other hand, there are strategies to add to the trustworthiness of the data. Future research could include different kinds of data collection that could get at more current experiences of (in)dignities at work. For instance diary studies framed around dignity prompts could be one way of accessing current stories. Alternatively, an extended ethnographic study of a single organization with several LGB/TQ employee-participants might provide opportunities for triangulation (e.g., focus groups with LGB/TQ employees, interviews with the HR department, document analysis, and cultural observations), which could point to salient
dignity threats, affirmations, and identity work strategies as experienced (almost) in the moment.

Conclusion

My goal for this project has been to highlight the value of adopting a workplace dignity lens as a way to understand the experiences of LGB/TQ individuals in the workplace. This is predicated on the understanding that the workplace can be a hostile space for LGB/TQ individuals. People who perform their gender, sex, and sexuality in ways that are deemed “non-normative” are often met with messages that are particularly undignifying. It has been my intent to highlight how those messages are communicated in the workplace and how they impact strategies of identity work. Furthermore, I am interested in drawing attention to how dignity can be affirmed in the workplace to combat these threats and mitigate the need for responses and resistance strategies. The lived experiences of these participants provide a catalyst for a larger conversation regarding the imperative for the communication of the dignity of identity in the workplace. Such inquiries should be designed to facilitate theoretical contributions to organizational communication research through the exploration of the communication of the dignity of identity in the workplace. This theoretical framework can inform everyday organizational life by placing communication at the center and designing targeted interventions that propose a more ideal situation for LGB/TQ employees by reflecting the complicated reality of navigating and communicating identity in the workplace. It is my hope that by having a deeper understanding of and appreciation for dignity at work—especially as experienced by LGB/TQ employees—workplaces can become more inclusive and respectful spaces that allow all individuals to bring themselves to work.
REFERENCES


Lucas, K. (2013). *Understanding workplace dignity: Discourse practices for inherent, earned, and remediated dignity*. Unpublished manuscript, Department of Management, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY.


APPENDICES
Appendix A: IRB Documentation

University of Nebraska – Lincoln
Informed Consent
Exploring Experiences of Workplace Dignity

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer (GLB/TQ persons account for an estimated 7 million private sector employees, 1 million state and local employees, and 200,000 federal employees (Bedgett, Lau, Sears, & Ho, 2007), investing significant amounts of time, talent, and energy to their respective organizations. Unfortunately, organizational life is not always kind to GLB/TQ persons. We are currently doing a project to learn more about the experiences of GLB/TQ persons in the workplace. Participants will answer a series of questions designed to elicit a description of their experiences at work. These questions will focus on individual experiences related to dignity at work, personal identity, and organizational life.

The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. In order to participate in this study you must meet the following criteria: 1) Identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer, 2) Be currently employed, and 3) Be at least 25 years old.

If you do not meet the above criteria, you do not qualify for this particular study and should not proceed. If you meet the above criteria, you may take part in this study. Participation in this study involves a one-on-one interview that focuses on your experiences at work. This process will take place in a private research space in the Communication Studies Department on the UNL campus or in another place of your choosing. The interviews will last between 60 and 90 minutes from start to finish. Your responses during the interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. If this is OK, please check the box at the end of this form. All responses will be kept confidential and your name, demographic information, and workplace will not be associated in any way with the research findings. All consent forms and materials will be kept in a locked drawer in the principal investigator’s office. Results of this research will be presented in the principal investigator’s dissertation and may be presented at professional conventions and included in journal articles.

I would like to inform you of your rights as a participant. You should also know that at any time throughout the interview process you are free to take a break, ask me to turn off the audio recorder, turn off the recorder yourself, refuse to answer any questions or ask for the recording to be deleted immediately after the interview or secure yourself a copy. You are also free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigators or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

There are no direct benefits to you as a result of participating in this study except potentially gaining a greater understanding of your experiences. In the event of problems resulting from participating in this study, please contact the UNL Psychological Consultation Center at (402) 472-2351. Treatment is available on a sliding fee scale.

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate or after the study is complete. If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact the principal investigator at (402) 472-3348. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator or would like to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board, telephone (402) 472-6965.

I have provided two copies of this informed consent. If you meet the criteria and choose to continue participation, you must read the entire informed consent (both sides) and verify that you agree to participate and fulfill the participant criteria by signing and dating both copies. Please keep one for your records and return the other to the
researcher before starting your interview. If you do not fulfill the criteria or choose to not participate, please return the blank informed consent forms and questionnaire to the researcher. If you have any questions about the study, please contact the principal investigator.

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate, having read and understood the information presented. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigators or the University of Nebraska. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your signature also indicates that you are in fact, identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer, are currently employed, and are at least 25-years old.

Below please indicate your preference regarding audio recording:

☐ I agree to be audio recorded  ☐ I do not wish to be audio recorded

Below please indicate if you wish to have the recording deleted immediately after transcription:

☐ Yes  ☐ No

I know that I am free to ask researchers to turn off the audio recorders at any time during the interview. You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your verbal consent certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Should you have any questions regarding your participation in this study, please feel free to contact any or all of the following people:

Sara Baker  Dr. Jordan Soliz
Phone: (402) 472-3348  Phone: (402) 472-8326
Email: sjbaker@huskers.unl.edu  Email: josliz2@unl.edu
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Hello. My name is Sara Baker. I’m a doctoral student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I’m doing a study to learn about the experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer persons in the workplace.

I am interested in conducting this study because I identify as heterosexual ally. Due to the nature of this interview, I thought that it was important that I disclose this part of my identity with you. I welcome any questions or concerns that you may have about me personally or about this research project.

This study will be done in two parts. The first part will ask you answer some open-ended questions related to your experiences in the workplace. Then I will give you a questionnaire for you to respond to. This questionnaire with ask about basic demographic characteristics. The entire process will take approximately one hour.

Before we begin, there are a few things I would like to go over:

- First I would like to confirm that you are eligible for this project:
  - Are you at least 19 years old?
  - Are you currently employed?
  - Do you identify as one of the following: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer?
  - (If a respondent answers “no” to any of these questions they will be thanked for their time and the interview will cease at this time.)

- Second, in order for me to accurately retain all of the responses you provide in the interview, I will be tape recording this interview. Your name, identity, sexual orientation/gender identity, and workplace will not be linked to any of the information you provide in your interviews. In fact, the only people who will be allowed access to your audio tape will be me and the professor overseeing this research project. Even though this interview will be transcribed, your name, age, ethnicity, workplace, and sexual orientation/gender identity will not be indicated throughout the recording of this interview. However, I would like you to know that you are free to ask me to turn off the audio recorder at any time during the interview. You may also refuse to answer any questions without punishment.

I also want to take you through the informed consent form and procedures for the study so you clearly understand your rights today. [Give both copies of consent form to participants, give participant time to read and sign both forms, collect one form from participant]

Do you have any questions before we begin?
Part I: Interview Questions

Now that we have the “housekeeping” items taken care of, we can begin our interview.

Everyone’s experience is different, so there aren’t right or wrong answers here.

Whenever you can, please give me stories and examples to clarify your point that will be helpful. Do you have any questions about this interview?

[TURN ON TAPE RECORDER NOW]

I’m going to ask you some questions about experiences you’ve had in the workplace. Specifically, I am interested in your experiences of dignity:

1. What comes to mind when you hear the term “workplace dignity” or “dignity at work.”

2. Can you tell me about a time when you experienced dignity at work?
   a) Who was there?
   b) What were you doing?
   c) What specifically was said or done?
   d) What was it about the experience that made you feel you had dignity?

3. Ok, I would like us to switch gears and talk about an experience that you have had at work that might be considered the opposite of the one you just described. I would like you to talk about a time when your dignity was threatened at work.
   a) Who was there?
   b) What were you doing?
   c) What specifically was said or done?
   d) What was it about this experience that made you feel like you didn’t have dignity?
   e) How did you deal with this threat?
      i. Did you say anything to anyone?
ii. Did you do anything in retaliation?
   1. If so, what was it?
   2. Would you consider this retaliation active or passive? How?
   3. [If considered active,] Have you ever done anything to passively get back at the organization?
   
   f. Looking back on this experience was there something that you wish you would’ve said or done?
      i. If so, what would that message be?
      ii. Who would you want to share this message with?

4. Now I’d like to talk more specifically about your work experiences in regard to your gender/sexuality. Can you describe a time when you felt dignity at work in respect to your gender or sexuality?
   a. Who was there?
   b. What were you doing?
   c. What specifically was said or done?
   d. What was it about the experience that made you feel you had dignity?

5. Now, can you describe a time when you felt that you weren’t experiencing dignity and it had something to do with your gender/sex/sexuality?
   a. Who was there?
   b. What were you doing?
   c. What specifically was said or done?
   d. What was it about the experience that made you feel you didn’t have dignity?
   e. How did you deal with that?
      i. Did you say anything to anyone?
      ii. Did you do anything in retaliation?
         1. If so, what was it?
         2. Would you consider this active or passive? How?
3. [If considered active.] Have you ever done anything to passively get back at the organization

f. Looking back was there something that you wish you would’ve said or done?
   
i. If so, what would that message be?
   ii. How would you want to share this message with?

6. How important of a role do you think your gender/sex/sexuality plays in whether you feel dignified on your job? Why or why not?

7. Are you out at work?
   
a. What made you decide to pass/reveal?
   b. [If pass] What sorts of things do you do to pass at work?
      
i. How do you feel about passing?
      ii. Do you think you will ever come out at work? Why or Why not?
   c. [If reveal] What prompted your decision to come out at work?
      
i. What did you say?
      ii. Who did you talk to about it?
      iii. What was the response from your coworkers? Managers/supervisors? Organization overall?
      iv. How do you think the organizational is responding?
         [If answer is not positive] Do you ever regret your decision to reveal?

8. How would you describe yourself as a person?
   
a. What sort of person are you?
   b. What are your most important characteristics?

9. Is there a difference between how you describe yourself as a person at home and a person at work?
   
a. [If yes] What are the differences for you between home and work?
   b. Has having this tension made a difference in how you see yourself?
c. [If yes], How do you see yourself at work compared to home?

10. Are there certain things that you do to fit in with the organization?
   a. If so, what are those things?
   b. How do you feel about this?

11. Finally, I would like to get your feedback on what can be done in organizations to support dignity for all employees. What advice would you give brand new GLB/TQ employees as they start out in their careers?

   Thank you for participating in this study. Your time and willingness to talk about your experiences is appreciated. If you have any questions please feel free to ask me at this time.

Part II: Demographic Data

In the space below, please respond to the demographic data questions. You can answer these questions with as much or as little detail as you wish. Furthermore, you can choose not to respond to these questions. Participation is voluntary.

**Demographic Data**

1. Age _____________________

2. Occupation:

   - Employee of a for-profit company or business or of an individual, for wages, salary, or commissions
   - Employee of a not-for-profit, tax-exempt, or charitable organization
   - Employee of an educational institution, system, or school
   - Local government employee (city, county, etc.)
   - State government employee
   - Federal government employee
   - Self-employed in own not-incorporated business, professional practice, or farm
   - Self-employed in own incorporated business, professional practice, or farm
   - Don’t Know/Not applicable

3. Education:
☐ Doctorate degree (for example: PhD, EdD)
☐ Professional degree (for example: MD, DDS, DVM, LLB, JD)
☐ Master’s degree (for example: MA, MS, MEng, MEd, MSW, MBA)
☐ Bachelor’s degree (for example: BA, AB, BS)
☐ Associate degree (for example: AA, AS)
☐ 1 or more years of college, no degree
☐ High school graduate - high school diploma or the equivalent (for example: GED)
☐ Don’t Know/Not applicable

4. Racial/ethnic background:

☐ Black or African-American
☐ Asian
☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
☐ Hispanic and/or Latino/a
☐ White
☐ Don’t Know/Not applicable
Appendix C: Recruitment Materials

Contact Email for LGB/TQ Organizations

Dear [Insert Name of Organizational Leader],

My name is Sara Baker and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I am currently working on my dissertation project, which focuses on the experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer adults in the workplace. I am personally interested in this project because I believe that workplaces should be safe spaces for all individuals. It is my hope that this research project can be used to advocate for policies that support and protect LGB/TQ persons in the workplace.

Attached you will find more information on my project as well as my contact information. I would greatly appreciate it if you could forward the attached information to members of your organization, if you think that this study may be of interest to them and is appropriate to be advertised to your group. Also, I am available to answer any questions or concerns that you may have about my project. I can be reached via email (sjbaker@huskers.unl.edu) or would be happy to schedule a face-to-face meeting. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Sara Baker

Email Communication

Reply to Interest in the Study

Dear [Insert First Name],

Thank you for your interest in the study. Below, you will find several dates and times for the interview. Remember that these interviews will last between 60 and 90 minutes. Once you have reviewed these options, please respond with a date and time that works best for you.

Also below, you will find several options regarding the location for the interview. Please select the option that you would prefer. This could include an alternative location of your own choosing or a phone interview in addition to private research and meeting rooms.

[List of Available Dates and Times for Interview]

Interview Locations [please select the option that you prefer]:

______ Secure research space on UNL’s campus
______ Private study room at UNL’s library
______ Private room in a coffee shop
Dear [Insert First Name],

Based on your indicated availability, your interview will take place:

[Insert Day] [Insert Time]

The interview will take place [insert location] and last between 60 and 90 minutes in length. Please let me know if this date and time does not work for you so that we can make alternate arrangements. You are free to contact me with any questions that you may have prior to the interview. Thank you in advance for your participation.

Sincerely,
Sara Baker

Interview Reminder

This is a reminder that we have an interview scheduled for:

[Insert Month, Day] [Insert Time]

The interview will take place [insert location] and last between 60 and 90 minutes in length. Please let me know if this date and time does not work for you so that we can make alternate arrangements. You are free to contact me with any questions that you may have prior to the interview. Thank you in advance for your participation.

Sincerely,
Sara Baker

Facebook Posting

I’m currently conducting an interview project that explores the experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer adults in the workplace. If you are over the age of 25 and are currently employed, I would love to talk to you about your experiences at work. If you are interested in learning more about the study, please contact me at sjbaker@huskers.unl.edu.
UNIVERITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES
Investigator: Sara Baker, doctoral candidate

INTERVIEW STUDY:
EXPLORING
WORKPLACE
EXPERIENCES

I am doing a study that explores
the experiences of gay, lesbian,
bisexual, transgender, and
queer adults in the workplace

PARTICIPATION
CRITERIA:
• AT LEAST 25 YEARS OLD
• CURRENTLY EMPLOYED
• IDENTIFY AS LGBTQ

Participation Involves One
60 – 90 minute interview

For more information contact:
Sara Baker, Principal
Investigator
sjbaker@huskers.unl.edu

Sara Baker | 419 Oldfather Hall, Department of Communication Studies | phone 787.377.3360 | sjbaker@huskers.unl.edu
Website Posting

Exploring Workplace Dignity

Hello. My name is Sara Baker. I’m a doctoral student in the Department of Communication Studies. I am currently doing a project that explores the experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer adults in the workplace.

In order to participate in this study you must meet the following criteria: 1) Identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer, 2) Be currently employed, and 3) Be at least 25 years-old.

If you agree to participate you will be asked to email me to set up a time and place to be interviewed. Interviews will be audio recorded, and I will ask you to answer a number of open-ended questions related to your experiences at work. All responses to these interview questions will be kept confidential and at no time will your identity be revealed in the analysis and or reporting of research results.

Participation in this study will require approximately 75 minutes of your time. Your participation is completely voluntary. At any time throughout the interview you may choose not to answer any question(s) and you are free to leave at any time that you do not feel comfortable.

If you are interested, please contact me at sjbaker@huskers.unl.edu. Thanks for your consideration of involvement in this study.

Sara Baker
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