



Sexual Orientation, Gender Identities, and the Experiences of 21st Century Federal Employees

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The U.S. federal government has a long history of discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. The active organization and institutionalization of that discrimination began with the “Lavender Scare” of the 1950s, when Senator Charles Hoey and Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Jr. led efforts to discover and terminate LGBT federal employees. Their crusade was significantly furthered by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who issued Executive Order No. 10450 in 1953 requiring federal agencies to investigate “sexual perversion” among their employees.

Anecdotal evidence suggests past institutional discrimination has persisted in the culture of many federal agencies. However, precise data have been difficult to come by. To that end, my colleagues and I use a survey of over 600,000 federal employees to ask whether or not LGBT people have more negative views of their jobs and agencies than their non-LGBT colleagues. We also consider whether such perceptions vary by the type of agency.

Federal Workplace Wellbeing Today

Many in the public perceive that U.S. national security agencies have organizational cultures that are particularly unfriendly towards LGBT people. Whether this is true or not has remained unclear because the Employee Viewpoint Survey, a voluntary evaluation sent to all federal employees, did not ask employees to self-identify as LGBT until 2012. When this demographic question was added to the Employee Viewpoint Survey, it became possible to explore the specific experiences of LGBT employees.

Making comparisons of various federal agencies, our study uses the newly available data to probe the influence of federal employees’ sexual orientations or gender identities on their feelings about personal safety, job satisfaction, and diversity and equity issues in the workplace.

Are LGBT Employees Less Satisfied Than Their Peers?

The answer, in a word, is no. Federal employees in our study self-identified as LGBT or not, and were asked indicated negative, neutral, or positive feelings about statements related to workplace issues. The results reveal no meaningful differences between LGBT employees’ feelings about personal safety, job satisfaction, and workplace handling of diversity and equity issues compared to their non-LGBT counterparts within similar agencies. Overall, all federal employees were much more likely to register positive perceptions than neutral or negative perceptions.

What About Employees of the National Security Agencies?

Compared to employees of other agencies, both LGBT and non-LGBT people working in national security agencies were less likely to be satisfied with their personal safety, job satisfaction, and the handling of diversity and equity issues. This held true for all of the survey statements that were reviewed, with the exception of the question asking federal employees to record perceptions of policies and programs promote diversity in the workplace (for example, recruiting minorities and women, training in awareness of diversity issues, mentoring). Responses to this question did not differ by sexual orientation – and, in fact, this statement was the least likely to elicit a positive reaction from any surveyed federal employee.

Integrated Ethical Diversity Training

Our study identifies concrete steps that can be taken to reform policies and programs that promote diversity in the federal workplace. According to federal employees, this is the most pressing need to be met. We propose integrating diversity and equity trainings into the workplace, focusing on the ethical aspects of diversity.

Here is what we mean: By linking respect for workplace diversity with core values of equal treatment under the law, integrity in the civil service, and other ethical components of federal employment, agencies can create an inclusive organizational culture likely to persist for the long term. This approach, rather than separate training sessions, is the best way to integrate respect for diversity into the regular organizational practice of each agency – in the process helping federal employees of all types and backgrounds feel comfortable, safe, and valued at work.

Beneficial Effects Beyond the Workplace

Our findings, while preliminary, open new conversations about the experiences of government employees in their federal workplaces. And the implications go beyond personal feelings about safety and job satisfaction to touch on the many ways in which bureaucrats understand their roles as policymakers and regulators within the larger U.S. democratic society. If federal employees experience dignity in diverse workplaces, we can hypothesize that they will become more likely to treat fellow citizens the same inclusive way.

Of course, much more remains to be learned about agencies conditions and the wider reverberations of improved federal workplace practices. Scholars must continue to dig much more deeply than was possible in the past into how civil servants' perceptions of their workplaces impact not only their own experiences but also the experiences of the fellow citizens they serve. Our study of federal employees is a good start, and indications new directions such research might take at all levels of government in the United States and beyond.

Read more in Peter Stanley Federman and Nicole Rishel Elias, "Beyond the Lavender Scare: LGBT and Heterosexual Employees in the Federal Workplace," *Public Integrity* 19, 1, (2016): 22-41.