Transforming Attitudes About Transgender Employee Rights

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Abstract

Transgender employees may suffer from discrimination due to transphobia. This article evaluates a pedagogical intervention designed to reduce the transphobia of North American undergraduate business students. Participants were enrolled in an organizational behavior course. They resolved a simulated dispute between coworkers over accommodating the bathroom choices of a transgender employee. Answers were classified as demonstrating inclusion, compliance, or hostility with the inclusive response being the establishment of gender-neutral restrooms and the hostile response being refusal to accept the transgender employee's bathroom choice. In the first year, 194 students completed the exercise with no advance preparation, while in the second year, 221 students performed the same task after reading a brief article about transgender employees. Results suggest that the intervention was effective as the inclusive response was most popular in the second year even though it had been least popular in the first year. Complete success was not attained, as one sixth of the students in the second year chose hostile responses. Implications for research, teaching, and practice are discussed.

Keywords

transphobia, diversity management, gender, organizational behavior

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As its name implies, the business case for managing diversity is that businesses will be more effective if they use the talents of all their employees, not just those who are demographically similar to top management. Although management of diversity is not cost-free (Brookshire & Delong, 2006) and is not always successful (Thomas & Ely, 1996), it represents an investment in the workforce that can pay off handsomely. For example, Ely and Thomas (2001) observe superior performance for racially diverse groups whose members view diversity as a resource that enables them to work together in new ways, while Catalyst (2004) finds that firms with a high percentage of female top managers outperform those with a low percentage of female top managers. A more recent study shows that diverse organizations tend to perform better than industry averages and much better than organizations that are not diverse (Hunt, Layton, & Prince, 2015).

To realize the benefits of managing diversity, an organization's managers need to have diversity competence which can be defined as the "ability to respect each other's uniqueness" (Frusti, Niesen, & Campion, 2003, p. 31). Diversity competence is therefore a crucial management skill (Kulik & Roberson, 2008), which has become increasingly important due to the growth in international business enabled by the Internet (Hite & McDonald, 2010). Therefore, according to Bell, Connerley, and Cochiara (2009, p. 601), "mandatory diversity education for management students is long overdue." This article evaluates a pedagogical intervention designed to transform undergraduate business students' attitudes regarding transgender employees. We begin by defining the terms "transgender" and "transphobia," then we describe our intervention and assess its effectiveness.

Transgender and Transphobia

Transgender individuals are those who transgress gender norms in any way (Davis, 2009). Collectively, transgender individuals are estimated to account for less than 1% of adults in the United States (Gates, 2011), the United Kingdom (Reed, Rhodes, Schofield, & Wylie, 2009), and other countries in Europe and Asia (Meier & Labuski, 2013). The concealment option that is available to lesbian, gay, and bisexual employees is closed to those who begin transitioning without leaving their current employers (Barclay & Scott, 2006) and the process of transitioning at work is so stressful that it can lead to suicidal thoughts (Budge, Tebbe, & Howard, 2010). The most common direction of transitioning is from male to female (Brown et al., 2012) even though those moving in the other direction may experience more favorable treatment at work (Dietert & Dentice, 2010).

Transgender individuals suffer from a form of prejudice known as transphobia (D. B. Hill, 2002). Transphobia and homophobia are highly correlated, with the major difference between the two constructs being that transphobia relates to gender identity rather than sexual orientation (Nagoshi et al., 2008). Transgender individuals are outcasts in comparison with the rest of the LGBT community, as demonstrated in the United States by the legislative history of the Employment Nondiscrimination Act. The current prospects for the bill's passage are bleak because its sponsors insist that it must protect transgender employees (Vargas, 2014). This pessimistic outlook is reinforced by the fact that half of the United States that protect lesbian, gay, and bisexual workers from employment discrimination do not extend these same rights to transgender workers (General Accounting Office, 2009).

Transgender employee issues offer an excellent way to assess and enhance the diversity awareness of business students, for several reasons. First, a difference between managing diversity and affirmative action is that managing diversity also focuses on groups that may not be protected under antidiscrimination law (W. J. Smith, Wokutch, Harrington, & Dennis, 2004). Transgender employees are not explicitly covered under federal law and are rarely protected by state laws (General Accounting Office, 2009). Second, "gender-complex education" which "challenges not only gender category oppression but also gender transgression oppression" (Rands, 2009, p. 426) can be facilitated. Third, educational programs can be very helpful to transgender students so that they feel welcomed and not marginalized by their colleges and universities (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005). Finally, successes have been reported for diversity awareness interventions that target other forms of discrimination such as racism (Case, 2007a) and sexism (Case, 2007b) and this provides reason for optimism in the fight against transphobia.

Restroom Rights of Transgender Employees

Transgender employees face a host of challenges at work that may have serious economic and psychological consequences. These include employer and coworker ignorance, discrimination, harassment, and violence. Keeping their jobs during the process of gender transition poses additional problems by precluding the "stealth" option of concealing that they are transgender individuals (Budge et al., 2010, p. 385). For this study, we have chosen to focus on the topic of organizational respect for the restroom preferences of transgender employees. It is commonly assumed that public bathrooms need to be gender-segregated for safety and privacy and to accommodate anatomical differences (Antony, 1998), but sex-segregated facilities are considered to

perpetuate male privilege because they create areas where men can share valuable information with other men (Cohen, 2010), because men's restrooms tend to be superior in terms of both availability and location (Anthony & Dufresne, 2007), and because they perpetuate stereotypes of women as being vainer and weaker (K. Levi, 2011). To transgender employees, access to the bathrooms of their choice is not a trivial issue. In Bender-Baird's (2011, p. 82) study of North American transgender men and women, "nearly every participant brought up the issue of bathrooms, whether I solicited it or not."

Method

We examine the effect of a reading about transgender workplace issues on the decisions made by students in a case study requiring the resolution of a restroom choice conflict between two coworkers, one of whom is a transgender individual. Participants were 415 business students at a medium-sized public university in the northeastern United States who were enrolled in an undergraduate course in organizational behavior. The organizational behavior course is well suited to exploring and expanding gender awareness (Sullivan & Buttner, 1992) as a diversity perspective illuminates its traditional topics (Muller & Parham, 1998). The organizational behavior course covers several other topics and the instructors at this institution are not bound by a common syllabus, but diversity issues typically take up 10% to 20% of the semester.

During class, they read a brief case titled "I'm Not Sharing a Bathroom With 'It'" which can be found in its entirety in the appendix. The case was created by two of the article's coauthors and a colleague who left our university before our research commenced. The scenario was set in Little Rock, Arkansas. Several states and more than 100 cities have outlawed gender identity discrimination in employment (Kelly, 2010), but Little Rock and Arkansas are not among them. The case asked the students to play the role of a CEO receiving a complaint from a female employee about using the same restroom as a coworker who is transitioning from male to female. Women's restrooms are places of both fear and refuge (Schapper, 2012), so resistance to transitioning employees from coworkers and/or supervisors is to be expected (Taylor, Burke, Wheatley, & Sompayrac, 2011). It is considered extremely insensitive to call a transitioning coworker "it" because transgender persons should be referred to in congruence with their gender identity (J. Kirk & Belovics, 2008). After completion of the case, students were eager to discuss it. Discussions included topics such as students' feelings toward both parties, how the laws differed within the United States, and the related class concepts of training, conflict management, and workplace culture.

In the Fall 2012 semester, 194 of the students were given the case while the other 221 students were given the case in the Fall 2013 semester. In 2012, the instructors introduced the case with no prior discussion of transgender employee concerns. Prior to the Fall 2013 semester, the instructors conferred electronically and collectively decided to add a reading to the required course materials titled "Transgender Issues in the Workplace" (Empire State Pride Agenda, 2009) and to present the case after students had read about and discussed this topic in class. But not all instructors taught the class in both years, which enables us to test for the effects on students' transphobia of teachers' prior experience in discussing transgender employee issues.

Measures

Students answered three open-ended questions about the case, as shown in the appendix. The third question was of chief interest to us, and it was "What solution best satisfies the needs of the company and its employees?" Answering this question engaged the students in the process of determining gender (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014), which takes place when situation-specific rules are developed that determine who is male and who is female. When students address diversity-related cases, they "reveal insights into their own thinking on the situation" (Guo, Cockburn-Wootten, & Munshi, 2014, p. 179).

The seven instructors for the course, all of whom were women, used a common rubric to classify responses as hostility, compliance, or inclusion. The article's senior author trained each instructor in the use of the rubric. Hostility, compliance, and inclusion represent three of the organizational responses to sexual minorities according to Rocco, Landorf, and Delgado (2009) and they correspond to denial, acceptance, and integration within Bennett's (1986) six stages of diversity awareness. A fuller discussion of the relationship between transgender theory and organizational responses to sexual minorities can be found in Rudin, Ruane, Ross, Farro, and Billing (2014), an article that analyzes the Fall 2012 (preintervention) data.

Hostility, the most transphobic response, was exemplified by denial of the transitioning employee's right to use the restroom of her choice, an outcome that Weinberg (2010, p. 150) characterizes as "unfair and unreasonable" and which embarrasses and humiliates transgender employees (Twing & Williams, 2010). Compliance, which may be with either law or policy according to Rocco et al.'s (2009) framework, was the appropriate classification for responses that instructed the complaining employee to respect her coworker's wishes. Because it preserves the gender binary while showing some respect for transgender employees' rights, this response exemplifies an intermediate level of transphobia.

The most inclusive answer was to make the restrooms unisexual. In Bender-Baird's (2011) study, several interviewees noted that the presence of unisex bathrooms reduced a source of stress for them. Doan (2010) argues that gender-segregated restrooms contribute to the daily experience of tyranny that transgender individuals endure, and Herman (2013, p. 66) concurs that they cause "minority stress" in the workplace with physical and mental health consequences for transgender employees.

Hypotheses

Our hypotheses are as follows:

> **Hypothesis 1:** The provision of an assigned reading to students that supports the workplace rights of transgender employees will reduce transphobia.
> **Hypothesis 2:** Instructors with more experience teaching about workplace issues of transgender employees will be more effective in reducing transphobia.
> **Hypothesis 3:** Neither provision of an assigned reading nor instructor experience will fully eliminate transphobia.

Hypothesis 1 is supported if the inclusion response becomes more likely in 2013 than in 2012 and if the compliance and hostility responses become less likely in 2013 than in 2012.

Hypothesis 2 is supported if the inclusion response becomes more likely in 2013 and if the compliance and hostility responses become less likely in 2013 for students whose instructors taught the course in both years compared with students whose instructors were teaching it only in 2013.

Hypothesis 3 is supported if a significant proportion of students choose the hostility response in 2013.

Results

We wanted responses to remain anonymous because we felt that students would be less inhibited and more willing to share their true feelings if they could not be identified. Avery and Steingard (2008) agree that anonymity can be useful in diversity education because it reduces self-censorship. Although we do not have demographic information about individual students, we know that 93% of the students participated and we do have demographic information for the classes as a whole. Table 1 compares the demographic characteristics of the 2012 and 2013 groups of students. The age distributions were

Table 1. Demographic Comparison, 2012 and 2013 Student Cohorts.

Year	Percentage male	Percentage aged 25 years or older
2012	59.6	10.5
2013	72.5	8.4
N	441	446
Chi-square	8.22	.57
Significance	.00	.45

Table 2. Response Choice Comparison, 2012 and 2013 Student Cohorts.

Year	Inclusion percentage	Compliance percentage	Hostility percentage
2012	27.3	38.7	34.0
2013	62.0	21.7	16.3
N	415	415	415
Chi-square	50.03	14.22	17.52
Significance	.00	.00	.00

very similar in both years, but in the second year there were significantly more men. Not only do men tend to exhibit greater levels of transphobia than women (Nagoshi et al., 2008), some men have physically assaulted male-to-female transgender individuals who used women's restrooms (Cavanagh, 2010). So this shift should not have been helpful to our efforts.

Table 2 compares student responses in 2012 and 2013. Hypothesis 1 is strongly supported as hostility rates were cut in half while the frequency of inclusion more than doubled. Hostility was the second-most common response in 2012 and the least common response in 2013. All differences between years are highly significant and in the expected directions. Hypothesis 3 is also strongly supported, as one sixth of the students chose hostile responses in 2013.

Table 3 compares the demographic characteristics of the students in 2013 whose instructors taught the course in both years with the characteristics of those whose instructors taught the course in only 1 year. The purpose of this table is to rule out alternative explanations for any differences in responses that may be observed between the groups. No demographic differences between groups are statistically significant.

Finally, Table 4 compares the student responses based on whether the instructor taught the class both years versus only in the second year. In 2013,

Table 3. Demographic Comparison, 2013 Student Cohort, Students Whose Instructors Taught Both Years and Only 1 Year.

Instructors	Percentage male	Percentage aged 25 years or older
Taught both years	70.7	9.6
Taught only 1 year	78.0	5.1
N	233	237
Chi-square	1.17	1.14
Significance	.28	.29

Table 4. Response Choice Comparison, 2013 Student Cohort, Students Whose Instructors Taught Both Years and Only 1 Year.

Instructors	Inclusion percentage	Compliance percentage	Hostility percentage
Both years	64.8	19.4	15.8
Only 1 year	53.6	28.6	17.9
N	221	221	221
Chi-square	2.26	2.07	.14
Significance	.13	.15	.71

instructors who had taught both years were more likely to attain the inclusion response and less likely to attain the compliance response at $p < .15$ while the percentages of students who chose the hostility response were virtually identical for the two groups. Hypothesis 2 was therefore partially supported.

Discussion

The 2013 student cohort was significantly more male than the 2012 student cohort. As discussed above, this should not have been helpful in our efforts to reduce transphobia, yet remarkable results were achieved in 2013. Inclusion moved from the least popular option to the most popular option. More than twice as many students chose the inclusion response while fewer than half as many students chose the hostile response. The use of data from different years means that our hypotheses are not as strongly supported as they could be, but the strong support for our first hypothesis suggests that transphobia can be reduced by informing students about the workplace issues of transgender employees. The results of our case study indicate that pedagogical

interventions on workplace issues of transgender employees can diminish transphobia in students. These results are consistent with the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1986) in the sense that as one becomes more aware of challenges faced by transgender individuals, one's competence to deal with transgender issues also increases.

Our second hypothesis received some support as well. In 2013, the returning instructors were more likely than the new instructors to elicit the inclusion response and less likely to obtain the compliance response while there were no differences between the groups in terms of the hostility response. Significance levels were not as strong as for the tests of the other two hypotheses, but this suggests that the experience of repeatedly teaching the course reduces students' transphobia, perhaps because instructors become more comfortable with integrating sexuality into the organizational behavior course, more knowledgeable about workplace rights issues of transgender employees, or more skilled at facilitating class discussions of this topic.

We asked the returning instructors for reasons other than the assigned reading that could account for the observed experiential effect. They commented, "I do get more comfortable with it as I administer it,"

> I was concerned the first year because I had a class with some very shy students who were hard to draw out. The following year, I had some idea about the issues the students might raise. To be frank about it, I was much more concerned about the discussion AFTER administering the questionnaire because this is where students would need to spend time processing their analysis and responding to one another's points and concerns,

and "I would say that I was more mindful the second year discussing the difference in federal and state laws in protecting transgender employees." So it seems that all three of the potential explanations for the experiential effect may be pertinent.

Unfortunately, our third hypothesis was also supported. One sixth of the students recommended a hostile response even though they were informed about transgender workplace issues. Perhaps a hardcore group of students may be impenetrable because their transphobia is so strong. This can be expected based on dominant beliefs about gender binarism and authenticating identity based on anatomically determined sex. Alternatively, it is possible that some of the students who chose the hostile response in the second year neglected the assigned reading or were insufficiently moved by it and could conceivably have become more sensitive through alternative media and methods of information delivery about transgender employee rights. Although such students may seem impenetrable, the developmental model of

intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1986) implies that multiple exposures to scenarios related to transgender employees across business related courses might alleviate these students' transphobia.

Pedagogical Implications

Our case study forced students to reflect on an important issue that was not discussed elsewhere within our management curriculum. Recognition of the right to restroom choice is viewed as a crucial step toward societal acceptance of transgender individuals (Elkind, 2007) and denial of that right poses a substantial barrier to their social integration (J. Levi & Redman, 2010). According to Rasmussen (2009, p. 440), "toilets don't just tell us where to go; they also tell us who we are, where we belong, and where we don't belong."

We invite colleagues at other universities to use our case as shown in the appendix for their own assurance of learning efforts, because many colleges of business assess diversity-related competencies and this usually takes place within the organizational behavior course. A grading rubric is available from the authors on request. Should others choose to create their own assessment instruments, we recommend the case study method. Case studies are less susceptible than attitudinal surveys to social desirability bias and therefore may provide more accurate assessments of students' diversity awareness needs (Volk, 2013).

We would caution others to remember that the instructional purpose is to reduce transphobia and improve diversity awareness, not to compare one instructor's performance with another. Some students will resist any positive messages about transgender employees and they may express disrespectful comments (D. J. Kirk & Durant, 2010), and through bad luck some instructors will end up with a greater number of such hostile students in their classes. The appropriate level of instructional evaluation is institutional, not individual, and the goal should be to reduce the prejudice of the entire student body. If enough institutions use this case and freely share their results, benchmarking will become possible because performance norms can be established, for example, with respect to the national and regional percentages of students who choose the hostile response.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research directions abound. The intervention could be translated into other languages and administered to students in other countries. The behavioral impacts of students' attitudinal changes about transphobia could be

measured. The experiential effect is also worthy of further exploration, for example, surveys could be given to instructors to determine how their transphobia and their comfort levels in discussing such issues within a classroom setting change from year to year. Extending the time horizon would also be useful, as there may be a level of instructor experience beyond which further improvements in student performance cannot be expected. Are some instructors more effective than others at reducing transphobia, and if so, why? The question is worthy of further study notwithstanding the previously discussed caveat that it is hard to compare the performance of different instructors because some classes will tend to be more transphobic than others.

It would also be interesting to test for spillover effects on other forms of prejudice. If transphobia is diminished by this intervention, homophobia and sexism may also be similarly affected by it because all three biases are manifestations of bigenderism, the belief that there are only two genders and that the male gender is superior (Gilbert, 2009). Racism may also be reduced, as Schmidt (2013) explains,

> It is settled law that an employer may not assign bathroom usage based on race, that equivalent bathrooms for men and women need to be provided, and that bathrooms must be accessible to persons with disabilities. Despite the protections afforded to other members of the population, employers may still inquire about and pass judgment on a trans person's genitals. The fight for equal access to bathrooms generally, and workplace bathrooms specifically, fits directly into the narrative of civil liberties in so much as it is a question of equality, dignity, safety, and respect for all people. (p. 161)

A spillover effect in the opposite direction may also occur, in which interventions aimed at reducing other forms of prejudice also reduce transphobia. There is a wealth of information on best practices in diversity training (King, Gulick, & Avery, 2010). Interventions that conform to these practices would seem most likely to have the desired effect.

Although our results suggest that the provision of relevant content can be very effective, room for improvement remained which means that it is worth comparing the effect of this intervention with alternative pedagogical methods of reducing transphobia. Rye, Chalmers, and Elmslie (2007) suggest that meeting transgender individuals is the best way to change students' attitudes toward transgender people. Walch et al. (2012) found a transgender speaking panel to be more effective than a lecture in reducing transphobia. With respect to other forms of discrimination, S. J. Smith, Axelton, and Saucier's (2009) meta-analysis confirmed that social contact with lesbians and gay men reduces prejudice against them, a result which was consistent with Allport's

(1954) intergroup contact theory. Berryman-Fink (2006) noted that university-sponsored social contact opportunities can reduce the prejudice of students against those who differ from them in race, sex, and/or sexual orientation. Avery and Thomas (2004) also advocate a combination of content-based and contact-based diversity education.

However, it is not always practical to arrange contact between students and transgender individuals, for example, when instruction is asynchronous as is often the case for online instruction, when multiple lecture sections of a course are offered at different times of the week, when faculty lack social connections with transgender individuals, or where there are no active organizations supporting transgender rights in the surrounding geographical area of the institution. Our results indicate that we were nonetheless able to reduce the transphobia of our students, for two reasons. First, there was an informational effect as students were much less ignorant after reading the material that we provided for them. Second, at least for the inclusion and compliance responses, there was an experiential effect as instructors achieved greater success the longer they taught about transgender topics. The implications for teaching are straightforward, as follows: (a) this topic should not be ignored and it should be an important part of a required class within the business curriculum, (b) course materials need to be chosen that will support the workplace rights of transgender employees, (c) instructors need to be chosen who will be willing to inform students about transgender rights, and (d) once chosen, the instructors should continue teaching the course over time. Although behavioral courses such as organizational behavior and human resource management would appear to be the most logical locations for the discussion of transgender topics, discussions of gender-related issues would also enrich quantitative courses such as accounting (Lehman, 2012) and management information systems (Kvasny, Greenhill, & Trauth, 2005).

Issues involving transgender employees represent the "bleeding edge of the cutting edge in the LGBT diversity human rights movement" (Davis, 2009, p. 109). Our results provide some grounds for optimism because our intervention was simple, free, and effective. Since today's business students are tomorrow's business leaders, we could eventually make the business world more tolerant if we cause our students to reevaluate their transphobia.

Appendix

"I'm Not Sharing a Bathroom With 'It'"

You are the CEO of a company in Little Rock, Arkansas. Your company has two small, identical bathrooms, one for men and one for women. One of your employees, Sheila, says "I'm not sharing a bathroom with 'it.'" You know

that "it" refers to one of her coworkers, Roberta, who was born as a male named Robert but who now identifies as female and plans to have gender reassignment surgery as soon as she can afford it:

1. The law in Little Rock prohibits discrimination based on age (if older than40 years, which Roberta is not), sex, race, religion, skin color, ethnicity, and disability (which Roberta does not have). Does Roberta have the right to nondiscriminatory treatment because of her gender identity transformation?
2. What are three dimensions of diversity (ways in which people differ) that could be relevant in this case?
3. What solution best satisfies the needs of the company and its employees?

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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