

Summary and discussion

This is the first time that a quantitative, large-scale, nationally representative survey has been carried out in the Netherlands among lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) employees. Until now, what was known about these employees was based on qualitative studies, on selective samples of employees (almost without exception recruited via LGB channels) or on specific groups of employees such as trade union members or people employed in senior secondary vocational education. The present study is the first to look at a representative group of employees to investigate whether there are any differences in job perceptions, treatment at work and well-being between lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual employees. And while it is always tempting for a researcher to emphasise differences between groups, the results of this study are actually characterised by the large number of similarities – or, more accurately, by similarities between lesbian, gay and heterosexual employees and by differences compared with bisexual employees.

Lesbian and gay employees

3% of male and 2.1% of female employees are exclusively attracted to members of their own sex. Of these employees, 91% report that at least some (11%), but in most cases (almost) all of their colleagues (80%) are aware of this. Some are deliberately open about their sexual orientation, because they feel better if their colleagues are aware of this, or see it as a way of contributing to raising the profile of homosexuality in Dutch society. Very few LGB employees report that they deliberately hide their lesbian or gay orientation for fear of possible negative reactions. Most LGB employees whose colleagues are not aware of their sexuality feel that their sexual orientation is irrelevant in their workplace or do not feel the need to be open about it. This is in line with earlier studies, for example by Kooiman and Keuzenkamp (2012). Their large-scale sample of LGBs revealed that the majority is 'out' at work; the main reason for not coming out is that they do not consider their sexual orientation to be relevant or that it is none of their colleagues business.

There are more similarities than differences in job perceptions, social treatment at work and well-being between lesbian, gay and heterosexual employees. Lesbian and gay employees are equally satisfied with their jobs, assess their own functioning equally highly and do not more often feel that they have fewer career openings or opportunities for development. They also do not fall out with their colleagues or managers any more often than other employees. They report conflicts, intimidation, sexual harassment, physical violence and bullying at work just as often as their heterosexual counterparts. They are also just as happy, feel just as healthy and suffer burnout just as often as other workers. There are also no differences regarding absenteeism. The study shows that lesbian and gay employees do experience bullying, conflicts or negative treatment, but no more often than their heterosexual peers.

There are several possible explanations for the absence of differences in job perceptions, social treatment and well-being in the workplace between lesbian, gay and heterosexual employees. First, the legislative climate and social acceptance of homosexuality in the

Netherlands in 2012, when the survey was carried out, may have been so positive that any negative side-effects of being in a sexual minority are no longer relevant. Discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation has been prohibited by law for a long time in the Netherlands, and the proportion of Dutch citizens with negative attitudes to homosexuality has been below 10% for years (Keuzenkamp & Kuyper 2013). Government, trade unions and the corporate world have also developed many initiatives in recent years to make the workplace LGBT-friendly. This may mean that the work experience and well-being of lesbian and gay employees today is no worse than that of heterosexual workers. An additional explanation may be a selection effect: lesbian and gay employees choose to work for organisations where they can be open, where they see the diversity climate as positive and where they are not confronted with negative attitudes or treatment. For example, chapter 2 of this report shows that lesbian and gay employees in the Netherlands relatively often work in the administration and education sector and relatively little in the industry and production sector. The first sector scores relatively well when it comes to the number of workplace jokes about homosexuality and the perceived acceptance of colleagues; the second scores rather less well.

There are three areas where differences were found between lesbian and gay and heterosexual employees: intentions to change jobs, social support and psychological complaints. Lesbian and gay employees are more often thinking about looking for another job and have more often already done something to find one. This can be explained by socio-demographic characteristics: lesbian and gay employees are often better educated, more often live in large cities and are more often single than heterosexuals – three factors that are closely related to intentions to change jobs. After correcting for these socio-demographic characteristics, the differences between the groups disappear.

The difference in social support works in favour of lesbian and gay employees. The difference cannot be explained by socio-demographic characteristics or employment background (such as the sector in which someone works). Therefore, only speculations are possible about the factors that play a role. One possible explanation is that lesbian and gay employees seek each other out and support each other at work, as members of minority groups often do (Meyer 2003). Since almost everyone in this group is open towards their colleagues, it is relatively easy for them to make contact with like-minded people. This mutual interaction could function as a network that offers social support. Another possible explanation is that heterosexual employees are aware that lesbian and gay employees are in a minority position and offer social support as an expression of their acceptance of sexual minorities.

Finally, lesbian and gay employees have more psychological complaints than heterosexual workers. This difference cannot be explained on the basis of socio-demographic characteristics, characteristics of the work situation or social treatment at the workplace. That comes as no surprise: these are general psychological complaints, not complaints that are exclusively related to work. The heightened risk of psychological complaints is also not surprising, but is in line with other national and international studies (for an overview, see Kuyper 2011; Meyer 2003). The literature suggests a variety of explanations for the psychological vulnerability of lesbian and gay individuals. Factors that play a role are whether or not people are open in different contexts about their

attraction to members of their own sex, acceptance of their own lesbian or gay sexual orientation, access to LGB networks or experiencing negative reactions from others (Meyer 2003). However, factors such as general social networks, living environment or physical health also play a role (Kuyper 2011). These factors were not all included in the questionnaire about experiences at the workplace, and the differences in general psychological health can therefore not be explained using the data obtained in this study.

Bisexual employees

Overall, 2.3% of male and 4% of female employees are sexually attracted to both sexes to some degree. This is a relatively low percentage compared with earlier research. That is probably due to differences in the questions, the study design and possible underreporting in the present study. In most cases, bisexual employees' colleagues are not aware of their attraction to both sexes. Their explanations of their responses mainly show that they do not consider their sexual orientation to be relevant at work, among other things because they are currently in a relationship with someone of the opposite sex.

Bisexual employees report more problems in a number of areas. They are less satisfied with their work, are more often planning to change jobs, have almost twice as many conflicts at work (mainly with colleagues), experience negative treatment from others almost twice as often and are more often subjected to bullying. In addition, they are less happy, regard themselves as less healthy, and report more psychological and burnout complaints.

Some of these differences can be explained. Bisexual workers are more often looking for another job because they are relatively dissatisfied with their present employment. And that can in turn be explained by the negative social interaction experienced by bisexual employees: their more negative work experience is related to the fact that they more often experience negative treatment from others. Negative social treatment is related quite strongly to both problems (lower job satisfaction and health problems).

The question that remains is why bisexual employees more often encounter conflicts, negative treatment and bullying. The data gathered for this study do not permit a uniform answer to be given to this question. The explanation does not lie in socio-demographic characteristics or characteristics of the employment situation. A few hypotheses can however be put forward, such as the relative invisibility of bisexuality in society, politics, debate and science, the lack of a strong, broad-based bisexual movement or the fact that many bisexual employees have not come out of the closet and therefore have limited opportunities to meet like-minded others. It does not seem plausible that the negative social treatment of bisexual employees is intended as a rejection of their sexual orientation. The majority of their colleagues are after all unaware of that orientation and prejudices against bisexuals are moreover not widespread in the Netherlands (Keuzenkamp & Kuyper 2013). It is therefore important to keep in mind the explanation that the relationship between well-being and negative treatment and between job satisfaction and negative attitudes could also operate the other way round: it may for example be that bisexual employees experience more negative treatment because they have more health problems. Conflicts and negative treatment can stem from irritation about colleagues being off sick or the perception that colleagues are awkward or difficult.

If bisexual employees have more well-being issues or are less satisfied, this could also elicit negative reactions from others. The causality the relationships cannot be established using the data gathered for this study, and the explanations cannot be tested. However, the heightened risks and the relationship between the different problems faced by bisexuals are clear.

Coming out works better?

40% of LGB employees report that none of their colleagues are aware of their sexual orientation. However, there are wide differences between the groups: the figure for lesbian employees is only 2%, while for bisexual men it is 74%. The explanations given by the LGB employees in the survey did not give the impression that they are deliberately not open out of fear of negative reactions. If their colleagues are not aware, this is often because LGB workers do not consider their sexual orientation relevant, have no desire to state their sexuality explicitly or are not yet certain of their feelings. It may be that fear of rejection plays a role among those LGB employees who did not provide an explanation for their responses. However, earlier research does not suggest that fear plays a dominant role in not being open about one's sexuality (Kooiman & Keuzenkamp 2012).

Campaigns and interventions frequently highlight the importance of openness about one's sexual orientation at work for job perceptions, social interactions and well-being of employees. This is not unambiguously supported by the current study. No differences were found in job satisfaction, self-assessed functioning, perceived equal opportunities or intentions to leave their job between LGBs whose colleagues were aware and LGBs whose colleagues were not aware of their sexuality. Also, no differences were found in terms of conflicts, negative treatment or bullying, nor in health and psychological complaints. The degree to which colleagues are aware does appear to be related to positive aspects, however: LGB employees with a larger number of colleagues who are aware of their sexuality experience more social support, exhibit more organisational citizenship (performing tasks that do not directly form part of their job description but which benefit the organisation) and are happier. They also suffer fewer burnout complaints. The fact that colleagues know about their LGB orientation may thus contribute to a more positive approach at work and fewer burnout symptoms. Of course, the relationship could also operate the other way round: employees in organisations where they experience a good deal of mutual support may well be more inclined to share personal information and feel safer in revealing their lesbian, gay or bisexual identity. And conversely, if someone is already close to a burnout, being open about personal matters such as sexual attraction is perhaps asking slightly too much.

A caveat needs to be mentioned concerning the relationship between job perceptions, social interactions, well-being and the degree to which colleagues are aware of someone's sexual orientation. Participants were asked whether colleagues were aware of their sexual orientation, not whether that openness was voluntary or involuntary. If someone decides for themselves to tell their colleagues, this may have a different effect on their job perceptions, social interaction and well-being than if someone is 'outed' against their will (e.g. via social media or gossip).

Diversity policies work

Where an employer has a policy on diversity at the workplace and there is a mechanism for submitting complaints in the event of negative or unfair treatment, LGB employees (and other social minorities) experience fewer negative attitudes and there are fewer jokes about homosexuality. On some points, there is a relationship between the policy and the social interaction with LGB employees. For example, LGB employees report less negative treatment (such as intimidation or sexual harassment) and less bullying in workplaces where there is a diversity policy.

Diversity policies are not only related to the social interaction with LGB employees, but also have a positive impact on all employees. Diversity policies are related to job perceptions, social treatment, well-being and intentions to leave in the same way for both LGB and heterosexual employees. The strongest link is between diversity policies and social interactions, but the relationships with job perceptions and intentions to leave are also substantial. In more positive diversity climates, i.e. workplaces where employees have the feeling that colleagues are not negative towards social minorities and make fewer jokes about them, employees report more positive job perceptions, more positive social interaction, greater well-being and fewer plans to change jobs.

The study also shows that the diversity climate is not equally good everywhere. Only 45% of employees report that their employer has a policy in place to combat discrimination, and jokes about social minorities are also not uncommon: roughly half the employees in the survey report that jokes are sometimes made about homosexuals (49%), migrants (50%) and women (55%). Some employees report that jokes are made about these groups regularly or frequently (7%, 9% and 12%, respectively).

A positive diversity climate is associated with various organisational characteristics. In general, employees with more female colleagues, a female manager, openly LGB colleagues and LGB management staff within the organisation report that there are more diversity policies, more appreciation of diversity at the workplace, fewer negative attitudes from colleagues towards social minorities and fewer jokes about different minority groups. The presence of female colleagues, in particular, appears to play an important role.

Discussion

In 2012, when the study was carried out, there were more similarities than differences in job perceptions, social treatment and well-being between lesbian, gay and heterosexual employees in the Netherlands. By contrast, bisexual employees report more problems than other employees in many areas. The principal recommendation is therefore to devote more attention to this group, for example in LGB projects promoted by government, trade unions, interest groups and companies. At the same time, this is a difficult recommendation to follow, given the limited information on the reasons for the position of this group. Given the greater problems faced by this group, including in terms of their general health, there is a good argument for in-depth research into the position of bisexual individuals at the workplace and in other sociocultural domains.

A good diversity policy and climate is important for all employees, regardless of their sexual orientation. Recent research has shown that employers have been taking fewer

measures in recent years in relation to health and safety at work and sickness absenteeism (Oeij et al. 2013). In times of recession, diversity policies may be more likely to come under pressure. However, given the clear relationship with intentions to leave (which could lead to unwanted loss of human and financial capital) and the indirect relationship with sickness absenteeism (a cost for employers), diversity policies might perhaps deliver more benefits than costs. Diversity policies should not be concerned only with sexual orientation, but with diversity in a broad sense. LGB employees would also benefit from this.

The Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER) published an advisory report on diversity policies in 2009.¹ Although the SER stated that there is little existing research about the effectiveness of diversity policies, it outlines a number of conditions in its report which must be met by such a policy. Among the key points are a clear vision of diversity, setting specific targets, engagement by senior management and a middle management which is prepared to take responsibility, anchoring of the policy in the organisation and promoting an organisational culture which motivates people to create an environment in which all employees are able to get the best out of themselves. Knowledge and skills in dealing with differences between people are essential for achieving this. The study confirms that there is a positive association between a climate of diversity and several aspects of work, and thus endorses the importance of a good diversity policy at the workplace.

This study focuses exclusively on the position of LGB employees, and therefore says little about LGBs who are not currently in the employment process, for example those looking for work. However, unequal treatment can also occur when people are entering the labour market. Do LGBs suffer discrimination in job application procedures? Does someone with experience sitting on the board of an LGBT rights organisation have the same chance as someone who gained this administrative experience on the board of a nature conservation organisation? Conducting a field study would appear to be the most appropriate way of answering these questions. A study in this vein was published in 2012, focusing on discrimination against non-Western migrants on the Dutch labour market (Andriessen 2012). The study compared the probabilities that Dutch natives and non-Western migrants with equivalent cvs would receive a positive response. This research method could also be used to ascertain whether LGB and heterosexual employees receive unequal treatment in application procedures. Looking at comparable experiences gained in LGB and non-LGB organisations or projects, when selecting final study projects or in relation to membership of certain organisations, would make it possible to reveal any differences.

This study was commissioned as a one-off exercise by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. In order to be able to monitor the labour market situation of LGB employees in the future, it would be necessary to add a question on sexual orientation to national and international labour surveys. The Netherlands Working Conditions Survey conducted by TNO and Statistics Netherlands (CBS) and the Dutch Labour Force Survey by CBS offer the best opportunities for this in the Netherlands. The continuous nature of these surveys would make it possible to keep a finger on the pulse with regard to job perceptions, social treatment and well-being of LGB employees in the Netherlands.

Note

- 1 This report looks not only at dealing with diversity at the workplace, but also at increasing the diversity of the workforce.