Transgender Equity in the Workplace: A Systematic Review

Nickolas B. Davis¹ and Stephen T. Yeung²

Abstract

Within the workplace, employees face many job challenges. Those who identify as transgender may face many adverse job outcomes because of a lack of equity in the workplace. This lack of equity may be the result of a lack of trans-inclusive non-discrimination policies and laws. Additionally, trans-inclusive organizational cultures are not uniform across the spectrum of employment. Studies have shown the workplace challenges faced by many transgender individuals; however, the current knowledge base is lacking. This study contributes to the existing knowledge base by conducting a systematic review of existing literature and proposing the initial stages of developing a conceptual model to better understand how transgender equity can be achieved in the workplace. It is the hope that this review will stimulate further research into this area.

Keywords

transgender, equity, employment, systematic review

Background

It is well known that companies across the employment sector implement various policies and procedures aimed at promoting a more inclusive workplace. Additionally, state legislatures and the federal government play a role by issuing rules, laws, and passing legislation that protects the rights of marginalized workers. One group of individuals that are often overlooked during the policymaking process are those individuals who identify as transgender.

Current estimates suggest that about 1.4 million adults in the United States identify as transgender, representing approximately 0.42% of the total population (The Williams Institute, 2021). Given that a relatively small portion of the total population of the United States identifies as transgender it is reasonable to assume that only a small portion of the entire workforce is comprised of transgender individuals. Despite these small numbers, however, employers are slowly beginning to become more aware of the need for trans-inclusive workplace politics (Davis, 2009).

The term transgender can be somewhat vague to those who are unfamiliar with it. Transgender is a broad term that encompasses those whose gender expression or identity does not conform to the societal norms based on their biological birth sex (Coleman et al., 2012). The concept of equity refers to the treatment of persons according to their unique needs. This type of treatment may include access that may be equal or treatment that is different but equivalent in terms of opportunities and quality (Fish, 2010). Thus, transgender equity refers to fairness in treatment of those who identify as transgender and those who do not according to their individual needs (Mencarini, 2014). Adverse job outcomes include being fired, not being hired, having inaccurate performance evaluations, or being denied a promotion because one is transgender (Human Rights Campaign, 2021).

This review aims to explore the current state of the literature related to transgender equity in the workplace. The primary focus of this paper was to examine expressions of transgender equity in the workplace, along with transgender equity competence, and attempts to link transgender equity with the reduction of adverse job outcomes. Secondary goals were to identify the current state of the literature on issues relating to transgender equity in the workplace and identify the impact transgender equity has on the workplace environment for transgender individuals. The PRISMA systematic search strategy was used to review the existing literature to explore transgender equity in the workplace.

¹University of Detroit Mercy, Detroit, MI, USA
²Weill Cornell Medical College, New York, NY, USA

Corresponding Author:
Nickolas B. Davis, University of Detroit Mercy, 4001 W. McNichols Rd., Briggs 320, Detroit, MI 48221-3038, USA.
Email: davisnb@udmercy.edu
The notable exception to this is one purely conceptual article that included data collected from qualitative sources such as interviews. The majority of articles selected for this study categorized a primary focus on transgender healthcare or related issues. The somewhat liberal selection criteria allowed for the inclusion of articles that included a broad range of settings and populations. Given the limited amount of available research on this topic, relevance to transgender equity in the workplace thus, meeting the inclusion criteria. At this stage articles were excluded if the article’s full text did not yield any insights into the manifestations or limitations of transgender equity in workplace settings. Articles were also excluded if a review of the full text indicated a primary focus on transgender healthcare or related issues. As shown in Table 2, nine articles were eliminated at this stage. Given this topic’s exploratory nature, conceptual, or theoretical relevance was an essential focus of the review.

### Table 1. Search Terms.

| Search Terms                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| transgender OR (gender nonconforming)                                        |
| AND (social equity) OR (social equity theory)                                |
| AND workplace OR career OR job OR office OR employment                        |
| NOT health*                                                                  |

### Method

#### Search Method

Searches were conducted for US-based studies published between 1990 and 2020 using the following databases: ProQuest, Sage Premier, PsychInfo, Academic Search Premier, Taylor & Francis, Web of Science, and Science Direct. The search terms utilized included: transgender, gender nonconforming, social equity, social equity theory, workplace, career, job, office, and employment. Search terms such as health and healthcare were omitted from the search given the large amount of literature relating to transgender health and its incompatibility with the scope of this study. An extended search period was utilized given the relative narrow focus of this review. Table 1 presents the formatted search terms with Boolean operators. Reference lists of the selected articles were also reviewed for inclusion.

#### Selection Criteria and Method

All search results were reviewed using the PRISMA framework for possible match to this study’s scope. At the primary screening level, articles were examined for appropriateness of inclusion based on information contained in the title or abstract, mainly excluding articles focused on athletics, educational systems, and student experiences; and not specifically related to workplace issues. Twenty-five articles were eliminated at this point, two due to duplication in another database included in the search. At the secondary screening level, the article’s full text was examined to look for appropriateness and relevance to transgender equity in the workplace thus, meeting the inclusion criteria. At this stage articles were excluded if the full text did not yield any insights into the manifestations or limitations of transgender equity in workplace settings. Articles were also excluded if a review of the full text indicated a primary focus on transgender healthcare or related issues. As shown in Table 2, nine articles were eliminated at this stage. Given this topic’s exploratory nature, conceptual, or theoretical relevance was an essential focus of the review.

### Findings

Given the limited amount of available research on this topic, the somewhat liberal selection criteria allowed for the inclusion of articles that included a broad range of settings and populations. The majority of articles selected for this study contain data collected from qualitative sources such as interviews. The notable exception to this is one purely conceptual article was included because it provides a quality framework for addressing social equity in relation to transgender workplace issues; another article reviewing judicial proceedings was also included to provide a policy framework for understanding transgender equity better. Table 3 outlines the articles that were included in this study.

For each of the articles that featured some form of original research (n=3), the sample sizes and settings were diverse. The participants in two of the articles mentioned above were persons who identified as transgender. The third article surveyed university students, none of whom identified as transgender. It is noted that a conceptual article, York et al. (2008), was also included to provide a policy framework for understanding equity issues for transgender persons. It is noted that a conceptual article, York et al. (2008), was slated for inclusion in this study. This article presented a legal discussion surrounding transgender equity. However, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia nullified this legal discussion (Valenti, 2021).

It is noted that the Journal of Workplace Rights has published several articles that examine sexual orientation and gender identity issues in the workplace, namely Barron (2009), Dietert and Dentice (2009), Gates (2011), and Rudin (2012). However, these were not included in this review as they did not meet the inclusion criteria.

#### Conceptual Articles

The conceptual article presents an overview of the broader Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT) workplace experience. While the GLB aspect of the research is beyond

### Table 2. Screening Data.

| Database       | Unfiltered results | Articles after primary screening | Articles after secondary screening; included in study |
|----------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| ABI/Inform (ProQuest) | 30                 | 5                                | 1                                                     |
| Sage Premier   | 30                 | 6                                | 3                                                     |
| PsychInfo      | 1                  | 0                                | 0                                                     |
| Academic Search Premier | 3                  | 1                                | 1                                                     |
| Taylor & Francis | 0                | 0                                | 0                                                     |
| Web of Science | 3                  | 2                                | 0                                                     |
| Science Direct | 0                  | 0                                | 0                                                     |
the scope of this review, the themes presented about the overall GLBT experience offer some significant parallels that can be applied to the transgender population.

Van Den Bergh (2008) outlines several of the workplace protections implemented for members of this population. These protections range from state nondiscrimination laws to employer-based inclusion and non-discrimination policies. However, Van Den Bergh (2008) shares that many of these policies were implemented while lacking a vehicle of enforcement.

Table 3. Evidenced-Based Review Results.

| Study                  | Design                        | Setting/Population                                                                 | Methodology                      | Findings                                                                 | Limitations                                                                                     |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Brown et al. (2012)   | Semi-structured interviews with demographic questionnaire | N = 9 male-to-female transgender persons. Age range 22–66 (M = 44.8). Respondents reported an array of sexual orientations. Respondents also varied in stages of sexual reassignment surgery status. | All participants’ responses were coded. Data analyzed for domains, core ideas, and cross-analysis. | Three domains emerged: educational pursuits and goals post-transition, career interests, and gender/sex role expectations. Career aspirations changed after transition. | Study comprised primary of European American MTF transgender persons who were diagnosed with gender identify disorder (GID). As such generalizability is limited. The samples formal educational level was low (only one participant completed a 4-year college program). |
| Johnson (2011)        | Blind surveys with eight open-ended and multiple choice questions | N = 94; 26 graduate public affairs students, 68 undergraduate students all enrolled at the University of Vermont. Age range 17-mid 50s. One respondent identified as a person of color. | Focus group                      | 40% reported being aware of or friendly with a transgender person; 91% of undergraduate and 98% of graduate students reported transgender persons should have workplace protections | Small survey results (N = 94); mostly descriptive. Student bias toward favorable attitudes on social equality issues (Vermont reputation for socially progressive politics). |
| Schilt (2006)         | In-depth interviews.         | N = 29; female to male transgender persons (FTM) all residing in Southern California, who were working as men or open transmen. Sample consisted of 18 open FTM and 11 stealth FTM. Age ranges from 20 to 48. Sample was predominantly Caucasian. | Qualitative based on interviews. | Respondents reported several workplace limitations as well as advantages (positive change in evaluation of abilities when evaluated as a male), economic gains. Counter evidence to human capital theories. | Small sample size and limited to the Southern California area. Generalizability is limited due to sample demographics. |
| Van Den Bergh (2008)  | Conceptual in nature.        | No formal setting/population. Author examined existing nondiscrimination and legislation. | N/A                              | Conceptual framework: PIE (protection, inclusion, equity). | Conceptual in nature. No scientific data present. Conceptual framework may be useful to examining transgender equity in the workplace. More research needed to validate framework. |

A conceptual framework is presented to examine how transgender persons and other sexual minorities interact in the workplace. This model, known as PIE (Protection, Inclusion, Equity), proves to be somewhat useful. At the protection level, formal legal protections must be introduced to protect marginalized workers—currently, no federal legislation exists to protect transgender individuals (Van Den Bergh, 2008). As Van Den Bergh (2008) described, equity is the ability to have access to appropriate and reasonable healthcare. For a transgender person in the workplace, this would equate to having
health insurance coverage and meets their unique needs, such as covering gender affirming surgery.

**Empirical Articles**

The remaining three articles selected for inclusion in this review contain some level of empirical research gathered through various means, in this instance, mostly interviews. Two of the articles used a sample of persons who identify as transgender, while the remaining examined university students, none of whom identified as transgender.

Johnson (2011) identified the need for further research on issues relating to transgender individuals and their role in the workplace. A study was conducted using blind surveys to a mixture of graduate and undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Vermont \( (n=94) \). The graduate students were enrolled in a public affairs program, while the undergraduate students were enrolled in courses addressing race and culture or race relations in the United States. The participants’ ages ranged from late teens to mid-50s; only one respondent identified as a person of color. This study found several interesting results.

When asked if respondents knew of or reported being aware of a transgender person, only 40% responded favorably. Additionally, 55% reported a basic knowledge of transgender issues. When questioned about interacting with transgender persons in the workplace, less than 40% of undergraduate students and less than 50% of graduate students reported that they would feel comfortable with a transgender manager or supervisor. These responses are somewhat concerning as 28% of undergraduate students and 75% of graduate students have been employed in the workplace in some supervisory fashion or another (Johnson, 2011).

This study illustrates a systematic problem with the more extensive awareness of transgender issues. Transgender persons in the workplace cannot achieve increasing equity levels, and companies cannot demonstrate transgender equity competence without increasing the population’s overall knowledge base. Additionally, this study begins to shape the generational knowledge divide among this social issue, despite limitations due to sampling and scope. To reduce adverse job outcomes among transgender people, and increase overall equity, institutional changes must occur. Johnson (2011) offers several suggestions, including increased education on transgender issues and encouraging internships that promote interaction with transgender persons. The implementation of these suggestions, while useful, would take many years to see positive workplace changes, as students, such as those surveyed may have delayed entry to the workforce while completing college coursework.

Whereas Johnson (2011) examined cisgender student attitudes toward transgender persons, Brown et al. (2012) directly sampled transgender persons. In the study, adult transgender women \( (n=9) \), mostly middle-aged and predominately Caucasian, who have been on hormone therapy for an average of 20.7 months, were sampled. Specifically, the researchers chose to examine their workplace experiences. A variety of methods were used, including semi-structured interviews and demographic questionnaires. Respondents were primarily identified as European American \( (n=7) \), with an average age of 44.8 years. Slightly more than half of the participants reported being employed full-time. The participants’ educational levels varied; however, only 11.1% \( (n=1) \) reported completing a college degree. After a review of the qualitative data, three core areas emerged: (a) educational pursuits and goals post-transition, (b) career interests/experiences, and (c) gender role experiences (Brown et al., 2012).

While the core areas of educational pursuits and gender role experiences are essential and relevant to the transgender experience, this review will focus primarily on workplace experiences. Much of the qualitative narrative obtained from the respondents suggest common feelings of frustration over incidents of harassment and discriminatory workplace practices. For example, one respondent, Katrina, shared that her boss asked, “Did you use the women’s restroom?” (p. 882). Additionally, several of the respondents questioned if the denial of employment was related to their transgender status.

The data gathered by Brown et al. (2012) illustrates apparent shortcomings implementing protective policies for transgender employees. This article provides accounts of experiences of transgender people who have experienced workplaces with low levels of transgender equity. Their adverse job outcomes, such as denial of employment, unfair evaluation, or lack of growth opportunities, are exacerbated. The ability to generalize data taken from this article is, like the previous article, limited due to the sample, it does seem to reinforce the themes of equity or lack thereof, in the workplace.

The final article selected for examination in this systematic review examines workplace inequalities of female-to-male transgender persons. In-depth interviews were conducted with female-to-male persons in the Southern California area \( (n=29) \). Of the respondents, 18 shared they were open about their transgender identity while 11 shared that they did not disclose their identity to employers; the author uses the term *stealth* to describe these individuals. The age of respondents ranged from the early 20s to late 40s. The majority of respondents identified as white. The respondents’ sexual orientation varied across the spectrum (Schilt, 2006).

Findings from Schilt (2006) suggest that female-to-male transgender persons experience some pseudo-positive experiences in the workplace. For example, since the respondents identified as men, they were often beneficiaries of male privilege. However, it was noted that because none of the respondents were male at birth, they experienced disparities in their interactions with coworkers. This type of experience is termed by Schilt (2006) as “outer-within” (p. 473). Additionally, the respondents reported increased workplace respect and recognition, given their identification as a man.

In addition to the several positive experiences reported by respondents in this study, several barriers to workplace advantages were also discussed. Several respondents shared that their physical appearance limited their workplace advantages.
For example, one respondent reported that his body structure limited or negated any increased authority or prestige that may have been gained. Additionally, respondents reported that persons of color experienced different workplace barriers when compared to their white counterparts. For instance, one respondent felt that any workplace benefits of gender advantage were negated due to his Asian heritage (Schilt, 2006).

The findings presented in this review offer a glimpse, albeit a limited one, into the current state of the literature related to transgender equity in the workplace. Though limited in their sample sizes, the empirical articles illustrate this social issue through the use of interviews and surveys. The conceptual article provide both a preliminary conceptual model to examine this social problem.

**Discussion**

The limited research suggests that the most of transgender people face some form of adverse job outcome in the workplace. This occurrence seems to span boundaries of age, education level, and race/ethnicity. However, this is not to say that individuals may not experience some or other adverse job outcomes based on age, education level, or race/ethnicity. Additionally, the literature agrees that adverse job outcomes are exacerbated by a lack of consistent transgender equity across the spectrum of employment.

The findings from the studies included in this review suggest that increasing transgender equity in the workplace can create positive job outcomes for transgender persons or reduce adverse job outcomes. This type of increase in equity must go hand-in-hand with increasing competence relating to transgender issues among other employees and business leaders.

A synthesis of the articles included in this study suggests that both employers and employees can contribute to increasing transgender equity in the workplace. Employers can foster trans-inclusive workplace culture by addressing policy shortcomings (Brown et al., 2012). An example of this may be the use of inclusive and gender affirming language in policies and procedures. Employers may also promote equity by lending visibility and awareness to transgender specific issues (Johnson, 2011), perhaps through diversity related education programs. Employers should also provide benefits through an equitable lens (Van Den Bergh, 2008), namely by offering health insurance options that provide coverage for gender affirming surgery.

The role that employees play in affirming transgender equity in the workplace in an important one as well. Employees should engage in discussions about transgender issues and participate in educational opportunities. Employees should also treat their transgender colleagues with respect (Schilt, 2006) such as by using their preferred pronouns. Employees can also serve as allies to their transgender colleagues by advocating for trans-inclusive policies and the use of gender affirming language in the workplace.

A dearth of quality systematic reviews, meta-analyses, experimental, and quasi-experimental studies relating to transgender equity is concerning, albeit understandable given the size of the population. It is nearly impossible to obtain a random sample of transgender people, given their relatively low numbers in relation to the general population and their varying levels of “outness” in the community and workplace. This caveat makes understanding this unique population all the more difficult. Also, the geographically limited nature of the studies included in this review makes generalizability questionable.

The data collected by Schilt (2006) would seem to illustrate some gains in transgender equity in the workplace. However, these gains would anecdotally be limited to those female-to-male transgender persons. This increase in equity would also appear to be linked to reducing the participants’ adverse job outcomes in other studies. However, this increase in equity and subsequent reduction in adverse job outcomes seems to be connected to the respondent’s observable gender identification instead of an increase in overall transgender equity competence in the workplace.

Moreover, conceptual frameworks such as the PIE model as presented by Van Den Bergh (2008) offer a unique way to examine transgender issues in the workplace. However, models such as this fall short in that they fail to address or account for the massive undertaking that must be made to achieve the first level of the model, in this case, protection. While transgender persons and allies in the community may find it beneficial to strive for PIE, the model does not provide a vehicle to achieve it.

**Limitations**

The lack of empirically-based studies on transgender equity issues is a primary limitation. The articles selected, with two being conceptual, provided no scientific examination into the experiences of transgender persons in the workplace. Furthermore, the empirical articles chosen for review had relatively low sample sizes and had no random selection of participants. Additionally, the articles drew samples from provincial areas of the United States, which may not be generalizable to the larger population. Finally, cisgender persons studying this population can present a potential limitation. However, those outside of the transgender community can contribute valuable knowledge so long as due diligence and sensitivity on the researcher’s part are utilized (Johnson, 2011; Moolchaem et al., 2015).

**Implications**

This review highlights the need for further study into transgender equity in the workplace. Currently, there is a lack of literature of both conceptual and empirical nature. The nature of the population makes random sampling problematic. Without this type of knowledge, however, employers, and lawmakers may be unaware or unable to quantify this distressing problem’s severity.

Finally, to increase transgender equity in the workplace and reduce adverse job outcomes, employers must implement
and enforce nondiscrimination policies and procedures, provide diversity training to employees and business leaders, and encourage a culture of openness toward gender identity and expression. These policy-level implications may be impacted by the available research, or lack thereof relating to transgender issues in the workplace.

**Toward a Conceptual Model to Achieve Workplace Equity**

Instead, transgender persons and allies may wish to work toward a model of advocacy and awareness, protection, competency, and equity (AAPCE), which draws a foundational basis from the PIE model as described by Van Den Bergh (2008).

Advocacy and awareness include advancing transgender issues on an organizational, local, state, and federal level; this may be accomplished through political action, discussions with organizational leaders and policymakers, or involvement with organizations that advocate for issues facing the transgender community. Through this advocacy and awareness, lawmakers and business leaders may recognize the need to implement protections such as non-discriminatory policies and procedures. Essentially, whether they are at an organizational or governmental level, policymakers cannot address an issue without knowing the needs of a marginalized population. Competency takes protection to the next level by creating a more inclusive and welcoming workplace. Competency ensures that coworkers and business leaders are formally aware of issues facing the transgender community. Competence may be accomplished through workplace policies and may be encouraged by local, state, or federal legislation that places additional protections for transgender workers. More inclusive diversity programs and a shift in organizational culture that includes components related to the needs of transgender workers may reflect competency in an organizational setting. In the final stage, equity is achieved when transgender workers are treated according to their individual needs (Fish, 2010). Essentially, equity is the summation of effective advocacy, awareness, and competence.

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