

LGBTIQ+ Employees' Coping Strategies to Deal with Gender Discrimination at Work: A Qualitative Study

LGBTIQ+ Çalışanların İşyerinde Toplumsal Cinsiyet Ayrımcılığıyla Başa Çıkma Stratejileri: Nitel Bir Araştırma

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Highlights:

- One of the areas where LGBT+ people face discrimination is the workplace.
- Various fears and anxieties force LGBT+ workers to adopt certain coping mechanisms in the workplace.
- The coping mechanisms used by LGB people are different from those used by transgender people.
- The most common coping strategy used by LGB individuals in working life is to hide their sexual orientation and gender identity.

Abstract: The objective of this study is to elucidate the coping mechanisms that LGBTIQ+ individuals employ in response to discrimination based on their sexual orientation and gender identity in the context of business life in Türkiye, with a particular focus on the influence of prevailing social norms and legal deficiencies. It is possible that LGBTIQ+ individuals may refrain from pursuing their rights in the event of discrimination. Consequently, LGBTIQ+ employees develop individual coping strategies in response to discriminatory practices. In this study, interviews were conducted with 19 LGBTIQ+ employees. The objective of the interviews is to ascertain the strategies that employees utilize to cope with discrimination. The structure and generally accepted norms of Turkish society, which justify LGBTIQ+ individuals' concerns about discrimination and exclusion from social life, have formed the basis of scientific curiosity for this research project. The data obtained from the interviews were transcribed and subjected to a descriptive analysis. The findings were subsequently classified into the following categories: hiding in the workplace, hiding as a result of witnessing discrimination, living a facade, remaining silent in the face of discrimination, confronting discrimination, and not seeking legal rights. The findings indicate that the most prevalent coping strategy employed by LGBTIQ+ individuals is the concealment of their sexual orientation and gender identity. This approach often results in a sense of disconnection from their authentic selves in professional settings. Moreover, the primary strategies employed by LGBTIQ+ employees are identified as working for organizations that are relatively accommodating LGBTIQ+ individuals, working with acquaintances, and imitating a heterosexual lifestyle. The data indicate that individual coping strategies have been employed more frequently by gay and bisexual individuals than by transgender individuals.

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Öne Çıkanlar

- LGBTQI+ bireylerin maruz kaldığı ayrımcılıkların yaşandığı alanlardan birisi çalışma yaşamıdır.
- Çeşitli korku ve endişeler, LGBTQI+ çalışanları işyerinde birtakım başa çıkma mekanizmalarını uygulamaya mecbur bırakmaktadır.
- LGB bireylerin uyguladığı başa çıkma mekanizmaları trans bireylerin uyguladıklarından farklıdır.
- Çalışma yaşamında LGB bireylerin en çok kullandığı başa çıkma stratejisi cinsel yönelim ve cinsiyet kimliklerini gizlemektir.

Öz: Bu çalışma, LGBTQI+'ların Türkiye'de iş hayatında cinsel yönelimleri ve cinsiyet kimlikleri nedeniyle yapılan ayrımcılığa karşı genel toplumsal normlara ve yasal eksikliklere bağlı olarak geliştirdikleri baş etme mekanizmalarını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. LGBTQI+ bireyler ayrımcılık sonrasında haklarını arayamayabilmektedir. Bu nedenle LGBTQI+ çalışanlar, ayrımcılıkla başa çıkmak için bireysel stratejiler geliştirmektedir. Bu çalışmada 19 LGBTQI+ çalışanla görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Görüşmelerin amacı çalışanların ayrımcılıkla başa çıkmak için hangi stratejileri uyguladıklarını ortaya çıkarmaktır. LGBTQI+ bireylerin ayrımcılık ve sosyal hayattan dışlanma endişelerini haklı çıkaran Türk toplumunun yapısı ve genel kabul görmüş normları, bu araştırmanın bilimsel merakının temelini oluşturmaktadır. Görüşmeler sonucunda elde edilen bulgular metne dökülerek, betimsel analiz yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Analiz sonucunda bulgular işyerinde saklanma, tanık olunan ayrımcılık sonucunda gizlenme, sahte hayat yaşama, ayrımcılık karşısında sessiz kalma, ayrımcılıkla yüzleşme ve yasal hak arayamama olarak kodlara ayrılmıştır. Bulgulara göre cinsel yönelim ve cinsiyet kimliğini gizli tutmak, LGBTQI+ bireylerin iş hayatında kendi varoluşlarından kopuşa neden olan en yaygın başa çıkma stratejisidir. Ayrıca LGBTQI+ çalışanların uyguladığı ana stratejiler, LGBTQI+ bireylere karşı ılımlı olan örgütlerde çalışmak, tanıdıklarıyla çalışmak ve heteroseksüel yaşamı taklit etmek olarak sıralanmaktadır. Bireysel başa çıkma stratejilerinin eşcinsel ve biseksüel kişiler tarafından trans bireylere göre daha sık kullanıldığı görülmüştür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: LGBTQI+; işte cinsiyet ayrımcılığı; başa çıkma; cinsel yönelim; cinsiyet kimliği

Genişletilmiş Özet

Bu çalışma, LGBTQI+ bireylerin günlük hayatta karşı karşıya kaldıkları ayrımcı tutum ve davranışlar ekseninde, çalışma yaşamında karşılaştıkları ayrımcılığı ve ayrımcılıkla başa çıkmak için tercih ettikleri stratejileri ele almak üzere tasarlanmıştır. Cinsel yönelim ve cinsiyet kimliği üzerinden ayrımcılık da dahil olmak üzere ayrımcılığın her türlü gerek uluslararası anlaşmalar, gerekse anayasa ve ulusal yasalar tarafından yasaklanmış olmasına rağmen pratikte LGBTQI+ bireylere yönelik ayrımcı söylem ve eylemlerle karşılaşmak mümkündür. Cinsiyetçilik, heteronormativite, heteroseksizm ve homofobi, LGBTQI+ bireylerin ayrımcılığa uğramasına yol açan başlıca akımlardır. Çünkü bu yaklaşımlara göre LGBTQI+ bireyler heteronormatif toplum yapısının dışına çıkan ve kalıba sığmayan konumdadırlar.

Çalışma yaşamında LGBTIQ+ çalışanlara yönelik ayrımcılık, LGBTIQ+ bireylerin kimliklerini açıkça yaşamasına veya gizlemesine bağlı olarak iki ana biçimde kendini göstermektedir. Gerçekleşen ayrımcılık, LGBTIQ+ çalışanların iş yerinde cinsel yönelim/cinsiyet kimliklerini açık ettiklerinde deneyimledikleri ayrımcılık pratiklerini içermektedir. Bu ayrımcılık, uygulanma biçimlerine göre formel ve informel olarak iki şekilde tezahür etmektedir. LGBTIQ+ bireylerin işe alınmaması, işten çıkartılması, terfi almasının engellenmesi, düşük ücret ödenmesi, fazla iş yükü verilmesi ve iş ödüllerinin kısıtlanması gibi uygulamalar gerçekleşen formel ayrımcılık örnekleridir. İformel ayrımcılık ise işveren ve iş arkadaşlarının düşmanca tavırlar sergilemesi, fiziksel taciz, sözlü taciz, sert bakışlar, alaycı söylemler, kişisel eşyalara zarar verme ve şiddet uygulama gibi gayri resmi eylemlere izin veren kurumsallaştırılmamış politikaları içermektedir. Beklenen ayrımcılık, LGBTIQ+ çalışanların iş yerinde cinsel yönelimlerini veya cinsiyet kimliklerini gizli tuttuklarında karşılaştıkları ayrımcı tutum ve davranışlara ilişkin yorumlarını kapsamaktadır. Beklenen ayrımcılık, bireylerin ayrımcılığı nasıl yorumladığına göre değişiklik gösterebilmektedir.

Çalışma yaşamında LGBTIQ+ bireylerin en çok kullandığı başa çıkma stratejisi gizlenmektir. Bireyler iş yerinde kendi gibi davranmayarak, heteroseksüel ilişkileri olan bir hayat tarzını taklit edebilmektedir. Bunun yanı sıra daha fazla çalışarak, yardımsever ve iyi bir imaj çizmeye ya da hazır cevap olarak her türlü sözlü tacize karşı gelip sert bir imaj çizmeye çalışarak ayrımcılığın önünde barikat kurmaya çalışabilmektedirler. Meslek seçimi sırasında ayrımcılık ile başa çıkabilmek kullanılan stratejiler arasında serbest meslek seçimi, LGBTIQ+ bireylere tolerans gösteren iş yerlerinde, LGBTIQ+ bireylerin iş yerlerinde ya da LGBTIQ+ topluluklara hizmet eden örgütlerde iş arama ve son olarak risk alma denemektedir. Çalışma sırasında karşılaşılan ayrımcılıkla başa çıkmak için kullanılan başlıca stratejiler sessiz kalma, sosyal destek alma, yüzleşme veya işi bırakmadır.

Çalışmanın uygulaması, Türkiye’de özel sektörde çalışan ya da daha önce çalışma deneyimi olan 19 LGBTIQ+ birey ile gerçekleştirilen bir nitel araştırmayı içermektedir. Araştırma sonucunda elde edilen bulgular betimsel analiz yöntemi kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Yarı yapılandırılmış mülakatlara dayanan araştırma bulgular arasında en belirgin olan, cinsel yönelim/cinsiyet kimliğini açık etme ve ayrımcılık arasındaki ilişkidir. LGBTIQ+ çalışanlar, çalışma yaşamında cinsel yönelim/cinsiyet kimliklerini doğrudan ya da dolaylı yollarla belli ettiklerinde, gerçekleşen ayrımcılık pratiklerine maruz kaldıklarını ifade etmektedir. Bireylerin deneyimledikleri ayrımcılık pratikleri işe alınmama, işten çıkartılma ya da istifaya zorlanma, sözlü taciz, mobbing ve nefret dolu davranışlar şeklinde ortaya çıkmaktadır.

LGBTIQ+ çalışanlar, gizli kalmayı tercih ettiklerinde ise çevrelerindeki bireylerin sergilediği fobik tutumlara ve ayrımcılığa bir gün kendilerinin de maruz kalabileceği kaygısı yaşamaktadır. Cinsel yönelimlerini gizleyen katılımcılar, dikkatleri üzerlerine çekmemek için LGBTIQ+ savunucusu söylemlerden de uzak durmaktadır.

Ayrımcılığın önlenmesinde kullanılan bireysel stratejiler yeterli olmayıp ayrımcılığı ancak belirli bir süre geciktirebilmektedir. Bu noktada daha kapsamlı hukuki ve sosyal politikalar oluşturulması gerekmektedir. Yasal düzenlemelerdeki eksiklikler LGBTIQ+ bireylerin görmezden gelindiğinin açık göstergesidir.

Introduction

Discrimination can be defined as the act of treating an individual or a group in a manner that differs from the norm due to the possession of certain characteristics, such as language, religion, race, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Due to their sexual orientation and gender identity, which are two of the aforementioned characteristics, members of the LGBTIQ+ community may be marginalized and segregated by a portion of society. In general, Turkish society has a social structure that is predicated on the acceptance of heterosexual orientation and birth-assigned gender as the norm, while simultaneously rejecting alternative forms of identity. Consequently, LGBTIQ+ individuals are subjected to discrimination in numerous domains of society.

It is imperative that LGBTIQ+ individuals engage actively in the workforce to ensure their survival. By contravening ethical and equality rules in the workplace, individuals may be subjected to discriminatory practices on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity, irrespective of the qualifications deemed necessary for the role in question (Levine & Leonard, 1984, p. 702). Individuals in the workforce may experience *actual discrimination* based on their sexual orientation or gender identity when they are open about their identity. Conversely, they may also face *anticipated discrimination* when they are secretive about their identity or orientation. An analysis of the legal framework in Türkiye reveals a glaring absence of legislation that explicitly prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity at the national level. This striking omission has resulted in the systematic marginalization and exclusion of LGBTIQ+ individuals. No explicit reference to sexual orientation or gender identity is made in any article that prohibits discrimination. Consequently, LGBTIQ+ employees are compelled to devise individual strategies to cope with the discriminatory practices they encounter.

The principal objective of this study is to elucidate the strategies employed by LGBTIQ+ individuals to cope with discrimination in the context of business life, which the legislation aims to safeguard in a general framework, albeit not explicitly.

Theoretical Framework

The societal structure in Türkiye is heteronormative, espousing the dichotomy of gender roles and marginalizing alternative forms of relationships. Heteronormativity refers to the process by which the socio-cultural structure is shaped in a manner that renders heterosexuality as the norm and assumes that all members of society are heterosexual (Altunpolat, 2017, p. 2). As a natural consequence of the heteronormative social structure, gender identities and sexual orientations that deviate from the gender dichotomy and heterosexual orientation are subjected to discrimination. Gender identity is defined as the subjective experience of an individual's connection to the gender they identify with, irrespective of their biological sex. It encompasses the individual's sense of belonging to a particular gender and their desire to be perceived by others within society in alignment with this identity. An individual who feels a kinship with the characteristics traditionally associated with men in a given society is regarded as masculine, whereas an individual who feels a kinship with the characteristics traditionally associated with women is regarded as feminine (Özkan & Lajunen, 2005, p. 103). In contrast, sexual orientation pertains to the emotional and sexual desire and attraction of the individual towards another individual (Güner et al., 2011, p. 20). Sexual orientation can be classified into four categories: heterosexuality (attraction to another sex), homosexuality (attraction to the same sex), bisexuality (attraction to both sexes), and asexuality (lack of attraction to both sexes) (Eşel, 2006, p. 281).

The concepts of lesbian, gay and bisexual express sexual orientation, while the concept of transgender expresses gender identity. Individuals who have shaken this ancient heteronormative belief in both biological sex and gender due to their sexual orientation and gender identities come together under the concept of LGBTIQ+ (Baird, 2004, p. 18). The concept of lesbian is used for homosexual women who have an orientation and desire towards their same sex, and the concept of gay is used for homosexual men. Bisexual, on the other hand, is used for individuals who have an orientation and desire for both their own sex and another sex (Güdül et al., 2017, p. 15-16). The concept of transgender, which expresses gender identity, refers to individuals whose biological sex and the gender they feel do not match. The concept of transsexual is used for individuals who have undergone a medical intervention so that their biological sex and their sense of gender are in harmony (McNamara & Ng, 2016, p. 531).

While homosexuality is not a crime in Türkiye, LGBTQI+ individuals are subjected to hatred and discrimination by conservative governments and certain segments of society (Özgünlü, 2019, p. 58; Şenel, 2014, p. 30). Discrimination represents a significant challenge for LGBTQI+ individuals across a range of domains, including education, health, the workforce, and numerous aspects of social life. This obstacle hinders their ability to exercise their most fundamental rights. The primary objective of LGBTQI+ individuals is to unite in order to advocate for their right to be regarded as equal citizens and to receive the same level of respect as others (Baird, 2004, p. 17).

Discrimination in the workplace refers to the negative treatment of employees or individuals or groups seeking employment on the basis of characteristics unrelated to productivity, in violation of the principles of equality and fairness (Chung, 2001, p. 34). Levine and Leonard (1984) distinguish between two forms of discrimination against LGBTQI+ individuals in the workplace: actual discrimination and anticipated discrimination. While LGBTQI+ employees face *actual discrimination* when they reveal their identity and orientation in the workplace, they face *anticipated discrimination* when they keep their identity and orientation secret. Discrimination can be classified into two categories: formal and informal. The distinction between these two forms of discrimination is based on the manner in which they are applied. Formal discrimination encompasses discriminatory practices such as unequal hiring, termination, and promotion opportunities, excessive workloads, low wages, and the denial of merit-based rewards (Levine & Leonard, 1984, p. 706). *Formal discrimination* is most evident during the recruitment process (Adam, 1981; Baert, 2017; Mishel, 2016; Weichselbaumer, 2003). LGBTQI+ individuals primarily utilize online career platforms, personal referrals, and social media as their primary channels for job searches. The proportion of individuals seeking employment through private employment agencies is relatively low. This is due to a lack of trust in these channels and a fear of being labelled (Köylü & Güzel, 2022, p. 27). Discrimination manifests not only at the stage of employment but also throughout the working period. Discriminatory treatment manifests in various forms, including the denial of invitations to corporate meetings, excessive workloads, impediments to career advancement, low remuneration, and the curtailment of employee rights (Beyaz & Öztürk, 2018, p. 153). Additionally, formal discrimination manifests in the form of dismissal or the implementation of intimidating policies with the objective of forcing the individual to resign. In instances where LGBTQI+ employees choose to reveal their identity or orientation in the workplace, they may receive warnings from their employers or superiors and subsequently face dismissal. Furthermore, they may be compelled to resign as a result of intimidation tactics employed by their employers, superiors, or colleagues, which may include excessive workloads and disregard (Doğan, 2015, p. 67).

Levine and Leonard (1984) define *informal discrimination* as "institutionalized policies that allow hostile attitudes, harassment, and informal actions by employers and colleagues" (p. 67). Chung (2001) identifies several forms of informal discrimination, including physical and verbal abuse, harsh and steely looks, sarcastic remarks, damage to personal belongings, and violence (p. 35). LGBT+ employees are subjected to both formal and informal forms of discrimination in the workplace. As a consequence of the discriminatory practices in place, LGBTIQ+ employees may be denied access to equal rights and opportunities afforded to other employees. While formal discrimination has a detrimental impact on the career and professional status of the employee, informal discrimination has a deleterious effect on the employee's morale, productivity, and psychological well-being (Chung, 2001, p. 35).

Anticipated discrimination refers to the discriminatory attitudes that LGBTIQ+ employees may encounter if their sexual orientation or gender identity is revealed in the workplace. The most significant factor contributing to LGBTIQ+ employees being subjected to anticipated discrimination and opting to remain anonymous is observing the discriminatory practices occurring in their vicinity. Those who anticipate significant discrimination often exhibit behaviors that diverge from their true selves. They may be ill-prepared for the actual discrimination they will encounter (Chung, 2001, p. 36).

Legislation to Cope with Discrimination in Turkiye

As is the case with all employees, those who identify as LGBTIQ+ will typically pursue legal recourse when faced with discriminatory practices. The most significant document in international legislation that espouses the principle of equality and seeks to prohibit discrimination is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In accordance with Article 23 of the Declaration, all individuals are entitled to work, the freedom to select their occupation, just and favorable working conditions, and protection from unemployment. Furthermore, all individuals are guaranteed equal pay for equal work, without distinction (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).

Another convention that adopts the equality of individuals in terms of rights is the United Nations Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976), which Turkiye signed in 2003. Article 6 of the Convention guarantees the right of everyone to work freely in whatever job they want, and Article 7 guarantees the right of everyone to work in just and favorable conditions. In the aforementioned legal regulations, it is aimed to prevent discriminatory treatment that everyone will encounter in working life, and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ individuals is also guaranteed.

Council Directive 2000/78 of the European Union dated 27 November 2000, which established a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation, explicitly stated the expression of sexual orientation and prohibited direct and indirect discrimination. The purpose of the directive is to put into effect the principle of equal treatment in member states in order to combat discrimination based on religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation in terms of employment and occupation (Güner et al., 2011, p. 26).

In 2010, the Council of Europe, of which Türkiye is a member, published recommendations for member states to combat discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The recommendations place an emphasis on the prevention, combating, and punishment of discrimination, harassment, and other forms of victimization encountered at the employment stage. Additionally, they provide equitable recommendations for access to employment and promotion conditions, as well as for matters pertaining to dismissals, wages, and other working conditions. Furthermore, the recommendations address the issue of preventing the disclosure of transgender individuals' gender history or previous names to employers and other employees in any unrelated manner. This is done with the aim of highlighting the additional discrimination that transgender individuals often face (Council of Europe, 2014, p. 16). While the recommendations are not legally binding, they offer a glimmer of hope with regard to the advancement of LGBTIQ+ rights. In the recommendations, transgender people are included as a distinct category, and efforts have been made to guarantee protection from discrimination on the basis of gender identity. It is of significant consequence that these advisory jurisdictions are of great importance, as the aforementioned legal regulations, including the expression of sexual orientation, do not extend to the expression of gender identity.

Upon examination of the national legislation, it is evident that Article 70 of the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey and Article 5 of the Turkish Labor Law No. 4857 prohibit discrimination in the workplace. While other minority groups are explicitly included in the national legislation, neither the expression of "sexual orientation" nor the expression of "gender identity" is explicitly included. This situation renders LGBTIQ+ individuals, who are compelled to remain invisible, the most discriminated against and vulnerable group. Furthermore, in addition to the dearth of adequate legal provisions to prevent discriminatory practices, certain existing regulations have been identified as perpetuating discriminatory attitudes and actions (Göçmen & Yılmaz, 2017; Özdemir, 2022, pp. 50-51). Discrimination against individuals who are marginalized by society is often justified by invoking expressions such as "immorality", "disgraceful behavior", and "indecent behavior" in legal regulations. LGBTIQ+ individuals may be dismissed from civil service on the grounds of "attitudes and behaviors that do not comply with the dignity of civil

servants” and “general morals and decency” as outlined in Article 125 of the Civil Servants Law No. 657. In addition to this legislation, numerous regulations, including the Law on Judges and Prosecutors, the Turkish Armed Forces Internal Service Law, and the Law on the Promotion of Primary and Secondary Education Teachers and Discrimination, contain provisions that perpetuate discriminatory practices in the workplace (Güner et al., 2011, p. 27).

Individual Coping Strategies of LGBT+ Individuals' for Dealing with Gender Discrimination at Work

LGBTIQ+ employees develop coping strategies in the face of discrimination in working life. The concept of coping is defined as all of the cognitive and behavioral efforts of the individuals to manage certain internal and external demands that exceed their resources (Folkman et al., 1986, p. 993).

The first encounter with discriminatory practices in working life usually starts at the stage of choosing a career. The model proposed by Chung (2001) for dealing with discrimination during career choice includes strategies that facilitate the entry of LGBTIQ+ individuals into business life in the face of potential discrimination. The first of these, the choice of *self-employment*, reduces the risk of discrimination and dismissal of LGBTIQ+ individuals and increases the individual's freedom. The second strategy for individuals who try to avoid from gender discrimination is *job tracking*, which means working in workplaces that are sensitive to LGBTIQ+ individuals and their rights and have LGBTIQ+ employees. Thus, the individuals can work in institutions where they will feel cordial and not be secretive (Levine & Leonard, 1984, p. 707). Many international companies are sensitive to LGBTIQ+ individuals and have company policies aimed at protecting LGBTIQ+ employees. For example, more than 400 Fortune 500 companies employ LGBTIQ+ employees and provide protection against discrimination (Gates & Mitchell, 2013, p. 168). In cases where the first two strategies are not possible, individuals apply for a job by *taking risks* as a third strategy.

After getting a job, keeping their identities and orientations secret is one of the coping strategies that LGBTIQ+ employees frequently use. Individuals are concerned about being exposed in the workplace and they make extra efforts to reveal to whom and when (Blandford, 2003, p. 624). Their preferences to keep their identities and orientations secret or disclosed are shaped by the workplace environment and their experiences (Taşkın et al., 2023). The gender, education level, culture level and approach of the employees in the workplace affect the decision process of the individuals (Demirdizen et al., 2012, p. 321). Employees who prefer to remain

hidden in the workplace can be perceived as asocial, introverted, and prone to individual work, even if they are not (Öner, 2015, p. 79).

In addition to maintaining a low profile, individuals can adopt a heterosexual lifestyle and espouse traditional family and social values by refraining from acting in accordance with their true selves at work. By exerting greater effort, they can attempt to construct a barrier against discrimination by cultivating a benevolent and positive image or by being prepared to respond and attempting to portray a harsh image in response to all forms of verbal abuse (Demirdizen et al., 2012, p. 327). As a result, LGBTIQ+ individuals become estranged from their lived experiences and their own selves, leading to the necessity of inhabiting an alternative life (Öner, 2015, p. 78). Individuals may take precautions such as not leaving their phones and computers unattended, using passwords, and deleting their internet history to prevent the loss of control at work due to fear of exposure (Demirdizen et al., 2012, pp. 327-328).

Chung (2001) proposed and identified four types of coping strategies used to combat discrimination encountered during the working process: *quitting*, *staying silent*, *seeking social support*, and *confrontation*. When discrimination becomes unbearable, the individual can find salvation in resignation. Since not every individual has the luxury of quitting their job, they prefer to endure and remain silent in order to survive. This is a kind of lack of response. Being introverted undermines the self-confidence of the individual and can negatively affect productivity towards work. The individual tries to overcome discrimination by getting social support or talking to selected people such as family, friends, and/or counselors. The last strategy is the struggle of the individual by confronting the perpetrators of discrimination and seeking rights. In addition to these, Woods (1993) put forward strategies such as closing the issue, changing the subject, staying silent and leaving the place to cope with discrimination (cited in Öner, 2015, p. 94).

Özeren et al. (2016, pp. 223-229) define the concealment of their orientation or identity by LGBT+ employees as silence, and the silence of LGBTIQ+ individuals is discussed under three themes. *Defensive silence* is when individuals feel compelled to remain silent in order not to be exposed to stigma and discriminatory practices in the workplace. Another is *submissive silence*, the state of being silent and introverted because they know that they cannot stay within the institution and break the norms. *Pro-social silence*, on the other hand, is to stay silent by avoiding many information and ideas in order to benefit the individual or the organization. LGBT+ employees often resort to defensive silence and submissive silence to cope with discrimination.

Although gay and bisexual workers frequently use coping strategies, they are not used much by transgender individuals (Özdemir, 2022, p. 48) as it is difficult for transgender people to hide

in terms of appearance compared to gay and bisexual individuals. All these strategies that LGBTIQ+ employees use to deal with discrimination do not completely prevent discrimination but may reduce it to a minimum.

Suggestions brought by LGBTIQ+ employees to deal with discrimination apart from individual struggles can be listed as correcting the lack of discrimination in the legal legislation, taking responsibility of the government, properly implementing the prohibition of discrimination in workplaces and providing trainings in this direction, organized struggle and solidarity networks (Köylü & Güzel, 2022, p. 50).

In addition to examining the strategies of individual entities, it is also crucial to analyze the approaches adopted by employer organizations with regard to discriminatory practices. In recent years, international companies have adopted diversity management strategies. Diversity management posits that employees possess a multitude of differences, including those pertaining to language, religion, age, race, culture, and ethnicity. When these differences are effectively managed, a more productive and effective working environment is created (Strachan et al., 2004, p. 199). The principal objective of the strategy is to circumvent discriminatory practices and optimize efficiency.

In order to gain insight into the strategies employed by LGBTIQ+ employees to navigate discrimination in the workplace, in-depth interviews have been conducted with 19 LGBTIQ+ individuals. This is carried out in light of the aforementioned framework and legal deficiencies. The objective of the interviews is to ascertain the current situation based on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ individuals and to contribute to future studies in this field. The study acknowledges the pervasiveness of discriminatory practices against LGBTIQ+ employees and aims to address the following research questions:

- What forms of discrimination are observed?
- Which coping strategies are selected to circumvent discriminatory practices?
- How does discriminatory behavior impact individual psychological well-being?

Method

Working life is an area where LGBTIQ+ individuals interact regularly and are exposed to discrimination. The discrimination applied negatively affects the life welfare, psychological well-being and satisfaction of the employees. The main purpose and research question of this study is to reveal which type of coping strategies LGBTIQ+ employees develop to deal with the discrimination at work they are exposed to.

The qualitative research method is employed to elucidate the discriminatory practices observed in the study in a realistic and holistic manner. Qualitative research refers to the process of gathering realistic and holistic data through techniques such as observation, interviewing, and document analysis, organizing, categorizing the data into themes, and interpreting it (Özdemir, 2010, p. 323; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008, p. 39). A semi-structured interview form and in-depth interview technique have been employed to ascertain the opinions and experiences of individuals. In-depth interviewing is a method of conducting purposeful interviews with individuals who are relevant to the research topic. The semi-structured interview form is a flexible instrument comprising half prepared questions following a set structure and half open-ended prompts allowing for exploration of emerging themes.

Phenomenology is an approach to understanding human experiences, focusing on phenomena that are known to the researcher but not fully understood. In this study, the phenomenological approach is used to gain insights into the experiences of LGBTIQ+ individuals.

Ethics statement

This study is derived from a master's thesis. In order to proceed to the empirical stage of the thesis, the approval of the university's ethics committee must be obtained. The requisite permission was obtained from Zonguldak Bülent Ecevit University Institute of Social Sciences prior to the commencement of the study, after which interviews were initiated with the participants. Prior to the interview, participants were required to sign a voluntary participation form indicating that the study had received ethical approval and that their personal information would be kept confidential. To ensure that the participants did not perceive themselves as part of an experiment, the interview proceeded in a manner that was consistent with their natural discourse and behaviors. The discourse and behaviors used in the interviews were carefully selected to avoid disturbing the individuals. The questions asked did not extend beyond the subject of the study, and the questions were determined in a neutral manner.

Participants, interviews, and limitations

Interviews were conducted with 19 LGBTIQ+ employees working in the private sector or having previous working experience in Türkiye. The sociodemographic characteristics of the participants are presented in the table below.

Table 1
Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

	Sexual Orientation/ Gender Identity	Age	Education Level	Occupation	City of Residence
Participant 1	Gay	55	Middle school	Psychic	Edirne
Participant 2	Transgender	28	Bachelor's degree	Driving instructor	Trabzon
Participant 3	Bisexual	30	License	Newspaper editor	İstanbul
Participant 4	Transgender	27	Associate degree	Call center operator	Antalya
Participant 5	Lesbian	23	Associate degree	Waiter	İstanbul
Participant 6	Bisexual	25	High school	Human resources secretary	Antalya
Participant 7	Pansexual	25	Master's degree	Psychologist	Ankara
Participant 8	Transgender	32	High school	Waiter	Trabzon
Participant 9	Pansexual	22	High school	Hairdresser	Aydın
Participant 10	Lesbian	23	Bachelor's degree	Accounting secretary	Ankara
Participant 11	Queer	31	Bachelor's degree	Receptionist	Ankara
Participant 12	Gay	28	High school	Accountant	İstanbul
Participant 13	Gay	37	Middle school	Cook	İstanbul
Participant 14	Lesbian	31	Associate degree	Anesthesia technician	İstanbul
Participant 15	Lesbian	19	High school	Musician	Trabzon
Participant 16	Transgender	26	Bachelor's degree	Sales consultant	İstanbul
Participant 17	Pansexual	29	Master's degree	Industrial engineer	Aydın
Participant 18	Transgender	30	Bachelor's degree	Courier	Ankara
Participant 19	Bisexual	32	Bachelor's degree	Human resources specialist	Ankara

Three of the participants defined themselves as gay, four as lesbian, three as bisexual, five as transgender, three as pansexual, and one as queer. In order to reach the participants, first, LGBTIQ+ Solidarity Associations were contacted. An informative text about the study was shared with the research groups led by the associations. More people were reached through the snowball sampling method by first contacting the people who agreed to participate voluntarily, and then the people they directed. The snowball sampling is the most commonly used method to find minority participants, such as LGBTIQ+ employees. Interviews with 19 LGBTIQ+ participants participating in the research were made via Zoom and Skype applications. The interviews were held between April 2021 and November 2021 and on the day and time period requested by the participants. The shortest interview lasted 20 minutes, while the longest interview lasted 65 minutes.

The interviews were recorded on a voice recorder with permission at the beginning of the interview. While 16 of the participants accepted this offer, the remaining 3 did not accept it and notes were taken during the interview. During the analysis process, the audio recordings and footnotes of the interviews with the LGBTIQ+ employee were transcribed and deciphered.

The desire of LGBTIQ+ individuals to keep themselves confidential in both business and social life due to discriminatory behaviors based on oppression and prejudices they face made it difficult for us to identify and reach them for interviews in our study. This is the most compelling

limitation encountered in the study. Another limitation is that the empirical study was conducted at a time when COVID-19 required medical precaution.

Data collection tools

The semi-structured form used in the study is divided into three parts. While the first part includes questions about the socio-demographic (age, education, occupation, sexual orientation/gender identity) characteristics of the participants, the second part focuses on the discrimination practices experienced by the participants. As elucidated in the course of the interview, the questions were designed to ascertain the identity of the individual or entity responsible for the implementation and the manner in which it was executed. The last part includes the psychological effects of discrimination and the suggestions of the participants to prevent discrimination. In order for the participants not to feel themselves as a subject, the interview proceeded in the flow they wanted. The discourse and behaviors used in the interviews were carefully chosen so as not to disturb the individuals. The questions asked were not out of the scope of the study, and the questions were determined to be neutral.

Results

In the course of the study's analysis, the audio recordings and footnotes from interviews with LGBTQI+ employees were transcribed and analyzed, and the data was organized into themes. In interpreting the findings based on the themes obtained, a descriptive analysis method was employed. The experiences and thoughts of the participants are of significant importance in this analysis method, which is primarily designed to convey the findings obtained through the organization and interpretation of the data to the reader. Accordingly, direct quotations were employed to convey the interviews with the participants to the reader in an original manner. The findings were organized under five themes: remaining hidden in the workplace, living a fake/double life, confronting discrimination, remaining silent in the face of discrimination and not seeking legal rights.

Concealing One's Identity in the Workplace

LGBTQI+ employees develop strategies to prevent discrimination as a result of their awareness of the existence of discriminatory practices based on sexual orientation and gender identity in the workplace, or as a consequence of having previously been subjected to such treatment. The most prevalent coping strategy employed by individuals is to maintain a state of secrecy. Individuals indicate that they are more susceptible to discriminatory practices when they disclose their sexual orientation and gender identity. Conversely, they perceive a greater sense of

security when they maintain their anonymity. As trust is established over time, individuals are more likely to divulge personal information to their colleagues. The participants who maintained their sexual orientation and identities as secret at the workplace employed the following statements:

“It is quite difficult to find a job in our country, but it is even more difficult for us... When we apply for a job, we make a special effort to find a non-homophobic/non-transphobic institution. When we find it, we prefer to be hidden.” (Participant 8, age 32, transgender)

“In our country, LGBTIQ+ individuals face discrimination in every aspect of society. After what happened around me, I always preferred to stay hidden at work. The fact that my workplace is a conservative place was also effective in my choice to remain anonymous.” (Participant 3, age 30, bisexual)

“I am hidden because I am afraid of being exposed to violence and being unemployed. I am aware that the people around me are heavily transphobic. I don't have much intimacy with my employer and co-workers.” (Participant 18, age 30, transgender)

“I have encountered hate speech against non-heterosexual individuals in the institution where I work. For this reason, I chose not to reveal my orientation.” (Participant 6, age 25, bisexual)

Although they have not experienced discrimination before, one of the reasons that pushes individuals to remain anonymous is the discriminatory practices they witness. The participants expressed the reasons for preferring to remain anonymous with the following words:

“The problems experienced by my friends who reveal their identity and the thoughts of my colleagues at work push me to keep it private.” (Participant 17, age 29, pansexual)

“My co-workers at my workplace make fun of a transgender client when they come. This causes me to stay away from them.” (Participant 5, age 23, lesbian)

“The problems experienced by my friends who reveal their identity and the thoughts of my colleagues at work push me to be discreet.” (Participant 3, age 30, bisexual)

Living a Fake/Double Life

Individuals may engage in a form of self-presentation that deviates from their authentic selves in an effort to circumvent discriminatory treatment. In order to safeguard themselves from discriminatory treatment, they endeavor to portray themselves in either a docile or harsh manner. The participants indicated that they maintain two distinct personas, one in their professional lives

and another in their personal lives. Those who have experienced this phenomenon report the following:

“When they realize that I’m different from everyone else, they don’t even look at my competencies, they don’t want to see us around. We are dragged into a fictional life.” (Participant 19, age 32, bisexual)

“Especially because of my naive behavior and tone of voice, I am not accepted to job postings that demand male employees. For this reason, I am trying to take on a more masculine, tougher image.” (Participant 7, age 25, pansexual)

“Although I’m not in that mood, I take a hard line when I hear unwarranted jokes from my co-workers and state that it’s nothing to make fun of.” (Participant 2, age 28, transgender)

Remaining Silent in the Face of Discrimination

While LGBTQI+ employees act against their own selves, they also suppress their thoughts and remain silent against the discriminatory treatment they witness around them. The underlying reasons for this are their reluctance to attract attention and raise suspicion.

“My colleagues at work made prejudiced attitudes about an employee they thought was a lesbian, and I couldn’t defend her enough. I tried to be supportive and defend her, but after a while I pulled myself back in case it would make them suspicious of me.” (Participant 6, age 25, bisexual)

“The attitudes, sarcastic gestures and rhetoric of my employer and co-workers towards someone they suspect may be an LGBTQI+ individual reveal themselves. I can’t trust these people.” (Participant 17, age 29, pansexual)

Confronting Discrimination

In contrast with the common assumption that LGBTQI+ individuals tend to conceal their identity, some individuals may choose to openly disclose their sexual orientation and gender identity at the outset of their professional relationship with their employer. This approach allows them to assess the employer’s attitude towards LGBTQI+ individuals and potentially influence the inclusive culture of the workplace. Concurrently, they may opt to pursue employment opportunities in workplaces that are sensitive to the needs of LGBTQI+ individuals. Employees using this strategy made the following statements:

“Because I was discriminated against and forced to resign before, I introduced myself and learned about their attitudes towards LGBTQI+ individuals before I got the job... Later, I started working.” (Participant 1, age 55, gay)

“Because I work for a relatively small business and I know my employer is not phobic, I didn’t feel the need to hide myself.” (Participant 9, age 22, pansexual)

Failure to Seek Legal Rights

The discourse analysis of the study participants revealed that individuals identifying as gay or bisexual frequently employ coping strategies. However, transgender people face relatively more discrimination, which makes it more challenging for them to cope with the discriminatory attitudes and behaviors they encounter. In such cases, transgender individuals may find it beneficial to reveal their external appearance and tone of voice.

Discrimination faced by LGBTIQ+ employees can have negative impact on their overall well-being, preventing them from seeking their legal rights. This is due to a lack of adequate legal remedies and confidence in the legal system. This situation is expressed in the following words:

“Homosexuality is not supposedly forbidden in Turkiye... There is no law that we can claim our rights against discrimination, in fact we are ignored. This state of being ignored also increases the discrimination against us and encourages the other side.” (Participant 11, age 31, queer)

“People’s perspectives on these issues are very different, I never thought to seek my rights. I feel like if I wanted my rights, more people would intervene and I would be more uncomfortable with this situation.” (Participant 8, age 32, transgender)

“It is very tiring to be in a struggle all the time. We are shaken by the slightest rhetoric and behavior and we will continue to be shaken.” (Participant 7, age 25, pansexual)

Discussion

The objective of this study is to elucidate the strategies employed by LGBTIQ+ employees in response to discriminatory experiences in the workplace. The majority of participants indicate that they choose to conceal their identity in order to cope with discriminatory practices, which are found to have a detrimental impact on their psychological well-being.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and questioning (LGBTIQ+) individuals are subjected to discriminatory practices in numerous domains of society, particularly in the context of employment. The workplace is an area where individuals are inherently required to interact, and it is challenging to circumvent discriminatory practices. The violation of ethical and egalitarian standards in the workplace, manifested in the differential treatment of individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity, irrespective of the qualifications demanded by the position, constitutes a form of discrimination in the professional sphere. LGBTIQ+

employees are subjected to discriminatory practices when they either directly or indirectly reveal their sexual orientation or gender identity in the workplace. Discrimination manifests in various forms, including non-employment, dismissal, verbal and physical harassment, mobbing, and hateful behaviors. Individuals who conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity are susceptible to the anticipated forms of discrimination. The foundation of anticipated discrimination is the concern that the discriminatory treatment experienced by others will eventually be directed towards oneself. The term “actual discrimination” is used to describe instances of physical discrimination, whereas “anticipated discrimination” encompasses psychological discrimination.

In accordance with the findings of other studies, the experiences of the participants in this study led to the conclusion that there is a significant prevalence of discriminatory practices against LGBTQI+ employees in the workplace. The strategy that participants frequently employ to cope with discriminatory practices is to conceal their identity or sexual orientation (Gelgeç Bakacak & Öktem, 2014). In addition to concealing their identity, individuals may also opt to work in institutions that have implemented policies to prevent discrimination against LGBTQI+ individuals or in institutions with which they are familiar and in which they feel comfortable expressing themselves. Another strategy employed is to emulate a heterosexual lifestyle and to remain silent in the face of discriminatory practices.

LGBTQI+ employees develop coping strategies to prevent both actual and anticipated discrimination. In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with 19 LGBTQI+ employees currently employed in the private sector or with previous experience of working in Türkiye. The primary objective of the interviews is to ascertain the coping strategies employed by LGBTQI+ employees in response to discriminatory experiences and to evaluate the efficacy of these strategies.

It is notable that the strategies employed by lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals are not frequently utilized by transgender individuals. This situation results in transgender individuals experiencing greater discrimination than gay and bisexual individuals. The participants expressed discontent with the legal recourse available to them following an incident of discrimination, citing a lack of sufficient and confidence-inspiring legislation.

Conclusion

The structure of Turkish society is predicated on a binary gender system that espouses and upholds heteronormative sexual orientation. The authoritarian management approach and the conservative attitude of society result in the marginalization of LGBTQI+ individuals from mainstream society. Historically, individuals have been subjected to prejudice on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity. The most significant obstacle encountered in expanding the

number of interviewees in the study was the reluctance of individuals to reveal their sexual orientation, which was observed not only in professional settings but also in other aspects of their lives.

The primary factors contributing to the persistence of homophobic attitudes and behaviors in Turkish society can be attributed to three key domains: ignorance, social structure, and religious beliefs. The majority of individuals who espouse homophobic attitudes are those who lack familiarity with LGBTIQ+ individuals and possess limited knowledge about this issue. Individuals act with prejudice against LGBTIQ+ individuals because they adhere to the belief that these individuals are contrary to the heteronormative social and religious structure in which they were born and raised. Consequently, the majority of individuals who self-identify as conservative are discontented with the presence of LGBTIQ+ individuals in their vicinity, and discriminatory practices are employed with the intention of eradicating LGBTIQ+ individuals. Discriminatory attitudes towards the LGBTIQ+ community are met with social sanctions.

In addition to pervasive social and religious norms, legal shortcomings in Türkiye prompt LGBTIQ+ individuals to prioritize individual strategies to combat discrimination. Discrimination in the workplace can impede LGBTIQ+ individuals' ability to enter business life. This creates obstacles to accessing certain rights that directly and profoundly affect human life, such as the ability to exist as oneself, to sustain one's life in a humane manner, and to benefit from health and retirement services. In order to overcome these obstacles and to be able to exist relatively easily in business life, LGBTIQ+ individuals are compelled to benefit from individual coping strategies that are designed to combat discrimination in business life.

It is evident that individual strategies are inadequate for the prevention of discrimination. Furthermore, they can only delay the occurrence of discrimination for a limited period of time. It is therefore recommended that strategies cease to be individual and that more comprehensive legal and social policies be established. The shortcomings of the legal framework serve as a clear indication of the marginalization of LGBTIQ+ individuals. It is incumbent upon individuals to develop strategies for combating discrimination.

This study accepts the existence of sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination that LGBTIQ+ employees are exposed to in the workplace and aims to identify the coping methods they employ to combat such discrimination. Nevertheless, this study, along with numerous others, has demonstrated that individual coping strategies are inadequate for the complete elimination of discrimination. These strategies have been demonstrated to have a partial preventive or delaying effect on discriminatory practices. It is imperative that LGBTIQ+ employees be afforded the same

rights as their heterosexual counterparts in the legal field. The initial step is to address the existing legal gap. It would be beneficial for the legislative body to enact a law that includes deterrent penalties for those who engage in discriminatory practices. Alternatively, a law could be established that would allow individuals to claim their rights in the face of discrimination. The enactment of this legislation would provide LGBTQI+ individuals with a sense of security and protection in all aspects of society, including the workplace.

Author's Notes

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