

Opportunities and challenges facing LGBTQ+ people in employment in rural England post-pandemic: a thematic analysis

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Abstract

Purpose – The following study aimed to better understand rural dwelling LGBTQ+ adults' experiences of the challenges and opportunities facing their working lives in England.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative, focus group design was utilized, using online recruitment and an online, one-off focus group. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Findings – Three themes were identified: stressors facing LGBTQ+ people in the workplace; opportunities in employment; and ideas to improve the workplace for LGBTQ+ people. Participants spoke to the ways in which both rural living and the pandemic had impacted their working lives, including elevated fears of being discriminated against; experiencing microaggressions in the workplace which they felt were partly elevated by a lack of visibility and affirmative policies; and a sense that specific workplaces inhabited by LGBTQ+ people had been decimated by the pandemic. Conversely, participants spoke of opportunities for affirmation of their gender and/or sexual orientation identities, feeling a sense of pride and connection with their communities through work.

Originality/value – This is the first study to the authors' knowledge that specifically explores rural dwelling LGBTQ+ adults' experiences of the workplace post-pandemic. It builds on previous empirical research by highlighting qualitative experiences of challenges and opportunity, which can inform organizations and policymakers' efforts to promote inclusivity.

Keywords Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Rural area, Workplace, Job satisfaction, Discrimination, Resilience

Paper type Research paper

The Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdown restrictions had wide-ranging impacts on the workplace, including disruptions to usual ways of working, office space, boundaries around work and loss of work (Sigahi *et al.*, 2021). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people (LGBTQ+) have been shown to have unique facilitators and barriers of job satisfaction, including the presence of affirmative policies and the extent to which they actively conceal their identities (Webster *et al.*, 2018). Further, workers within rural areas may face unique facilitators and barriers to job satisfaction, such as reduced access to opportunities, isolation, trends of higher wages and an increased sense of belonging (e.g. McElroy *et al.*, 2022). However, the intersection being between LGBTQ+ and rural dwelling has not been explored in light of Covid-19 lockdown restrictions, leaving gaps in knowledge for how these individuals experience work and what might help. Better understanding the ways in which these changes have impacted minoritized groups is important to enable organizations, policymakers and managers to provide adequate support and promote job satisfaction. The present study explores the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people (LGBTQ+) living in a rural county in England regarding the impact of lockdown restrictions on their working lives and employment.



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Rural living and the workplace

The definition of a rural area varies by country, though for the present study, the United Kingdom Government's definition of a rural area was used, encompassing any area outside of a settlement with less than 10,000 population (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2021). A county is categorized as rural if more than 80% of its population live in such areas. Rural areas internationally are known to face a range of unique challenges, such as reduced access to local health facilities such as hospitals (Franco *et al.*, 2021), less diverse populations, less access to wider community supports and lack of access to transport (Action with Communities in Rural England, 2023). For the workplace, systematic reviews highlight challenges around reduced opportunities, less diverse workforces, feelings of isolation and issues with workforce recruitment and retention (Russell *et al.*, 2021; Williams, 2012). Rural living may therefore pose unique challenges to working life, though limited research to date has explored how this intersects with the challenges and opportunities facing LGBTQ+ people, for whom additional unique stressors in the workplace have been identified.

Challenges facing LGBTQ+ people in the workplace

Minority stress theory proposes that LGBTQ+ people may internalize negative public attitudes towards their identities and face increased rates of discrimination, resulting in unique psychological stressors (Meyer, 2003). The theory suggests that proximal (i.e. internalized) and distal (i.e. external events) stressors occur as a result of societal stigma and discrimination towards minoritized identities. Predominant distal stressors are direct and indirect experiences of discrimination and prejudice. Key proximal stressors according to the theory are concealing one's LGBTQ+ identity, expecting rejection from others and internalizing negative ideas about one's identity (i.e. internalized homophobia or transphobia). These stressors are purported to contribute to negative health outcomes. The theory further suggests that the extent to which one holds their minoritized identity as important, integrated into their identity, and is able to access both individual- and community-level support can buffer the impact of such stressors and constitute positive health outcomes.

Research testing minority stress theory have repeatedly found that attempts to conceal one's LGBTQ+ status, anticipating rejection and/or discrimination for being LGBTQ+, and social isolation are all mechanisms contributing to worse mental health, including depression, anxiety and suicidality (Mongelli *et al.*, 2019). A meta-analysis has supported these hypotheses in the workplace, finding that supportive colleagues, LGBTQ+ -supportive policies and lower rates of workplace discrimination are associated with LGBTQ+ disclosing their identity more and ultimately reporting better wellbeing and lower psychological strain related to work (Webster *et al.*, 2018). Subsequent studies have demonstrated that the ability to be authentic in the workplace is particularly important for improving life satisfaction where the individual holds their LGBTQ+ identity as central to their self-concept (Fletcher and Everly, 2021). Taken together, prior research examining the satisfaction and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ individuals highlights the importance of supportive, non-discriminatory workplace culture, and the ability to be out and authentic to oneself as important facilitating factors for job satisfaction.

Qualitative studies have explored the lived experience of being LGBTQ+ in the workplace to better understand the facilitators and barriers to wellbeing and job satisfaction. A recent study into lesbian, gay and bisexual people highlighted that the experience of exclusion in the workplace for LGBTQ+ people may be subtle and deemed less outwardly exclusionary or severe than that of other minority groups, perhaps minimizing its severity (Williams *et al.*, 2022). Other recent qualitative studies have explored these issues in transgender populations, finding similar themes of how harmful workplace discrimination based on gender identity can be for individuals, further compounding feelings of rejection and abandonment from wider society (Varshney, 2022). Additional research highlights the importance of intersectional issues, such as

LGBTQ+ people living in rural areas reporting less LGBTQ+ -supportive policies in the workplace, less visibility of other LGBTQ+ colleagues, and increased rates of discrimination (Movement Advancement Project, 2019; Stonewall, 2018). Of note, Stonewall (2018) conducted a survey of over 5000 LGBTQ+ people in the United Kingdom, of whom over 3000 were in employment. The study found that reported rates of discrimination in the workplace were higher for those living in small-medium towns and cities compared to larger towns and cities. Respondents living in rural areas also reported less LGBTQ+-affirmative policies in their workplace compared to those working in urban areas. This may be particularly important given the overlap of the importance of diversity in the workplace and wider community as facilitators of LGBTQ+ job satisfaction and wellbeing (Webster *et al.*, 2018). This suggests that there may be inequities in rural compared to urban living that may uniquely impact LGBTQ+ in the workplace, which warrants further investigation to address the impact on mental health and wellbeing.

Only one previous study to the authors' knowledge has examined LGBTQ+ people's experiences of working in rural areas, focusing specifically on teachers. The study found worse rates of depression, anxiety and self-worth compared to those working in urban areas, and reduced opportunities for outness at work as a result of limited visibility of LGBTQ+ people in the local area (Lee, 2019). Other specific challenges facing LGBTQ+ adults in rural areas have yet to be explored, so how this translate outside of the teaching profession is not known.

Identifying and addressing how discrimination and inequalities manifest is particularly important in the UK context, where the Equality Act (2010) provides a legal framework to protect people from discrimination in society and their workplace. The aim of the Equality Act is to clarify unlawful treatment and strengthen the protection for people who may be discriminated against due to their protected characteristics (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, sex, sexual orientation, race, and religion). The act considers discrimination as treating a person unfairly or less favorably than others, this discrimination can be: 1) Direct: based on their protected characteristics, 2) Indirect: when the person is treated the same as others without considering reasonable adjustments, leading to disadvantage, 3) Harassment: when the person is subjected to offensive and unwanted behavior, and 4) Victimization: when a person receives negative treatment after raising a discrimination complaint (Acas, 2023).

Regarding the work environment specifically, the act emphasizes that access to and conditions of employment cannot be negatively impacted due to a person's protected characteristics and specifies that reasonable adjustments and policies need to be in place to prevent discrimination (Equality Act, 2010). Better understanding if and how discrimination in the workplace impacts LGBTQ+ people living in rural areas will better inform ways to support this population to thrive in the workplace free from all forms of discrimination.

Covid-19 pandemic and the workplace

The Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdown restrictions have had demonstrable effects on the workplace, including job losses, drastic changes to working practices (e.g. remote working, closure of office spaces), financial implications for companies, and some negative effects on emotional wellbeing (Kaushik and Guleria, 2020; Sigahi *et al.*, 2021). Different sectors have been impacted differently, both financially and in the extent to which remote working during lockdown and beyond has been possible, and as have individuals dependent on their individual characteristics (Kniffin *et al.*, 2021). Research has explored the experiences of employees in specific settings concerning the impact of the pandemic on working life (e.g. mothers working in India, Kataria and Pandley, 2023), although no studies to the authors' knowledge to date have explored LGBTQ+ people's experiences. Further, none have

examined how this intersects with living in a rural area, which prior research highlights may be a unique intersectional challenge for LGBTQ+ people. This leaves gaps in knowledge for how to support job satisfaction for this population in light of any unique disruptions or challenges faced.

Having an updated understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing LGBTQ+ in the workplace post-pandemic would inform managers, policymakers and further research to better understand how to promote wellbeing in LGBTQ+ people, in light of existing barriers to this. The following study therefore aimed to answer the following research questions: what do LGBTQ+ adults in a rural county in England perceive to be the challenges, barriers and opportunities to wellbeing in the workplace, and what ideas do they have for improvements?

Methods

Design

The study used a qualitative focus group design with a semi-structured topic guide. A critical realist epistemological stance was taken, whereby the authors acknowledge that a reality exists “out there” that can be accessed through inquiring about experiences, though accept that the researchers’ own positionality, assumptions and experience can influence that process (Willig, 2016).

Participants

Participants were adults over the age of 18 who self-identify as LGBTQ+ who were living in a specific rural county in England. A rural area followed the United Kingdom government definition of being “outside of an area with more than 10,000 resident population” (Department for Environment, Food and Affairs, 2021). The county in which participants were living is classed as a rural county, with 85% of its population residing in rural areas specifically. Exclusion criteria included those under the age of 18, people only working and not living within the targeted county and those unable to provide informed consent to take part in the study. Eleven participants attended the focus group, though only nine provided demographic information. See Table 1 for a summary of the participants’ demographics.

Measures

A semi-structured topic guide was provided by the study’s funder; this study focuses specifically on the section exploring jobs and opportunities, with the remaining themes being published elsewhere. The topic guides included: impact of the pandemic on jobs and opportunities; benefits and challenges of employment for LGBTQ+ people; impact of employment on wellbeing; and ways to improve employment for the community.

Procedure

Following ethical approval being granted by a University Research Ethics Committee, the study was advertised on various social media platforms, and interested participants responded via email. Once enough participants had provided informed consent, the focus group was arranged at a suitable time over Microsoft Teams. The focus group lasted for 2 h and was facilitated by the first author. The recording was then transcribed verbatim and anonymized. Participants were reimbursed for their time.

Ethical considerations

All involvement in the study was strictly confidential and extra efforts have been made to protect anonymity in the write-up of the results. Prior to taking part in the study, all

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
Gender	Female	Transgender female	Male	Male	Transgender male	Male	Female	Male	Male
Age	Not provided	25-34	45-54	18-24	25-34	25-34	45-54	18-24	18-24
Ethnicity	White British	White British	White British	Asian British/ Indian British	Black British	Black American	White British	British Indian	British Indian
Sexual orientation	Pansexual, Demisexual	Pansexual, Demisexual, Homoromantic	Gay	Gay	Gay	Gay	Lesbian	Gay	Bisexual
Source(s):	Authors' work								

Table 1.
A table summarizing the participant demographic information

participants were made aware of the topics that would be discussed to enable full informed consent given the sensitivity of the topics explored. Time was taken at the beginning of the focus group to highlight a distress protocol around taking breaks as needed; only sharing what feels comfortable; and being aware of other participants through sensitive language use and choosing what to disclose. Participants were introduced to ground rules at the start of the focus group including confidentiality, turn taking, use of the online platform and managing distress and disclosures. Throughout the group, active listening and open-ended prompts were used to facilitate group discussion. The facilitator drew on clinical training to be aware of signs of distress throughout the group; none were noted and no adverse events were reported. All participants were offered a full debrief, and all were signposted to relevant local and national LGBTQ+ support agencies.

Analysis

The analysis followed [Braun and Clarke's \(2022\)](#) thematic analysis, taking an inductive approach. The transcript was transcribed verbatim and anonymized, then read in full twice by the first author. Initial line-by-line coding then involved ascribing words or phrases to capture the meaning expressed. Codes were then grouped based on shared meaning, which was reiteratively developed until themes were identified. This was collaboratively discussed and agreed by both authors until agreement was reached. To identify and manage researcher bias, prior to the conduct of the focus group, the first author undertook a bracketing exercise to identify expectations, interests and viewpoints going in. This was repeated prior to the analysis. The first author acknowledges clinical and research interests in the impact of stigma on mental health.

Results

Three themes were identified from the data which are presented in turn. Quotes are presented verbatim, except where . . . has been used to shorten a quote and [] adds context for clarity.

Theme 1: stressors facing LGBTQ+ people in the workplace

Participants spoke to a range of ways in which lockdown restrictions had negatively impacted their employment, from reduced access to employment following sector closures and job losses; increased fears of discrimination; and reduced visibility.

Sub-theme 1: stressors around sector closures and job losses. Participants spoke about how the sectors LGBTQ+ people tend to work within had been particularly impacted by the pandemic:

So you know, hospitality, the arts, you know, shut down for ages and ages and people furloughed and so on, um and then also think about social care. You know, a lot of LGBT people work in social care and were working flat out, you know. . . . There's been quite a lot of impact for LGBT people, I think because of the sectors that we tend to work in.

Some of my peers are sex workers. Um and that industry has been completely crashed.

This raised additional fears of loss of income, difficulties finding new jobs and increased stress. Participants' experiences suggested a disruption to a sense of belonging to the general workplaces they view LGBTQ+ people to inhabit being particularly impacted. It also suggests an increased sense of identity-related threat as a result.

Sub-theme 2: additional fears of discrimination. Three participants talked about additional worries about being discriminated against due to being LGBTQ+ when it comes to seeking new jobs or facing redundancies in a company:

Is it more beneficial for me to be an LGBT person in the industry now or not? I mean like 'cause, you know, if I'm LGBT plus, is that gonna be like ticking a box? And so therefore they're less likely to pick me. And if I do, you get made redundant then. If people realize I'm trans on an application, is that going to then influence them because they could quite easily go and display their biases and make up a reason why they didn't want interview me or accept me for a job. And it's kind of one of those things that. I mean, I can, you know, I can put whatever on the form. I mean, they really don't know your name and everything. But when I physically turn up for the interview, I can't really hide the fact that you know . . . I've kind of been trying to get my head round whether it's a positive thing or a negative thing at the moment.

Their comments reflected active concerns about whether their workplace would value them more or less due to being part of the LGBTQ+ community, and further whether being transgender would result in direct discrimination when it comes to seeking further employment. Their narratives spoke to questioning whether seeking new employment would simply be a "tick box" rather than authentic desire to employ them, and suggested a lack of safety that they would be genuinely wanted and protected in the workplace. This suggests elevated proximal stressors through fearing rejection based on LGBTQ+ identity when needing to apply for a new job, and an elevated risk of distal stressors through concerns around direct and indirect discrimination throughout the application process.

Sub-theme 3: the pressures of being visible and educating others. Some of the challenges in employment came from participants' experiences of being asked questions as an LGBTQ+ person, which comes with an additional pressure to "educate" others, and at times involves being asked inappropriate, offensive or "outrageous" questions:

Though as great as that is, and like I thrive on people coming and asking, like people asking questions is great. God dam um. Since when is educating the entire world or rest of the world our job? . . . Where I spent more time answering and I'm gonna say inane questions. Because these are things that could be looked up trivially and expressed in a far more comprehensive way than I could ever try. Um, because I can only ever talk for one person.

Or being the trusted trans, which is a thing that I'm getting fed up of, actually, which is we trust you not to overreact to this like obviously outrageous question, but we're like, 'we have to make sure it comes to you'. There's been due diligence or whatever.

Suddenly you're a role model or you're the resident expert and, actually, companies or employers need to realize that that's actually quite lazy. I mean, it's fine on a, you know, and if you're in a small team and somebody come to you because they know you and stuff and, yeah, of course we will, we will work to help. But. Um, actually it's it's quite a lazy sort of thing.

Their experiences highlighted additional, subtle pressures they faced as LGBTQ+ people, and the deleterious impact of subtle prejudicial questions on well-being. Rural living was noted to negatively impact visibility in the workplace, where participants reported being known to be the only LGBTQ+ or one of a very few, which increased this pressure to educate. Such experiences may reflect distal stressors as direct and indirect forms of discrimination, and may increase the risk of proximal stressors through elevated stress at the enactment of normative ideas.

One participant also shared having been asked inappropriate, direct questions about their transition:

You know, when I started transitioning, HR wrote to me, and they had this list of things that HR put together and they wanted to know very specific, very personal details about like, you know 'what surgery are you having; when are you having these surgeries' and, you know, like, 'are you gonna change how you dress?' And I was like, wow, this is not OK. I um and then like I was saying like this is totally not OK . . . then they were saying, 'well, if you've got something that's better, then we'll consider incorporating it'. So it's kind of like put me on this on me to find how they should be working

and what they should be doing. And I kind of felt like . . . It didn't feel like they were taking it that seriously. So it's a bit disappointing.

These may represent unique minority stressors in the workplace for trans individuals, whereby questions asked – be it to help through making adjustments or to educate oneself – might constitute stress for the individual. For some, this may increase proximal stressors, such as the expectation that others are not taking it “seriously”, may reject them, and increase a propensity to conceal one's identity.

While participants broadly appreciated colleagues inquiring about LGBTQ+ issues, this also seemed to come with a sense of pressure, responsibility and an additional role of being a “role model” or “educator”, which may not always be chosen by the individual themselves. This may speak to the subtle ways in which prejudice shows itself, as a lack of respect for boundaries towards LGBTQ+ people in the workplace. Trans individuals may be particularly impacted by harmful, inappropriate questioning.

Theme 2: opportunities in employment

Regarding opportunities for LGBTQ+ people in employment, four participants discussed how being visible as an LGBTQ+ person comes with both costs and benefits. Participants talked about a range of opportunities to experience pride, connectedness or to offer support for LGBTQ+ people in the workplace:

I do bartending, and I've noticed that, especially since like being in bars, it is quite a vulnerable setting for queer people and I often find that people who are queer if there is an issue, come to me as the only openly queer person in that workplace. And I think that's a very like important thing is to have, is that actually people are more likely to want to speak to someone they can relate to and know what they're going through. And I find that a lot of work being very openly queer person there.

Last year I was actually given the opportunity to teach a lesson on LGBT plus. Um. And it was just the best thing I've ever done. And these kids were so, um, respectful and asked questions, but asks questions like, oh, 'I saw asexual the other day, what does asexual mean?' And I was so. Um. Proud to be able to be that person there for them.

Participants' experiences highlighted affirmative themes for their LGBTQ+ identities through connecting with and/or supporting others from the community through their work. This afforded some satisfaction, pride and connection with their community, which are known to be important buffers against minority stress for LGBTQ+ people.

For participants from the transgender community, there were further positive experiences of local workplaces making swift changes to using correct pronouns, and updating computer systems with their correct name. This may reflect organizational-level support as another facilitative factor of being well in the workplace. While being LGBTQ+ came with the challenges of vulnerability in places like bars, a fear of being discriminated against and a felt pressure to educate, there were opportunities for visibility, pride, connection and imparting knowledge or support onto others. Participants seemed to value such opportunities when they were out in the workplace. The workplace also provided opportunities for gender affirmation for trans people.

Theme 3: ideas to improve the workplace for LGBTQ+ people

To improve employment and opportunities, participants spoke about the importance of visible LGBTQ+ inclusion in job adverts, which had been a positive sign for one participant whilst changing jobs during the pandemic. One participant recommended having clear, transparent, team-based approaches to recruitment procedures to reduce the risk of conscious or unconscious discrimination. For example, participants noted that for

transgender people, their qualifications and certificates or identification documents may not be using their correct name, which they noted can pose a risk to discrimination and raises concerns. One participant suggested that involving the community in self-auditing processes might help to make recruitment procedures more inclusive:

[Employers] put on an identity hat and walk through the job recruitment process and go, 'OK, here, we now have a specific hypothetical scenario', you can reach out to the community, 'How would you feel if this was the question of list?' Like that type of self auditing.

Further suggestions were to make the entire process more inclusive, such as having "frequently asked questions" about the interview process covering issues like dress code. This may be particularly important for people who are or who have undergone a gender transition and may feel unsure about this and feel uncomfortable asking:

Don't discriminate. Right, like at its purest level, it's just make a better system that is inclusive for everybody. Um, piece things that people get access, um, preempt the fact what people might ask about the interview, like where it was actually my first job interview since transitioning. What the hell do I wear? Right, uh, pre-transition was like, well, interview, so suit. Done. Um. And I felt awkward asking the question. If you have a repository for applicants that includes some of the common questions in advance because you have thought about it, you have demonstrated a level of competency.

Participants' suggestions point to broader inclusion practices throughout recruitment procedures to cater to the needs and experiences of LGBTQ+ people, from visibly stating inclusivity of LGBTQ+ people in job adverts, to self-auditing the process from the perspective of LGBTQ+ people, to actively addressing micro-aggressions in the workplace through awareness training and limiting the reliance on one or two employees to educate others. They spoke of the importance of visible signs of LGBTQ+ affirmation, such as flags being displayed in windows or on websites, which was particularly helpful in smaller, rural towns, where such displays were limited. Such suggestions speak to some of the ways in which workplaces can increase access to both individual- and organizational-level support to reduce LGBTQ+ people's fear of direct and indirect discrimination through visibility, supportive policies and procedures, and transparency in processes.

Discussion

Eleven LGBTQ+ adults attended the focus group and three themes were identified in the data. The findings suggested that being LGBTQ+ in the workplace post-pandemic held both benefits and costs, ranging from a felt pressure to be visible, educate or support others, but also a range of opportunities for pride, connection and gratification. The participants felt that increased visibility in the workplace from recruitment onwards, such as "frequently asked questions" and guidance, and self-auditing and involvement procedures would all help to improve workplaces for LGBTQ+ people.

Stressors facing LGBTQ+ people in rural workplaces

The themes raised by participants reflect the previous survey study by Stonewall (2018), which highlighted elevated rates of discrimination and less affirmative LGBTQ+ policies for people living in rural areas. The present findings add nuance to those experiences, whereby reduced visibility of LGBTQ+ people in both wider communities and the workplace may impact people's experiences of work. This may also raise additional fears of discrimination in seeking and retaining work, reflecting prior findings on the additional stressors LGBTQ+ people may face in work (Stonewall, 2018; Webster *et al.*, 2018). In line with

Meyer's (2003) minority stress theory, participants' narratives spoke to proximal stressors in the workplace, pertaining to fearing discrimination and rejection due to a lack of visibility, prejudicial attitudes and behaviors, and in seeking work as a result of job losses. They also spoke to distal stressors, such as being asked inappropriate questions and being put in a position of educating others. These may be unique minority stressors facing LGBTQ+ adults in the workplace, which are known to negatively impact job satisfaction and wellbeing (Mongelli *et al.*, 2019). Conversely, participants spoke to opportunities for individual-, community- and organizational-level support in work which may buffer minority stress, such as opportunities for LGBTQ+ -specific activities, connecting with other LGBTQ+ people through work, and affirmative policies and procedures including swift name changes and pronoun use following a gender transition. These may all be important processes for organizations and policymakers to attend to in promoting job satisfaction and wellbeing for LGBTQ+ people in the workplace.

The present findings build on theoretical and research findings highlighting the deleterious impact of microaggressions in the workplace – acts of de-valuing or excluding another based on identity, conscious/explicit or otherwise – on mental health and job satisfaction (Galupo and Reisnick, 2016). Participants spoke to the challenges of being visible as an LGBTQ+ person in the workplace, whereby being asked questions with varying degrees of appropriateness seemed to cause stress and a sense of responsibility to educate others correctly. Some examples of inappropriate and offensive questions being asked at different levels, from colleagues to HR, may also represent microaggressions. This speaks to the on-going impact of cis-heteronormative ideas in the workplace, which have been shown to mediate the relationship between workplace outness and job satisfaction (Prati and Piertrantoni, 2014). The findings suggest that this may be further elevated in rural areas, which echoes previous studies (Lee, 2019; Stonewall, 2018). Such norms warrant further action to address, with some previous research finding that presence of LGBTQ+ -supportive policies and awareness training may help to improve workplace cultures for these populations (Webster *et al.*, 2018).

Participants discussed some ways in which being rural dwelling was constraining, such as less overall visibility of other LGBTQ+ people which compounded a sense of pressure to educate; less visibility within workplaces such as less displays of flags or outwards signs of affirmation; and a sense of less knowledge of LGBTQ+ issues overall. This echoes previous research specifically exploring rural dwelling LGBTQ+ teachers, whereby conservative norms, less opportunities for being out at work, and less visibility overall contributed to worse mental health (Lee, 2019). Considering unique experiences at the intersection of LGBTQ+ identity and living in a rural area may help guide policymakers with targeted efforts to improve wellbeing and satisfaction.

Equally, participants highlighted opportunities in the workplace for experiences of affirmation of gender and sexuality, for connection with their communities through their work, and for the benefits of authenticity. A prior mixed methods study found that some LGBTQ+ individuals felt that they offered unique insights into the workplace, though this was associated with higher levels of perceived discrimination unless the employer agreed (Gacilo *et al.*, 2018). The present findings build on this complex “double-edged sword”, as participants suggested that the disruptions to the workplace had raised fears around discrimination, but not removed opportunities for positive connection, authenticity and job satisfaction. This contributes to calls for how organizations can facilitate through increasing visibility and inclusive practices at all levels, and working to include LGBTQ+ people in these practices where possible. This may be a delicate balance for employers and local agencies to be aware of in ensuring inclusive and affirmative workplaces without relying on the good will of LGBTQ+ employees themselves.

Impact of lockdown restrictions on LGBTQ+ people in work

Participants felt that the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown restrictions had specifically “decimated” some workplaces which LGBTQ+ typically work in, such as the caring professions, the arts and sex work. It had also raised additional threats and anxieties where participants were job-seeking, including fearing and anticipating discrimination during the application process, and questioning whether employers would value or devalue them based on their LGBTQ+ status (for example, in hiring and redundancy decision-making). This echoes the uncertainties and challenges raised by the pandemic on workplaces (Sigahi *et al.*, 2021), and adds unique stressors and anxieties that LGBTQ+ people may face. Anticipating discrimination and indeed the potential to experience discrimination from needing to apply for a new job or where job losses occur are both known to negatively impact the mental health of LGBTQ+ individuals (Webster *et al.*, 2018). The longer-term impact of the pandemic and lockdown restrictions may still be contributing to raised anxieties, prejudice and a sense of unsafety in the workplace for LGBTQ+ people, which warrants further attention regarding both impact and support efforts.

Discrimination facing LGBTQ+ people in the workplace

The findings speak to a range of ways in which LGBTQ+ people may fear, anticipate or experience discrimination in the workplace at multiple levels. Participants gave examples of colleagues, HR, employing managers and organizational policies and procedures in their brushes with actual or anticipated discrimination. This reflects previous findings in this field, whereby discrimination in the workplace can take many forms (Galupo and Reisnack, 2016), may be less overt and noticeable to others (Williams *et al.*, 2022), and may compound the impact of societal stigma (Varshney, 2022). The present findings add that transgender and gender non-conforming individuals report additional fears and experiencing limited structural support, from worries related to not having adequate information or guidance on dress codes for interviews, to fearing being actively discriminated against during recruitment should they be identified as being transgender. Further research and interventions targeting transgender and gender non-conforming people specifically are warranted to ensure any additional, unique stressors are alleviated. Intersections with rural dwelling may require additional, targeted efforts to improve workplace culture for LGBTQ+ people (Lee, 2019).

Limitations and recommendations

The present study is limited by its use of a semi-structured topic guide and focus group format; individual interviews may have enabled participants to speak more freely about a range of topics, rather than being unduly influenced by group dynamics. Additionally, while steps were taken to identify and limit the influence of subjectivity and bias, it is acknowledged that the presented findings reflect only one way of making sense of the data. Being qualitative in nature and a small sample size, the findings only reflect the experiences of those sampled and are not generalizable; further research is needed with larger samples across different settings, including specific sectors.

Future studies could further explore the opportunities and challenges facing transgender and gender non-conforming adults in the workplace, from any unique forms of discrimination they anticipate or experience, and resilience and coping at both individual and organizational levels. Workplace-based interventions to facilitate positive, affirmative cultures, policies and practices warrant further development and evaluation.

Conclusion

In summary, the present focus group study reported the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in the workplace in a rural county post-pandemic. Findings suggest that significant challenges

and opportunities remain, reflecting two sides of the same coin. Participants experienced fears of discrimination, actual discrimination and additional pressures such as being positioned as educators or asked inappropriate questions. Conversely, they experienced a range of opportunities for pride, connection and gratification. Rural dwelling seemed to constrain visibility and outness, but also left room for experiences of affirmation and connection. Further research and practice can build on their suggestions and replicate community-based designs to hear from lived experiences, with the aim of continuing to improve the state of play for LGBTQ+ adults in the workplace.

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