Unions as Institutional Entrepreneurs: The Contribution of Unions to the Diffusion and Adaptation of LGBT Diversity Initiatives

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Unions as Institutional Entrepreneurs: The Contribution of Unions to the Diffusion and Adaptation of LGBT Diversity Initiatives

Introduction

Over the last few decades, both management practices and research have increasingly started recognizing the inclusion of LGBT workers as a key issue (Colgan, Creegan, McKearney, & Wright, 2007; Köllen, 2016b; Ng & Rumens, 2017). Management and organizational research has extensively explored the impact on wellbeing and performance of inclusive organizational policies and practices targeting LGBT employees (Webster, Adams, Maranto, Sawyer, & Thoroughgood, 2018), as well as on organizational performance (e.g. Pichler, Blazovich, Cook, Huston, & Strawser, 2018). This research has shown that inclusive practices deployed by companies can indeed improve the working lives of LGBT employees, thus providing the companies with an ‘ethical argument’ for their implementation. Furthermore, the research has additionally shown that these practices can have a positive impact on the performance not only of those individuals, but on that of the organization as a whole, thus providing companies with a ‘business case’ for the implementation of inclusive practices.

Instead of focusing on their impact, another stream of research has looked more closely at the processes and the favourable organizational and institutional conditions through which companies arrive at the implementation of LGBT-inclusive practices (e.g. Briscoe & Safford, 2008; Chuang, Church, & Hu, 2018; Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002; Raeburn, 2004). Current research has, however, predominantly been conducted within the US context (and, to a lesser extent, in the context of the UK), so that its conclusions can hardly be generalized when considering other countries, in which employment relations are regulated in different ways (e.g. Countouris, 2007). Most studies either rely on social movement theories (in order to explain the active role that LGBT associations and campaigns are playing in pushing companies towards the adoption of inclusive practices) or on institutional theories (for explaining the binding effects that certain coercive, normative, and mimetic
pressures have in fostering the implementation of those practices) (e.g. Chuang, Church, & Ophir, 2011).

However, very few papers have, until now, focused on the role of unions in promoting and securing LGBT rights at work. Those predominantly British studies focus largely on aspects of LGBT inclusion within the unions themselves, e.g. on the creation of ‘safe spaces’ for gay and lesbian union members within the unions (Bairstow, 2007), on how those members can make their voices heard (Colgan & Ledwith, 2002), and on how to assure them that the unions do, indeed, represent their lesbian and gay membership (Colgan, 1999). A study from Colgan & McKearney (2012) analyses the relationship between LGBT union networks and LGBT company employee networks. However, with the exception of this study, no research has been done into the way in which the unions contribute to the shaping of organizational practices of LGBT inclusion in external workplaces, beyond the unions. In order to better understand this interrelation, our article takes precisely this focus.

Since it is based on empirical data from Italy, this paper complements the existing literature on the adoption of LGBT-friendly practices in business organizations, and also extends the small corpus of studies which have explored the role that unions can play in pushing companies towards the implementation of those practices. Unions in Italy still play a highly active and very relevant role in the regulation of employment relations in the corporate sector, and this context contrasts with the typical Anglo-American contexts considered by most literature on LGBT-friendly practice implementation. Furthermore, this paper makes a unique contribution to our understanding of the implementation processes of LGBT-friendly practices by exploring unions as institutional entrepreneurs. By framing the unions in this way, we can understand them as actors that, working in an environment characterized by a heterosexist conception of sexual and affective relations, can disengage themselves from such a context, and envision and champion new practices, in order to create a more inclusive workplace. Through a qualitative research process, we show how unions do, indeed, act as institutional entrepreneurs, and what specific results they have achieved, in terms of pushing companies towards the implementation of LGBT-friendly practices.
Heteronormativity and institutional entrepreneurship

Heteronormativity refers to the set of institutionalized symbols, norms, and discursive and material practices that create and reproduce the belief that people fall into two distinct and complementary genders (male and female), which align with heterosexuality and predetermined roles in society (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Individuals and relations falling outside this “sex/gender system” (Rubin, 1998) are perceived as “pathological, deviant, invisible, unintelligible, or written out of existence” (Yep (Yep, 2002, p. 167). Since sexuality is an ubiquitous phenomenon in all spheres of life (Jackson, 2006, p. 106), heteronormativity permeates transversally all social orders: family, religion, market, organizations, education, and mass media tend to replicate a binary and heteronormative conception of sexuality (Yep, 2002). Heteronormativity implies several forms of marginalization and discrimination for homosexual and bisexual employees in the workplace. Common examples include benefits granted by the company to married employees, such as insurance policies, or other partner benefits, which discriminate against same-sex couples (Raeburn, 2004), but also informal discourses, such as homophobic jokes (Willis, 2012), and symbols, like family portraits or wedding rings.

The concept of institutions is taken to mean different things in different contexts and disciplines. Sociologists and organizational scholars look at institutions as both socially constructed systems of norms that produce patterns of behaviour, and as symbolic systems, by which individuals and organizations ascribe order and meaning to their own experiences (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Jepperson, 1991). Both the material and symbolic resilience of institutions lead individuals and organizations to take them for granted, as if no alternative were available (Scott, 2013; Zucker, 1987). However, institutions are subject to change processes that can be both incremental and discontinuous (Scott, 2013, p. 48). The actors involved in the ‘institutional work’ - i.e. the creation, maintenance and disruption of institutions - (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011), have been initially defined by DiMaggio (1988) as ‘institutional entrepreneurs’; that is, as actors with sufficient resources, who have an interest in the realization of new institutional arrangements.
Although the characteristics of a given field might prompt institutional change to a great extent, “all actors embedded in the same field are not equally likely to act as institutional entrepreneurs” (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009, p. 75). Thus, various studies have dealt with the interrelated attributes that characterize institutional entrepreneurs and permit them to embark on institutional change (Hardy & Maguire, 2008, p. 206), namely their properties, their position, and their intervention strategies.

A first set of studies has explored the properties of institutional entrepreneurs that “distinguish institutional entrepreneurs from others in the field, and allow them to envision and promote alternative arrangements” (Hardy & Maguire, 2008, p. 200). For example, some studies, applying the perspective of critical realism, have shown the importance of institutional entrepreneurs’ reflexivity, which allows them to disembed from the current institutional order and conceive new institutional solutions (e.g. Leca & Naccache, 2006; Mutch, 2007).

A second set of studies has focused on the social position of institutional entrepreneurs in a specific field (Battilana et al., 2009; Hardy & Maguire, 2008, 2017). According to Bourdieu’s (1990) conceptualization, “fields are structured systems of social positions within which struggles take place between individuals over resources, stakes, and access” (Battilana, 2006, p. 659). Social positions influence institutional entrepreneurs’ perceptions of the field itself, and its institutional contradictions, as well as their access to different available resources. An example from this second stream of studies is the paper by Maguire et al. (2004), in which the authors show how institutional entrepreneurs made use of their subject position to legitimate themselves with different stakeholders in the emerging organizational field of HIV/AIDS treatments advocacy in Canada.

Lastly, a third set of studies has explored the intervention strategies deployed by institutional entrepreneurs, i.e. the set of strategies, skills and abilities adopted to achieve institutional change. Hardy and Maguire (2008) divide the literature in this stream into three main sub-areas by which entrepreneurs deploy their strategies. The first sub-area concerns the whole set of resources – material, financial and organizational, cultural, discursive, political and historical [2] – that
involves the construction of *rationales* or reasons that underpin the institutional change at stake. This area is strategically relevant in involving and mobilizing people around the project of change. For that reason, social movement theory has largely been adopted when accounting for the ways in which institutional entrepreneurs create coherent interpretative structures referred to as “collective action frames” (Hardy & Maguire, 2008, p. 208). Such framing activity implies the use of discourse and rhetorical strategies that draw on established institutional logics to present the new institutional arrangement as necessary (Battilana et al., 2009; Seo & Creed, 2002; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). This makes the new institutional arrangement more comprehensible and meaningful, and provides compelling reasons for supporting it (Hardy & Maguire, 2008). The last sub-area concerns institutional entrepreneurs’ *relations*; that is, the setup of collaborative networks (e.g., partnerships and coalitions) committed to the instatement of new institutions (Hardy & Maguire, 2008, 2017).

By framing the activities of trade union departments involved in dismantling heteronormativity in Italian organizations as institutional entrepreneurship, we try, in this paper, to address two research questions related to the adoption of LGBT-inclusive practices: (i) what properties, social position, and intervention strategies characterize the unions as institutional entrepreneurs? And (ii) what are the outcomes, risks and opportunities associated with the unions’ entrepreneurial striving?

**Research context: Diversity and trade unions in Italy**

Although a relatively new concept within Italy, more and more Italian companies and organizations have, within the last decade or so, started to follow some sort of diversity management approach. The main drivers for this trend have been the increased labour-market participation of women, an increased influx of immigrants onto the Italian labour market, and EU legislation on anti-discrimination in the workplace (de Vita, 2010). In Italy, the societal discourse on workforce diversity is very much focused on (cis-)gender issues. Compared to other dimensions of workforce diversity,
(as in many other national contexts), the organizations’ commitment to sexual orientation-related
issues of workforce diversity is comparatively low, and issues related to the gender identity of
employees are almost totally overlooked (Murgia & Poggio, 2014; Ravazzani, 2016). Ravazzani
(2016) shows that the diversity initiatives of Italian companies “principally aim to address social
expectations and mainly focus on the traditional, legally protected attributes of gender, parenthood
and disability, reflecting their centrality in the social agenda and legislative make-up of Italy” (p. 10).
The strong influence of the Catholic Church on the public debate in Italy might be one reason for the
fact that overcoming heteronormative structures in organizational settings is only seen as being of
secondary importance (Gamberini, 2013; Zanola, 2014). In response to pressure from various
European institutions, Italy recognized same-sex civil unions in 2016. This has provided some of the
benefits, rights, and obligations of marriage to same-sex couples, but it does leave open the possibility
that some employers might treat same-sex and opposite-sex partnerships unequally (ILGA, 2016).
Compared, however, to other countries in Western Europe, the level of acceptance towards
homosexuality is still comparatively low (European_Union, 2015). The LGBT Diversity Index, a
benchmark tool issued by the employer’s association Parks, shows that the number of participating
companies, (and, within that, companies who have explicitly integrated LGBT issues into their overall
diversity approaches), rose from 19 to 42 between 2013 and 2016 (Parks, 2018). However, these
numbers still illustrate the marginal position of issues related to the sexual orientation (and gender
identity) of employees in Italian diversity practice.

In terms of the Italian unions, there are two ‘players’ that deal with LGBT-related work issues:
CGIL Nuovi Diritti (‘CGIL New Rights’) and UIL Coordinamento Diritti (‘UIL Rights
Coordination’). Both departments emerged as autonomous initiatives from union representatives.
CGIL Nuovi Diritti was founded in the early 1990s, as a department of the Confederazione Generale
Italiana del Lavoro (‘Italian General Confederation of Labour’, CGIL), the oldest and largest Italian
trade union confederation. The stimulus for its foundation was the publication of a report on the
discrimination of gay and lesbian employees from CGIL’s Milan office. The UIL Coordinamento
Diritti department was founded in 2013, within the third largest Italian trade union confederation, the Unione Italiana del Lavoro (‘Italian Labour Union’, UIL). Its function was, and is, to provide the union’s equal opportunities office with a specific focus on discrimination related to sexual orientation (CGIL, 2018; UIL, 2018). The UIL Coordinamento Diritti department was established after the current national officer (who at that time was a union representative for his company) reported the distribution of homophobic flyers by some UIL representatives in north eastern Italy.

CGIL was historically linked to the Communist Party, while UIL was linked with more centrist, social democratic positions. Italy’s second biggest trade union association, the Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori (‘Italian Confederation of Workers’ Trade Unions’, CISL), was closely linked to the Christian democratic party. CISL remains more oriented towards the principles of Catholic social teaching, which means that the association continues to tend rather to oppose than support LGBT inclusive policies (Holzhacker, 2012).

However, since the 1990s, relations between political parties and unions have weakened (Pulignano, Carrieri, & Baccaro, 2018). The Italian bargaining system is substantially voluntarist, with very few direct state interventions. There is no legal definition of how collective agreements should be reached and implemented. However, collective agreements are important guidelines for employers defining working conditions, and for jurisdiction in labour disputes. Besides nationwide, cross-sectoral negotiations, there are two levels of negotiating such agreements: on the sectoral level of national industries, and on the company or plant level (Colombo & Regalia, 2016). The implementation of the LGBT-related diversity practices analysed in this article belongs to the latter level. In terms of union density, the Italian situation (34.4%) represents a sort of European average. The density is higher than, for example, in France (8%), Poland (12.2%), Germany (17%), the UK (23.7%) and Ireland (27.2%), but it is much lower than, for example, in Denmark (67.2%) or Sweden (66.8%) (OECD, 2018). Bargaining, however, is often quite hard:

[…] the lack of a stable framework of rules of the interest representation, as well as the strong engagement in a “pluralistic-competitive” (rather “conflictual”) industrial relations model reduced the scope for both
employers and trade unions in Italy to affirm their common points of view and to build up stable institutions, able to support sustainable cooperation between them. (Pulignano et al., 2018, pp. 665-666)

**Research design and methodology**

Following a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2013), the data analysed in this article has been taken from a larger research project on LGBT diversity management in Italy. Aiming at understanding the role of unions in the process of Italian organizations adopting LGBT diversity management practices, this paper is based on 13 in-depth interviews (see Table I). Our sample comprises 7 trade unionists concerned with LGBT rights in the workplace, 4 LGBT activists holding significant roles in other LGBT associations, the head of an Italian manufacturing company, and the industrial relations officer of an Italian bank. The latter two interviewees were working for companies that were driven by unions to sign agreements to extend the rights offered to married employees to LGB employees who had married abroad. The semi-structured interviews focused on (i) the participant’s personal and professional background; (ii) the union, association or company that he or she works for; and (iii) the way in which he or she relates to companies or unions, and the implementation of LGBT-inclusive policies. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via Skype, recorded and transcribed. We performed a theoretical, deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012) of the data, guided by the analytical dimensions identified by Hardy and Maguire (2008, 2017) in their literature reviews on institutional entrepreneurs. In order to understand the unions’ role as institutional entrepreneurs, we therefore focused on their: (i) *properties*, meaning the “special characteristics, qualities and abilities” that “distinguish institutional entrepreneurs from others in the field, and allow them to envision and promote alterative arrangements” (Hardy & Maguire, 2008, p. 200); (ii) *social position* (Battilana, et al. 2009; Hardy and Maguire 2008); and (iii) *intervention strategies*, that can be further classified according to (a) the resources they mobilize; (b) the rationales they leverage for institutional change; and (c) the relations they rely on to bring about
collective action (Hardy & Maguire, 2008). The interviews were conducted in 2016 and 2017, around the time when civil union (but not marriage) for same-sex couples was introduced in Italy.

**Table I: List of 13 Interviewees**

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<th>Organization</th>
<th>Type of Organization</th>
<th>Interviewee’s position</th>
<th>Date (month/year)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>CGIL</td>
<td>Founder CGIL Nuovi Diritti Department</td>
<td>06/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>CGIL</td>
<td>Secretary of FIOM CGIL Varese</td>
<td>09/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>UIL Coordinamento Diritti Department</td>
<td>Founder, National Officer</td>
<td>06/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>UIL Coordinamento Diritti Department, Lombardy Officer</td>
<td></td>
<td>05/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>UIL Coordinamento Diritti Department, Tuscany Officer</td>
<td></td>
<td>07/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>UIL Coordinamento Diritti Department, Credit and Insurance Sector Officer</td>
<td></td>
<td>07/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>National Secretary</td>
<td></td>
<td>04/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Arcigay LGBT Association</td>
<td>Officer for the group ‘Work, Visibility and Coming Out’</td>
<td>06/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>President of Arcigay Milan</td>
<td></td>
<td>04/2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Former Coordinator of Milan Pride</td>
<td></td>
<td>03/2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Rete Lenford Lawyers Association</td>
<td>Lenford Studies Centre Officer</td>
<td>10/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Company 1 International Bank</td>
<td>Industrial Relations Officer</td>
<td>07/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Company 2 International Manufacturing Company</td>
<td>Human Resources Head</td>
<td>06/2016</td>
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Findings

The findings show how the two Italian trade union departments, theoretically framed as institutional entrepreneurs, deal with heteronormativity in organizations. Since their striving clashes with elements deeply rooted in the Italian institutional context (the clearest example being the institution of marriage, which was not [and still is not] legally available to same-sex partners at the time the interviews were conducted), their working is a divergent institutional change process (Battilana et al., 2009). Drawing on the above-outlined notion of institutional entrepreneurship, we link their actions with their properties, social position and intervention strategies (Hardy & Maguire, 2017).

Trade unions as institutional entrepreneurs

Properties. The main activity of CGIL Nuovi Diritti and UIL Coordinamento Diritti is not only to provide LGBT workers with counselling and support in their individual negotiations with the organizations in cases of discrimination, but also to create awareness about these topics within the union itself. The unions’ representatives who dealt with LGBT rights showed particular sensitivity and commitment to LGBT issues. Both offices were founded bottom-up, out of personal initiatives instigated by the founders, in a period when addressing LGBT issues in Italy was far from easy. The founder of CGIL Nuovi Diritti has been in the union since the 1980s, as a representative for the banking sector. The current national officer was an activist prior to assuming her position, but she was already involved with the union to some degree at the time of the department’s foundation.

“No one from [the] union’s establishment actually asked us to take care of gay, lesbian and trans issues in the organization. […] We did that of our own accord, day after day, working with determination, ignoring comments and career opportunities within the organization. From time to time, a dilemma looms. We’ve chosen the way that’s far removed from where the power is, but power is necessary to change things” (CGIL Nuovi Diritti Founder).
“Today it may seem normal to have a meeting in the union about this topic, but 40 years ago, 30 years ago, it was a taboo in every environment. Not only in the union, but also in the workplace, in society at large” (CGIL Nuovi Diritti National Officer).

Most of the participants from the unions described themselves during the interviews as being gay or lesbian, and reported their past and/or present political activism, often in associations dealing with LGBT issues. This factor also seems to be important when recruiting new officers.

“Before recruiting the person, you have to try to understand a little bit where he/she comes from. If he/she comes from associations for instance. For instance, it was very important to me; we’ve got a lot of them coming from associations [outside of CGIL, primarily from Arcigay]” (UIL Coordinamento Diritti National Officer).

**Social Position.** The social position of the trade unions should provide CGIL Nuovi Diritti and UIL Coordinamento Diritti with legitimacy in the eyes of rank and file union members, and of the working class in general. At the same time, given the historically conflicting nature of industrial relations in Italy, the role of workers’ representatives is prejudicial to their interaction with some companies, where “talking of unions is like cursing in Church” (UIL Coordinamento Diritti Lombardy Officer).

Union departments dealing with sexual orientation and gender identity can count on the strong presence of confederated unions in different territories and economic sectors. Looking at the unions’ archival material summarizing agreements related to LGBT rights, we noticed that the companies that reached LGBT-related agreements with trade unions belong predominantly to labour-intensive sectors, where workers are more readily replaceable than in knowledge-based sectors. We found cases of companies operating in the logistics sector, in the metal-mechanics sector, a consumer cooperative in large-scale retail, a company operating in hospital services, and one providing call-centre services. Therefore, union initiatives seem to be more essential in those sectors where the contractual power of workers is lower, due to their higher replaceability. The presence of local offices - with their staff
members often also being, or having been, members of local LGBT associations - allows LGBT workers to get in touch with them easily.

*Intervention strategies.* As outlined above, intervention strategies can be subdivided into three areas: resource mobilization, rationales, and relations.

Concerning the resources available to trade union offices dealing with LGBT issues, the situation differs partially between the two unions. CGIL Nuovi Diritti is organized into regional offices, to which LGBT workers may resort, when feeling themselves discriminated against, but each office enjoys a large degree of autonomy, and the amount of material and relational resources varies between different regions. Even though founded more recently, UIL Coordinamento Diritti has a more structured organization, with a headquarters, and a network of representatives organized by region and professional category. In this scenario, the main resources available to unions are relations and know-how. The strong bond that appears between unions and LGBT activism (and in particular with Arcigay, the oldest and largest Italian LGB organization), which is often due to the very background of officers working in the LGBT rights departments, provides them with know-how and expertise in LGBT issues, both within and outside the workplace. However, our interviewees described the mediation style of the unions as cooperative, since they consider legal action against the firm only as a last resort solution. Indeed, no cases of legal action or prolonged conflict were reported to us.

The rationales that underpin the promotion of LGBT-inclusive practices by those offices within the unions that are concerned with LGBT rights do not leverage on the creation of economic value for the organizations, but point to the defence and safeguarding of workers’ rights.

The trade union must be sure that labour doesn’t violate people’s dignity, and humiliates them, right? Because… where do the fundamental elements of union culture and background come from? They come from a disequilibrium […] labour and production are important, but not at the expense of everything else; they can’t trample on people’s dignity, on people’s fundamental rights. (CGIL Nuovi Diritti National Officer).
Instead of considering LGBT workers to be carriers of ‘specific’ values for the organization, unions identify LGBT workers as workers, thus carrying the same set of rights that pertain to all workers. Within this framework, non-discrimination is the goal, and this has to be achieved by formal agreements, which extend to sexual minorities the same rights already acquired by heterosexual workers. Yet, union respondents recognize that agreements may be not sufficient per se, since they do not address informal discrimination, and a heterosexist environment may even go so far as to prevent LGBT workers and employees from asking for a benefit, if the ‘cost’ of coming out is perceived as being higher than the value of the benefit itself. Thus, cultural change is seen as a prerequisite to the exploitation of formal rights, and education plays an essential role in this respect.

When asked about the appropriateness of a business case for diversity in order to promote LGBT-inclusive practices, all but one of our union respondents agreed on its value for LGBT inclusion, arguing that a business perspective can complement an equality and justice perspective, in order to reach a higher degree of inclusion.

“Everything that is done for achieving this goal [i.e. LGBT inclusion], is something positive anyhow. So there must not be the prejudice that if someone else does it, maybe someone that we dislike, or we don’t like very much, then: “No!” That would be a short-sighted view” (CGIL Nuovi Diritti National Officer).

Rejecting the business case for diversity, one unionist gave a warning of the dangerous implications inherent in submitting the inclusion of a minority group to profit increase. Referring to a famous Italian advertising campaign targeting homosexual couples, he ironically commented “non-discrimination is either at 360° or it’s nothing. It’s like being pregnant: you’re either pregnant or not”.

The relational dimension of the LGBT rights departments of the unions in some ways reflects the fragmented reality of the Italian LGBT associative world, as our respondents reported different collaborations with local actors. Notably, both CGIL Nuovi Diritti and UIL Coordinamento Diritti have always had a strong relationship with the most important Italian LGBT association, Arcigay. “If there are episodes of discrimination, we turn either to CGIL or to UIL, which are the two unions we
collaborate with the most, that in turn have their own departments dedicated to these kinds of instances; we kind of built them together over time,” Arcigay’s National Secretary told us.

**Outcomes, risks and opportunities.** Since unions are not free from heteronormativity, the first result achieved by both CGIL and UIL’s offices has been to put LGBT rights on the agenda of the unions, and to provide union representatives with the competences necessary to deal with LGBT issues. The main focus of both departments is on counselling LGBT workers who have been discriminated against. Interventions are, therefore, often limited to mediations with companies to find *ad hoc* solutions.

Although CGIL Nuovi Diritti is not directly involved in bargaining collective agreements with companies, and no agreement has yet been reached at the national level, some results have been obtained at the company level of negotiations. In the case of an Italian manufacturing company, rights and benefits for married employees have been extended to LGB employees who have married abroad. The specific extension of marriage leave to same-sex couples was an autonomous request by union representatives, without there being any solicitation from either the employees, or the Nuovi Diritti department. The request was formulated within the equal opportunities commission, and led to the first agreement on LGBT issues in the metal-mechanics sector in Italy.

A similar agreement has been reached by Coordinamento Diritti UIL with Italy's largest banking group, as well as with a company in the hospital services sector. In the case of the multinational bank, the extension of marriage leave to same-sex couples originated with the request of a gay employee who had married his partner abroad. The company initially denied the request. It was seen as being non-compliant with company policy, since same-sex marriage was (and still is) not recognized under Italian law. The story made it to the newspapers, prompting the recently-formed Coordinamento Diritti department to contact banking industry representatives, and to propose a new deal, extending the provision of the national collective agreement for marriage leave to same-sex couples that had
married abroad. The agreement was discussed within the welfare committee of the company, a body composed by representatives of both the company and trade unions.

The main risks union department officers recognize when dealing with LGBT discrimination are related to the embeddedness of their role within the wider industrial relations system, often characterized by conflicting relations between unions and employers. Prejudice against unions and unionists may prevent them from accessing organizations to tackle heteronormativity. Moreover, the reliance on ad hoc interventions and single agreements at company level is seen as far from sufficient to dismantle heteronormativity in organizations. At the same time, union departments dealing with heteronormativity see the opportunity to intervene in economic sectors and organizational realities where the likelihood of discrimination is higher. Indeed, we documented two cases where union representatives were able to reach the first agreement on LGBT rights in the manufacturing sector in Italy, and to accomplish the same in a multinational bank, starting from a single case of discrimination in a peripheral branch of the company.

Discussion

Our study has shown that the role unions take in the process of adaptation and diffusion of LGBT diversity management in a continental European context can be theoretically framed as institutional entrepreneurship. As institutional entrepreneurs, these unions contribute towards encouraging companies to further the inclusion of their LGBT employees, and to address discrimination against those employees.

The persons in charge of LGBT issues within the unions are in large part closely related to associations that are engaged in political activism in the area of LGBT rights. This provides them with a certain standing and legitimacy within the unions themselves, as well as with the LGBT workers and employees they represent, and for whom they negotiate. However, this also restricts them to equality and social justice-related grounds of justification for their claims. As shown by our findings, as a result of this equality-driven rationale, the outcomes of their activities as institutional
entrepreneurs are exclusively related to extending those benefits and facilities to homosexual employees that hitherto were only granted to heterosexual ones (e.g. partner benefits and marriage leave). These outcomes are the result of collective agreements that activate ‘sanctions’ for discriminatory behaviour, rather than promoting inclusive behaviour within the organization. It is in no way obligatory for companies to negotiate these agreements, but once they have signed such agreements, they become formally binding. However, such outcomes related to partnership status might increasingly become obsolescent in the broader European context, since more and more European countries have made the institution of marriage legally available to same sex couples (e.g. France, Germany, and Spain). This narrows down the legal scope for companies to treat same-sex and opposite-sex married couples differently. Together with the ongoing development of European workplace-related anti-discrimination legislation and jurisdiction, this tendency might make the claim for overcoming formal unequal treatment obsolete in the near future. For the unions this carries the risk that, in the wake of this positive development, their advocacy for this claim might also become obsolete, and with it their status as institutional entrepreneurs in the field of LGBT inclusion. However, legal protection and equalization do not eradicate homophobia and heteronormativity, though they are undeniably important steps in the right direction. It remains important, therefore, to preserve all voices that aim towards LGBT inclusion, including those of the unions, especially in those countries where LGBT rights are still limited, and/or the political trend is a reactionary one. Such a changing environment is challenging for the unions, but may also open up new opportunities.

Their specific social position within the field of LGBT inclusion provides the unions with a strong ethical rationale, which allows them to primarily mobilize actors, which share this rationale, in a voluntary way. LGBT inclusion can include much more than formal equalization policies, and it can address any area of institutionalized heteronormativity, in order to achieve an inclusive and supportive organizational climate (Köllen, 2012, 2016a). Advocates of the business case for a diverse workforce and its appropriate management tend to restrict themselves to a lesser degree to certain diversity management initiatives than the justice-driven unions do. However, no matter whether one
gives more weight to the business argument, or to the justice argument, it is still the case that the
desired goal is a greater degree of inclusion for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender employees. It
could, therefore, be an opportunity for the unions to extend their formal focus on LGBT inclusion by
engaging with the informal facets of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in the workplace. Of
course, it may be assumed that, just as within society at large, heteronormativity and cis-normativity
are also structuring categories within the unions, and amongst their members. Such a shift of focus
away from formal equality would, therefore, entail considerable internal persuasion. However, this
could enable unions to maintain their status as institutional entrepreneurs within the field of LGBT
inclusion, without having to surrender the social justice perspective (cf. Kirton & Greene, 2006),
albeit it that, today, the business case perspective seems to be the more efficacious one.

Against this background, the outcome of the work and negotiations undertaken by the unions must
not be underestimated. Contrary to other institutional entrepreneurs in that field, who may apply a
business case rationale for their efforts, unions have the possibility to push all companies in the
direction of inclusion and non-discrimination. They are not dependent on the organizations’ ‘belief’
in the business case for LGBT diversity management, and they are, therefore, also able to reach
companies for which employees do not represent a critical success factor, and where employees may
not be as highly valued as in other sectors. Whilst business consultants or consulting firms
specializing in LGBT issues are predominantly approached voluntarily by those organizations, which
value their LGBT employees, and consider them a source of competitive advantage, unions can also
approach organizations which think otherwise. That may imply a ‘cream-skimming’ dynamic
whereby unions end up dealing with more difficult realities characterized by higher levels of
heteronormativity. Given this, one might ask the question as to whether unions might be able to
strengthen their impact as institutional entrepreneurs were they to broaden their perspective on
employee welfare and social justice, by having an additional business case focus. However, one has
then to consider that business case considerations might, in fact, potentially work against LGBT
employees in the future (see e.g. Noon, 2007; Rhodes, 2017), showing the economic benefit of
exclusion and discrimination. Furthermore, it might be that this additional focus could undermine the legitimacy of the unions as a voice for justice and equal treatment of all employees and workers in this debate. Whatever future developments may occur, this article has shown that, within Europe, unions can be regarded as institutional entrepreneurs in the field of LGBT workforce diversity, capable of reaching out to certain types of organizations, which would otherwise not have implemented LGBT diversity initiatives of any kind.

Notes

[1] All companies, unions, and associations whose representatives have been interviewed for this article exclusively focus on initiatives targeting lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) employees. Although none of them addresses issues related to transgender (T) employees or workers, all of them utilize the term ‘LGBT’. We therefore retain the term ‘LGBT’ in this paper, but it is important to state that we are, in effect, speaking only about LGB (see Köllen, 2016b, for the general debate on why it may be questionable to establish one category (through initialism) that comprises both different sexual orientations and gender identities).

[2] As pointed out by Hardy and Maguire (2017), this heterogeneous list refers to material, discursive, and organizational resources that can (and in most cases do) overlap. In line with the authors, we refer in this article predominantly to material resources, addressing symbolic and organizational resources through ‘rationales’ and ‘relations’.
References


