Employee voice mechanisms for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender expatriation: the role of Employee-Resource Groups (ERGs) and allies

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ABSTRACT
Recent literature on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) expatriates has largely taken an employee perspective. Less attention has been devoted to organizational mechanisms supporting LGBT voice opportunities for global mobility. In this study, we use respondent data from 15 LGBT employees in combination with data from five global mobility managers to examine the role of Employee Resource Groups. Using the depth, scope and level of voice to frame the study in relation to stereotype threat theory, the findings show that discrimination and stigmatization are prevalent features affecting voice. The findings advance three distinct contributions concerning marginalized (LGBT) employee voices about expatriation: the importance of ‘informal’ social dialogue, the shallow ‘depth’ to voice decision-making roles about LGBT expatriation, and a consideration of ‘silence’ in voice literatures.

Introduction

Employee voice has a strong research history across many fields including HRM, political science, industrial relations, and organizational behavior (Dundon, Wilkinson, Marchington, & Ackers, 2004; Milliken, Schipani, Bishara, & Prado, 2015; Mowbray, Wilkinson, & Tse, 2015; Wilkinson & Fay, 2011). Dundon et al. (2004) define employee voice as ‘a complex and uneven set of meanings and purposes with a dialectic shaped by external regulations, on the one hand, and internal management choice, on the other’ (p. 1149). We note that while the notion of employee voice is complex and has been conceptualized

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concurrently as formal and informal, and as business/professional/social (Dundon et al., 2004; Wilkinson, Donaghey, Dundon, & Freeman, 2014), voice can be further complicated across multiple workplace boundaries (e.g. internationally) as well as particular workgroup identities (e.g. class, gender, occupation or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender [LGBT]). Extant literature on employee voice has taken a predominantly universal approach that tends to perpetuate heterosexism and normative generalizations predicting something of a false employee homogeneity, typically heterosexual ethnic-majority males (see Gedro, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Munoz & Thomas, 2006 for important critiques). Absent from extant employee voice literatures, with a few recent exceptions, is research that explores voice opportunities and the constraints of sexual minority employees, i.e. LGBT people. Bell, Ozbilgin, Beauregard, and Surgevil (2011) suggest that LGBT employees in particular may remain silent for fear of mistreatment or discrimination, resulting in ‘unheard’ and ‘missing’ voices.

The core focus of our article is on issues of diversity and inclusion (D&I): diversity in culture, ethnicity, religion, age, gender and sexual orientation, and inclusion involving equal participation and the removal of barriers, to enhance voice mechanisms and global mobility (see Berry, 2016). We explore the role of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) as a form of voice for LGBT and global mobility. We argue that a focus on voice mechanisms for LGBT expatriates is warranted on the basis of empirical evidence demonstrating increased diversity – including a strong LGBT presence – among expatriates (McDevitt-Pugh, 2011; McNulty, 2015a; McNulty & Hutchings, 2016; McPhail & McNulty, 2015; McPhail, McNulty, & Hutchings, 2016; Paisley & Tayar, 2016).

Gedro, Mizzi, Rocco, and van Loo (2013, p. 282) define LGBT expatriates as constituting ‘a sexual minority … of people that cross international borders for professional reasons.’ Published research has thus far established that LGBT workers often face unique challenges compared to their heterosexual colleagues (e.g. Tilcsik, Anteby, & Knight, 2015; Weiss, 2007). Many still experience a lack of visibility and voice that limits their opportunities for international work (Gedro et al., 2013; McPhail & McNulty, 2015; McPhail, McNulty, & Hutchings, 2016). Other studies suggest that LGBT are marginalized and stigmatized, despite the lure of work opportunities for career progression (Gedro, 2010; Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002). This is complicated further when the location is considered to be dangerous for LGBT employees, defined as one where there is any event or life circumstance that presents a threat, real or perceived, to the health, wellbeing, safety and security of an LGBT employee including a lack of social or legal protection on the grounds of sexual orientation (McPhail & McNulty, 2015). Homosexuality is still punishable by death in seven countries and illegal in a further 85 countries (Expat Gay, 2013; Silver, 2014). Even in those locations that may appear safe for LGBT, people may still face persecution due to religious, political or legislative intolerance. For example in the USA, in 28 states employees can still be fired for being gay or transgender (Bellis, 2016).
Drawing from stereotype threat theory, this article explores the extent to which the global mobility of LGBT employees is impeded by the threat of being stereotyped as LGBT. Thus, do ERGs and Ally networks overcome this threat by providing voice and positive framing for LGBT identity? Further, does stereotyping behavior emanate only from within organizations or do LGBT people simultaneously engage in degrees of self-stereotyping that may constraint voice networking, potentially resulting in silence or marginalization irrespective of the existence of voice structures? We begin this article by positioning LGBT employee experiences of voice scope and depth in relation to workplace career opportunities, international work experiences, and the use of ERG voice structures and ERG Ally voice networks. We then frame LGBT expatriation using stereotype threat theory, to explore whether ERG voice facilitates or hinders LGBT expatriates’ ability to engage in global mobility opportunities. We follow by explaining our methodology, after which findings are presented in relation to the overall aims for the study. We conclude with a detailed discussion of the implications arising from our study for theory, research and practice, including future research directions for further study on LGBT expatriation and voice.

**ERGs and LGBT expatriates**

The purpose of LGBT ERGs is to drive business opportunities and to improve workplace culture for LGBT employees by providing them with a voice mechanism that allows their needs and concerns to be heard. ERGs can exist in multiple forms, e.g. formal-informal and/or social-business orientated. ERG membership is predominantly made up of LGBT employees and a network of straight allies (co-workers, supervisors, other employees) who support LGBT rights. LGBT employees in the ERG are usually ‘out’, and being LGBT is possibly more central to their workplace identity.

Colgan and McKearney (2012) note that, as far back as the late 1980s, LGBT activism drove the establishment of LGBT union groups in the United Kingdom. This was often in the form of LGBT informal ‘company networks’ as a precursor to the establishment of formal ERGs. Brown (2010) notes that the purpose of LGBT ERGs is typically different from other ERG’s in that they act for, and on behalf of, both those who have a voice as LGBT employees, and also for the unheard or ‘missing’ voices of those who, due to fear of repercussions, remain ‘in the closet’ at work. ERGs have grown and evolved significantly in the past 25 years (Friedman & Craig, 2004; Kaplan, Sabin, & Smaller-Swift, 2009; Mercer, 2011), with some organizations funding ERGs in exchange for formal reporting methods and metrics to demonstrate potential links to organizational effectiveness, inclusivity and diversity goals.

The Corporate Equity Index (CEI), an American benchmarking tool developed by the Human Rights Campaign Organisation, shows that since 2002 LGBT-related education and training programs in ERGs exist in 8 out of 10 CEI-rated businesses
(Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2015; Washington & Evans, 1991). In addition, ERGs can occupy a wide voice remit through lobbyist activities as well as functioning as a sounding board for executives who want to learn about LGBT inclusion (Colgan & McKearney, 2012; Sorter, 2014). Strategically, ERGs can exist as a critical voice mechanism for LGBT employee global mobility; for example by providing discreet and professional information for employees who are not ‘out’, including access to supportive resources and networks privately and confidentially (Colgan & McKearney, 2012). ERGs can further provide LGBT employees with access to appropriate Allies who can lobby for their participation in international work opportunities, and/or provide LGBT expatriates already working abroad with the necessary access to relevant resources online. This is particularly important for those in rural or remote locations (Colgan, 2011). Importantly, ERG voice fora can lobby for equal benefits and support for LGBT expatriates.

**Allies and LGBT expatriates**

Allies are characterized as people that are a member of a ‘dominant or majority group who work to end oppression in his or her personal and professional life through the support of, and as an advocate for, the oppressed population’ (Washington & Evans, 1991). Allies typically undergo company-supported training in their roles. One of the functions of Ally networks is their responsibility to advocate and act as change agents for issues related to LGBT minorities in organizational contexts (Brooks & Edwards, 2009). We position ERGs and Ally networks as complementary rather than separate voice mechanisms in the sense that each can be, and often is, an extension of the other.

Brooks and Edwards (2009, p. 137) suggest that Ally networks have become an important mechanism through which LGBT employees find avenues for inclusion, safety and equity in the workplace in their perceptions of fair treatment. One of the functions of Ally networks for LGBT employees is their ‘responsibility to advocate, educate, research and act as change agents for issues related to LGBT minorities in international contexts’.

Allies can act as an effective voice mechanism for LGBT employees by modeling behaviors of advocacy and support to LGBT persons and confronting inappropriate behaviors (Brooks & Edwards, 2009; Brooks, Robards, Gibbs, Lozano, & Edwards, 2007). Allies can further support LGBT expatriation by actively seeking to change policy and support LGBT staff participation across institutional levels; for example through HR policy formation, among managerial functional levels, within trade unions structures, and specifically in ERGs. Ally advocacy can be apparent through confronting bias and discriminatory comments and actions by championing the voices of LGBT employees. Allies are defined as ‘people willing to take action, either interpersonally or in larger social settings and move beyond self-regulation of prejudice’ (Brown & Ostrove, 2013, p. 2212).
Linking employee voice mechanisms and LGBT expatriation

The role of LGBT ERGs, along with allied networks, constitutes a distinct ‘form’ of voice for the representation of those who remain ‘invisible’, or ‘in the closet’, with regard to expatriation. Research has indicated that heterosexism and ‘silence’ constrain LGBT employees’ ability to engage in international work experiences and to articulate their concerns (Colgan & McKearney, 2012; Priola, Lasio, De Simone, & Serri, 2014; Weiss, 2007). The form of ERG and Ally voices can be found in both union and non-union firms, as a formal and informal voice arrangement, or as a direct (e.g. individual) as well indirect (e.g. collective) mechanism. In addition to form is the ‘depth’ of voice, defined as the extent to which voice is perceived as real and genuine for the employees who encounter the arrangements and decisions made by management as a result (Boxall & Purcell, 2011; Wilkinson, Gollan, Marchington, & Lewin 2010). It is possible that the depth of voice LGBT employees encounter is unique to the constraints they face owing to their minority status and/or perceptions of discriminatory marginalization. Collins (2007) shows that being a member of a stigmatized group may result in members becoming the target of prejudice or, in the case of expatriation, find themselves excluded from being sent to certain locations, especially those considered dangerous. Arguably, much of the voice literature has ignored LGBT employee voice mechanisms in the context of global mobility.

The scope, form and depth of voice are important dimensions (Wilkinson, Gollan, & Marchington, 2010). Numerous studies attest to the importance of employee involvement in upward problem-solving within organizations as a mechanism for employee voice (see Mowbray et al., 2015; Wilkinson, Townsend, Graham, & Muurlink, 2015 for recent reviews). Janssen and Gao (2015) found among 337 supervisor-subordinate dyads in the Chinese manufacturing industry that when employees perceive that they have high voice status, they are motivated to engage in subsequent voice behavior (see also Ohana, 2016). Employee voice can also be an important component of psychological safety in the workplace because it provides employees with a safe climate (Milliken et al., 2015). When employee voice opportunities are absent or shallow, research has shown an increase in withdrawal behaviors and decreased performance among employees due to perceived discrimination (Matsunaga, 2015; Wagstaff, del Carmen Triana, Kim, & Al-Riyami, 2015).

Mechanisms that can facilitate LGBT employee voice and global mobility specifically includes the role of ERGs and related Ally networks, where individuals come together to obtain equity for LGBT employees’ global mobility in the form of inclusive participation and the active removal of barriers to inclusion. Recent studies claim that sexual minority status neither postpones international assignment opportunities for LGBT employees nor does it preclude engagement in global mobility altogether; of the few studies conducted, there is growing evidence that LGBT employees want to engage in global mobility and that organizations
welcome their participation (McPhail & McNulty, 2015; McPhail et al., 2016; Paisley & Tayar, 2016). Less clear is how LGBT employees participate and how related ally networks play a role in facilitating voice for LGBT global mobility.

The concept of employee voice for LGBT employees interested in expatriation rests on the assumption that remaining in the 'global closet' can limit international career opportunities. The global closet is defined as the space within which negotiation of homosexual identity is moderated by concerns related to invisibility, discrimination, stigmatization, and safety and security issues (Gedro, 2010). Gedro (2010, p. 395) further refers to the 'lavender ceiling' as one in which organizations tend not to 'promote those in the sexual minority (i.e. those who are not heterosexual) to positions of increased authority, power, prestige, and formal responsibility'. Such discrimination typically begins in the home-country (Collins, McFadden, Rocco, & Mathis, 2015; Everly & Schwartz, 2014; Hill, 2009). This can be direct and formal (e.g. termination) and/or indirect and informal as covert forms of discrimination (e.g. exclusion from salary increases, bonuses, promotions, and increased responsibility; Hebl et al., 2002; Hill, 2009; Noknoi & Wutthirong, 2007). Employee voices may become constrained due to an individual's responses to cope with various work and societal pressures related to LGBT status, or due to narrow (shallow) organizational voice structures that diminish participation owing to employer power that makes it difficult for people to speak-up or speak-out (see Donaghey, Cullinane, Dundon, & Wilkinson, 2011). As a consequence, employee silence and subsequent isolation from career opportunities can impact economically on organizations in terms of stifling or derailing global staffing initiatives (see Brown, 2010; McNulty, De Cieri, & Hutchings, 2013). When discrimination persists, the potential reinforcement of a ‘silence-voice’ dichotomy is likely to occur. Not only can such ‘silencing’ (e.g. absence of voice) result in the loss of critical talent to the organization or derogation in employee alienation and attrition (Kohn, 1976; Munoz & Thomas, 2006), the arrangement can be inherently discriminatory and marginalize the (home country) rights of LGBT people. Consequentially, narratives advocating workforce diversity predicated on a corporate advantage rationale risks neglecting the human rights inclusion agenda, which can have merit irrespective of corporate gain (Kollen, 2016; Labucay, 2015; Süßmuth-Dyckerhoff, Wang, & Chen, 2012).

It is important to note that discrimination among LGBT people in general has been found to vary according to ‘type’ of sexual orientation and gender identity (i.e. LGBT), thus it would be erroneous to homogenize LGBT people as facing the same levels of discrimination and the same degree of stigmatization across all types of sexual orientation and gender identification (Collins et al., 2015). McPhail and McNulty (2015) note that, to date, studies in the management field have not sufficiently explored bisexual or transgender expatriates and, despite using the term ‘LGBT’ as an overarching reference, the focus has been primarily on lesbian and gay employees. The term ‘LGBT’ in this article is similarly applied to reflect its use in current literature (e.g. Everly & Schwartz, 2014; Gedro et al., 2013; Ungar,
2000) as part of the broader debate in relation to LGBTQ, LGBTI, and LGBTQI (where Q = questioning and I = intersex; Munoz & Thomas, 2006). LGBT is thus an overarching term noting that extant literature on diversity accepts that identities operate at multiple complex levels (Paisley & Tayar, 2016). As a result, the role of ERGs and Allied networks as voice channels are likely to be highly diverse, variable, and involving informal voice exchanges in leveraging social dialogue and information and communication sharing among LGBT staff groups.

**Stereotype threat and LGBT expatriates**

Stereotype threat theory is used in this study to explore the extent to which ERGs and Ally voice networks impact LGBT employee global mobility. Although we have conceptualized that these voice mechanisms, by design, are intended to help LGBT employees overcome stereotype threat in facilitating global mobility, no research to date has proven this to be the case. Rather, it may be that the effectiveness of these mechanisms is marginal and that stereotypes are both institutionally and individually embedded. Stereotype threat is concerned with how stereotypes harm employee voice opportunities, link to HR performance, and may prevent LGBT employees from having equal access to global mobility and equal levels of benefits and support. Scholars (e.g. Gupta & Bhawe, 2007; Osborne, 2007; Shapiro, Aronson, & McGlone, 2015; Steele, 1997; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002) have shown that stereotype threat reduces the performance of individuals who belong to negatively stereotyped groups. While we are careful not to assume that LGBT employees always necessarily belong to a negatively stereotyped group, research attests to problems of discrimination towards LGBT employees that suggests issues related to stereotyping (Gates & Viggiani, 2014; Lewis & Pitts, 2017; Munoz & Thomas, 2006). Stereotype threat is defined as a situational predicament in which people perceive themselves (whether real or imagined) to be at risk of confirming a negative stereotype as a result of belonging to a particular social group (Steele, 1997), in this case LGBT. Collins (2007) found the presence of stereotype threat in the workplace for LGBT and that the stereotyping of employees can directly and indirectly impact on their work performance and turnover: the LGBT workforce feels fear, hatred, and intolerance toward them. They also face discrimination, stigmatization, isolation and stereotypes associated with being ‘not normal’ and less able.

Stereotype threat has been shown to induce anxiety, lower intellectual performance, and deplete working memory (Osborne, 2007; Sackett, Hardison, & Cullen, 2004), where repeated exposure can lead to diminished confidence, poor performance, and loss of interest in pursuing certain goals (Nelson, 2015). It has also been shown to increase arousal and self-consciousness about one’s performance, and to increase the extent to which an individual will try to suppress negative thoughts about the stereotype to which they belong (Beilock, Jellison, Rydell, McConnell, & Carr, 2006; Ben-Zeev, Fein, & Inzlicht, 2005; Johns, Inzlicht,
Suppression thought processes may consequentially engender ‘silence’ rather than voice. It can further lead to a decrease in the available resources an employee may have to perform adequately on a given task, therefore impeding an individual’s physiological ability to complete a job or work role (Ben-Zeev et al., 2005). Stereotype threat theory represents an important lens through which to view, and manage, LGBT employees’ voices and related issues (e.g. concealable stigmas) at work in terms of their ‘identity management’ to avoid discrimination. In other words,

these individuals face decisions about when, how, and to whom to disclose their concealable stigmas with important consequences for the way individuals experience work … with experiences from one interaction shaping expectations and behaviors in future interactions (Jones & King, 2013, p. 1487).

Given the aforementioned analysis, we suggest that the threat of sexual minority stereotyping (at the individual and/or organizational level) resulting from participation in voice mechanisms such as ERG networks may be one explanation for LGBTs’ inability to secure international work opportunities, particularly in dangerous locations.

**Methodology**

The study upon which this article is based draws on data from a combined sample of 20 respondents: 15 LGBT male and female employees (11 of whom have lived and worked, or are still living and working, abroad), and five managers responsible for global mobility and/or D&I. The participants work in a range of industries including mining, foreign affairs, computing, and education (see Table 1). The country background of the employee sample (n = 15) includes both western and Asian countries/regions, however, the manager group (n = 5) all originate from Asia, which may skew the data on diversity. For reasons of confidentiality, the sample was intentionally not matched; LGBT employees were not linked to the companies in which the managers were employed. Given the focus of our article on ERG voice structures and Allies’ network processes concerning expatriate participation, we deliberately focused on respondent experiences of such, supplemented with managers as company agents responsible for delivering and promoting voice to facilitate LGBT expatriation.

This study utilized a qualitative, inductive approach to draw on the perspectives of employees and managers about the role of ERG voice and Allies’ networks in facilitating LGBT global mobility. All 20 respondents were surveyed, and five were then interviewed. This allowed for core themes to be explored with enough flexibility to allow participants to identify issues that they considered important and to elaborate on critical incidents (Creswell, 2003). The 15 LGBT employees identified as being lesbian, gay and bisexual (but not transgender, questioning or intersex) and we acknowledge that each of these groups is unique. While no transgender, questioning or intersex expatriates participated in the research, our
Table 1. Sample characteristics of participants (n = 20).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LGBT employees (n = 12)</th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 Nigel</td>
<td>M/G</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Middle manager</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 Greg</td>
<td>M/G</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>De-facto</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Financial services</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 Sylvie</td>
<td>F/L</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>De-facto</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Oil &amp; Gas</td>
<td>Middle manager</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>London, Singapore</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4 Ellen</td>
<td>F/L</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Middle manager</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5 Sam</td>
<td>F/L</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Financial services</td>
<td>Middle manager</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6 Connie</td>
<td>F/L</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>De-facto</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Financial services</td>
<td>Senior manager</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>USA (repatriated)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7 Seb</td>
<td>M/G</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>De-facto</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>Middle manager</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8 Jack</td>
<td>M/G</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Professional services</td>
<td>Middle manager</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#9 Simon</td>
<td>M/G</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Maried</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Middle manager</td>
<td>Middle manager</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#10 Tania</td>
<td>F/L</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Maried</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Middle manager</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>London, Netherlands, Thailand, Canada</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#11 Marvin</td>
<td>M/G</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>De-facto</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Computing</td>
<td>Middle manager</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#12 Seth</td>
<td>M/G</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Junior staff</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#13 Chris</td>
<td>M/G</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>Chile</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#14 Alan</td>
<td>M/G</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Middle manager</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Netherlands (repatriated)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Managers responsible for D&I and/or global mobility (n = 5)

| #1 Jon                 | M/G      | Y               | Y       | Y       | Commodities | Regional Director, D&I/3 years | Singapore | UK |
| #2 Gill                | F/L      | –               | Y       | –       | –           | Leader of ERG/5 years | Taiwan | US |
| #3 Sue                 | F/S      | N               | N       | Y       | IT          | Global Mobility Specialist/1 year | Singapore | USA |
| #4 Jenny               | F/S      | Y               | Y       | –       | –           | APAC Mobility Leader/4 years | Hong Kong | USA |
| #5 Connie              | F/S      | Y               | Y       | Y       | Professional services | APAC D&I Leader/10 years | Hong Kong | UK |
focus on voice mechanisms for LGBT people applies to all LGBTQI employees, hence use of the term ‘LGBT’.

As in other studies about expatriates (McNulty, 2015b; McPhail & McNulty, 2015), we used a qualitative approach to extrapolate key findings in relation to our key research questions. Of those interviewed, two were managers and three were employees. Half of the participants (n = 10) had experience of ERG voice supports; the remainder either had no experience (n = 5) or did not join, citing time constraints (n = 3), or did not answer (n = 2). The use of related data collection methods (surveys plus interviews) was to ensure as wide a reach as possible into the LGBT community. One survey and interview instrument (with identical questions) was developed for LGBT employees, with a separate survey and interview instrument (with identical questions) developed for managers. We created the questionnaire using online survey software (at http://www.surveymonkey.com) and placed a link online at http://expatresearch.com.

Questions asked in both the surveys and interviews were developed from a limited number of prior studies on LGBT expatriates (Collins, 2009; e.g. Gedro, 2007, 2010; Gedro et al., 2013; McNulty, 2014, 2015a; McNulty & Hutchings, 2016; McPhail & McNulty, 2015; McPhail, McNulty, & Hutchings, 2016; Paisley & Tayar, 2016). We also conducted an in-depth literature review across both academic and industry literatures relating to LGBT employees, voice, and inclusivity (e.g. Baert, 2014; Doucerain, Dere, & Ryder, 2013; Fullerton, 2013; Hofhuis, van der Zee, & Otten, 2016; Kaplan, 2014; McFadden, 2015; Mercer, 2014; Noknoi & Wutthirong, 2007; Priola et al., 2014).

Demographic and expatriation information was collected from participants. After the survey, five participants agreed to be interviewed for which we used a semi-structured interview approach. The survey and interview respondents were asked to comment on the following questions (among others): (a) the extent to which LGBT expatriation is supported by their company, (b) their concerns about LGBT expatriation, (c) legal/moral stereotyping, (d) the most helpful types of information and support for LGBT employees that is required prior to relocating abroad, and, (e) company policies/practices in relation to LGBT expatriation and voice. Each participant in both the survey and interview was advised that the research was conducted in accordance with the participating universities’ ethical protocols, that their participation was voluntary, and that all responses would be treated in confidence, with anonymity assured by pseudonyms to be utilized in any published research. Participants were reassured that any published research would be made available to them for ‘member checking’ prior to submission to a conference or journal.

Employee and manager respondents participated over a four-month period from August to November 2015. Given that the questions were identical, all respondents across both groups were given the option to complete the online survey or to be interviewed, with the online survey facilitating anonymity for those that felt uncomfortable with being identified. We recognize and acknowledge
that survey data can sometimes compromise the richness and exploratory nature of a qualitative approach due to the lack of opportunity for probing and clarification. However, given the exploratory and preliminary nature of this study, and the dearth of research exploring LGBT employee views about expatriation, we accepted that it was worth forgoing opportunities to probe the participants for more information in order to gain confidential access to as many ‘unheard voices’ within the LGBT employee community as possible. Within the structure of our research design, there is no compelling reason to delineate between those that participated via survey vs. interview as questions across each method were identical and all of those who were interviewed were also surveyed. Interviews, when conducted, lasted between 45 and 90 min.

Using a theoretical sampling approach (Creswell, 2003), the 15 employee and five manager respondents were sourced using a combination of personal networks, snowballing, and social media. For example, two employee participants were invited to join the study via personal invitation, being identified as LGBT expatriates through the first and second authors’ personal networks; these respondents then contacted other LGBT expatriates in their network to suggest they also participate, thus leading to a snowball approach (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Other employee participants were located as a result of a conference presentation by the first and second author in Singapore in September 2015 (to a group of energy executives who identified as LGBT), from which three participants volunteered to participate. Invitations to participate in the study were also posted on Facebook, LinkedIn and Google Plus, with memberships to lesbian and gay associations (e.g. ‘Fruits-in-Suits’) being used to gain access to LGBT employees and managers.

Using a ‘small-N’ case study approach (see Blatter & Haverland, 2012), it is not possible to assess how large the LGBT employee population may be from which to determine a non-response rate given that some LGBT employees do not wish to make their status known and are therefore not easily identified. Likewise, given only recent corporate interest in D&I, it is not possible to assess the potential manager population from which we could gather data. Following Saunders and Townsend (2016), a sample of 20 (15 LGBT employees and five managers) is within acceptable boundaries for meaningful analysis, especially for difficult-to-access respondent population groups.

Data were analyzed by manually coding responses into categorized themes. The first author coded data into clustered themes using primary-level codes and the second author checked the codes against data to ensure consistency of interpretation. From these codes (which used phrases associated with particular issues), a final list of themes was established (Saldana, 2009), which are presented in the findings. Manual thematic analysis was selected because it provides for systematic categorization of a large but manageable amount of qualitative data (Richards, 2005).
Findings

**ERG voice scope and depth: LGBT employee perspectives**

Almost half of the employee respondents \((n = 7)\) reported having some opportunity for voice in terms of LGBT ERG participation. Of those, only four employees felt it was effective or somewhat effective. It appears management have a direct controlling relationship over the functioning of ERG as a voice mechanism; for example, the majority of LGBT ERGs are run by either senior management or an LGBT employee, who is elected to do so. Employees join ERGs for a number of reasons, including the ability to network and share information with Allies and other LGBT employees. The desire to communicate and advance the voices of LGBT people is a strong motivator for those who predicate in ERG fora, as one participant said,

[I joined] to have a personal sense of belonging and community, to advocate for inclusion, and to educate on LGBT issues in the workplace. (#2)

Some of those that do not join LGBT ERGs may not want to come ‘out’ at work and believe that by joining they may be ‘outed,’ from which there may then be a detrimental effect to their employment. To this end, the role of the ERG for voice has a de facto narrow (limiting) rather than wider degree of inclusivity. Nonetheless, most respondents agreed that the main purpose of LGBT ERGs is the provision of support, awareness, and networking among LGBT employees. To a lesser extent, ERG voice can be seen also to assist the company to promote broader organizational goals. One employee said,

It exists as a safe space for LGBT employees and is also a demonstration of the company’s commitment to supporting D&I at the local level. (#8)

Importantly, ERGs also provide informal opportunities for social dialogue among LGBT employees, including hosting activities and other extended networking opportunities. In relation to our first research question (*Are ERGs and Ally networks successful in facilitating LGBT employees’ voice in relation to global mobility and expatriation?*), the majority of respondents indicated that their company ERG arrangement is proactive in facilitating global mobility opportunities through the sharing of information, by advocating and promoting international positions, identifying potentially suitable LGBT employees for the positions, and by making LGBT-sensitive issues known to mobility teams.

In relation to Allies, the majority of employees \((n = 13)\) reported having more than one support network, with only two employees having none. Allies in the support network included managers, co-workers, D&I officers, CEOs and other executives, risk and compliance directors, supervisors, direct reports, and peer colleagues, of which the majority are straight and internal to the company, located in the home country, informally assigned, and working outside the HR department. Allies were found either through HR, informal conversations, word-of-mouth, introductions by others, online, and through day-to-day work activities. While
most employees said that their organization was supportive of Allies, the network remained predominantly an informal form of voice. One employee remarked:

I have discussed with HR setting up an LGBT network or even doing basic education and they are against it. (#3)

The majority of employees generally perceive that Allies help to facilitate their voices concerning global mobility in several ways, for example, via: (1) the promotion of advocacy, inclusion, safety, equity, and organizational change; (2) support of their values; and, (3) moral courage. Respondents reported mixed views about wider organizational systems that advocate for LGBT employees interested in working abroad. Another employee suggested,

I don't believe somebody should have to turn down a good career opportunity because of their sexuality. In homophobic countries, I think it would be reasonable to expect an employer to provide support when relocating LGBT employees. (#11)

In relation to our second research question (What are the outcomes of ERGs and Allies in relation to global mobility – to individuals, to organizations?), the major benefit arising from ERG voice channels is a demonstrated acceptance, and greater visibility through leadership support, of LGBT employee that can potentially lead to a more engaged workforce. From a mobility standpoint, when companies facilitate LGBT employment abroad, participants view the key benefits to organizations as an expansion of the talent pool and the development of commitment among LGBT employees. Among others, key factors which LGBT employees believe contribute to successfully living abroad include: being accepted and respected, being good at their job, respectful and supportive to co-workers, perseverance, courage, gumption, commitment, and flexibility. Processes of social dialogue among ERGs and Ally networks suggested that LGBT colleagues considering working abroad should seek LGBT-friendly countries, use networks to discover the realities of host locations, and choose locations carefully whilst keeping an open mind. Respondents remarked that one should ‘connect with the ERG and become actively involved’ (#7), ‘be more brave, just go for it’ (#6) and ‘understand the host country sensitivity to LGBT and understand you are the guest, so you must live within the rules. If you can’t live within the rules, don’t consider the work’ (#12).

When working abroad was not successful in terms of an assignment failing, LGBT employees cited a number of reasons why including: (1) being made redundant once host-location management became aware that the employee was gay; (2) an assignment being cancelled just prior to departure when the host country leadership learned the candidate was lesbian, citing the government would not be comfortable with such a situation; (3) premature repatriation due to an inability to secure visa; and, (4) legal status and/or employment for partners or spouse being denied, resulting in stress that ended the relationship.

The scope to voice concerns about global mobility showed mixed responses. Nearly two thirds (n = 9) of LGBT employees reported that their company supported them to undertake an international assignment and to any location, with
the remaining six respondents indicating that LGBT expatriation was supported by their company only in certain circumstances, and more often only to LGBT-friendly locations. This is despite that only one-third \((n = 5)\) reported that their company claims to apply the same global mobility policy for heterosexuals as for LGBT wishing to work abroad, and that slightly more than one-third \((n = 6)\) felt their company’s formal mobility policy did meet the needs of LGBT employees.

When asked why LGBT employees did not seek international positions abroad with their company, the strongest concern relates to the fear that their same-sex status will create physical safety problems once there, followed by dual-career issues for their same-sex spouse, lack of company policies to cater for their unique needs, and to a lesser extent opportunities to voice concerns about relocating with children. A notable issue remains possible embarrassment if an application to go abroad is declined arising from sexual minority status, including for some the fear of being ‘outed’.

To help LGBT employees to work abroad, the most common types of support required are at the interpersonal and psychological levels and include (among others): (a) knowing that the destination location is LGBT-friendly; (b) having open and supportive conversations with colleagues, managers, HR and Allies about the relocation; and (c), having a supportive manager in both the home and host-location. Various forms of social dialogue to help mediate some of the tensions and fears unique to LGBT employees (e.g. ranging from the desire for reliable and accurate resource information to concerns of begin ‘outed’) includes: (i) sourcing other LGBT groups in the proposed host country; (ii) access to a mentor; and, (iii) safe housing. Table 2 provides a full list of the types of voice and information supports that LGBT employees seek via ERGs when relocating abroad. In addition, the final column in Table 2 provides a summary of scope, level and depth to the types of voice encountered. In this respect, the evidence points to a wide scope of voice opportunity via ERG networks, although with little depth to actual decision-making. ERG network voice channels were further found to utilize both formal and informal forms, across multiple levels, including specifically informal networks.

**Voice, diversity and inclusion: managerial perspectives**

Two of the five manager respondents reported that the global mobility of LGBT employees was a strategic part of their companies’ objectives, noting that actively encouraging employees to work abroad is important to their business model. Others commented that employees wishing to work abroad were actively supported in less formal ways, although not part of any strategic goal. The remaining two respondents did not feel that the global mobility of employees was either a strategic objective nor important, but both noted their company relocated LGBT employees upon request. In relation to LGBT employee’s ability to work abroad, the majority of managers supported relocation and claim to provide the same
voice opportunities as for heterosexual employees. Occasional policy adjustments are made in response to specific LGBT feedback or issues, usually determined on a case-by-case basis. The remainder \( n = 2 \) support LGBT relocation, but only to LGBT friendly host country destinations, and without specific adaption of an existing policy for LGBT concerns.

In relation to the first research question about ERG voice for LGBT employees, the majority of employers indicated that ERGs and Ally networks provided advocacy, voice and support for LGBT employees; in addition to diversity ‘brand’ building for their company. The process of Ally network dialogue within companies featured as an important conduit to channel LGBT voices and articulate expatriation concerns across multiple levels. Some managers noted that their KPIs related to the goals of supporting Ally networks, including providing them with support and materials and ensuring activities are incorporated in end of year reporting. Ally networks were seen to play a role in facilitating an informal voice dynamic for LGBT employees promoting advocacy, equity and inclusion. Allies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support/voice and information (ranked most important to least important)</th>
<th>Type of support</th>
<th>Forms of voice (formal-informal)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Knowing that the destination location is LGBT friendly</td>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Scope/formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Visible information, at the global level, that the company affirms and supports diversity &amp; inclusion across its global footprint</td>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Depth/formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Open and supportive conversations with colleagues, managers, HR and Allies about the relocation</td>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>Depth/informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. A supportive manager in both the home and host location</td>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Scope/informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How to prepare to living in a potentially dangerous location and what to do in the event of a dangerous situation</td>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Scope/formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Knowing what goes on the ground, i.e. the actual realities of everyday life</td>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>Level/formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Visa assistance for partner/spouse/dependents to relocate</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>Level/informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Presence of LGBT colleagues in the intended host location</td>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>Level/informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Information about what to expect in the host location</td>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>Scope/formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. A clear duty of care policy for themselves and dependents in the event of problems whilst abroad</td>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>Scope/formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. LGBT-specific pre-departure preparation about what to expect and how to mitigate those problems should they arise</td>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>Scope/formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Access to a mentor</td>
<td>Career</td>
<td>Level/informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Information about access to and benefit entitlements for dependents</td>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>Scope/formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Safe housing</td>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>Scope/formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Introductions prior to departure to LGBT Allies, networks and groups in potential destinations</td>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>Level/informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Guarantees of employment upon return</td>
<td>Career</td>
<td>Scope/formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Indications as to how working abroad will enhance career development</td>
<td>Career</td>
<td>Scope/formal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
helped articulate values, showcase moral courage, provide safety, and function as an education and information-sharing platform. Allies are both internal and external to the company and fulfilled both informal and formal roles.

When managers were asked to comment about benefits arising from ERGs that indirectly impact LGBT employee voice (our second research question), evidence indicated several outcomes: positive role model-building, mentoring and coaching, personal development, and widening access to new networking opportunities. Those managers engaged in ERG voice networks commented on positive spill-over benefits for the company; for example, from ‘reduced recruiting costs … reduced turnover … and high performing teams’ (#1). Managers reported that, in their view, employees joined the ERG to have a specific voice, for support, to seek alliances and as a platform to articulate their concerns and potentially change policy. When managers were asked to consider why some LGBT employees do not engage in international work opportunities or join a formal ERG network, they believe it centers on concerns about coming out (e.g. engendered silence), spouse career issues, lack of awareness about the ERG support (e.g. shallow voice depth), and prior knowledge that some assignments for LGBT employees had been less than successful:

A few years ago in Hong Kong, we moved a lesbian [manager] from the US. Her partner wasn’t able to join her due to visa restrictions. This was a very challenging situation for her, and she did not stay in Hong Kong, and after repatriating to the US she resigned. (#5)

Other reasons include fear that same-sex relationship status would create safety concerns in a host location, issues related to relocating with children, lack of company policies to cater for LGBT employee needs, or overt discrimination once their sexual orientation or gender identity is known. One manager reported that ‘requests [by LGBT] to work in places such as the Middle East are rejected’ (#1). When asked to consider what LGBT employees need to facilitate them working abroad, manager responses included having a supportive boss; open and supportive conversations with colleagues, managers, HR and Allies; and visa assistance for dependents. Table 3 provides a more extensive list of managerial perspectives on voice and resource supports to LGBT employees. Managers indicated that providing information about what to expect in a host location was the most helpful strategy for supporting employees; specifically visa assistance, benefits, and entitlements for dependents. One manager respondent said,

We do our best to support LGBT mobility. Immigration tends to be one of our biggest barriers, and the related rights of the partner/spouse to work in the host country also causes significant financial issues for our LGBT employees considering assignments. (#5)

The majority of managers believe their company provides information as the primary voice source to help meet LGBT employee expectations. The final column in Table 3 further indicates the coexistence of both informal and formal types of voice form, such as accessing networks to share information and to provide support with
open conversation opportunities for LGBT employees. At the same time, while there is a varied scope of issues reflected in managerial respondent perspectives of ERG network voice, there is little actual depth of decision-making for LGBT employees themselves. One manager suggested that, despite all their efforts to support LGBT employee voices, they did not always succeed, noting that success may be a factor shaped by the type of location rather than organizational desire:

In many of our APAC locations we do not consciously adapt or change what we do specifically for LGBT employees. We provide networks and connections. However, in the US, EMEA and to a lesser extent Australia, there are more formal support networks and programs. (#3)

**Discussion**

This study demonstrates that ERGs and Allies (for some of those that access them) can be used as mechanisms that facilitate LGBT employees’ voice in relation to international career opportunities. For individual employees, voice mechanisms can be used to protect and respect personal identity and sexual preferences, with goals ‘not’ to share information for various personal reasons irrespective of their employment contract and status. Beyond such a personal focus, expatriation introduces very specific voice concerns for both LGBT employees and organizational
management, in relation to the host country cultural and legal environment, which could be hostile to LGBT rights. For the organization also, such issues can add unanticipated obligations that complicate voice policies with considerations for different forms of voice and information-sharing that support a duty of care to expatriate employees (Fee, McGrath-Champ, & Liu, 2013; McPhail & McNulty, 2015; Perkins & Shortland, 2006; Schuler, Jackson, & Tarique, 2011). Our study makes three distinct theoretical and policy-focused contributions concerning LGBT missing voices, as follows: (i) the importance of informal social dialogue and networks for LGBT voices; (ii) the shallow depth to the voice opportunities for LGBT employees and constraints that limit (or narrow) the ability to articulate concerns and access adequate information concerning expatriation; and, (iii) a recognition of the role of ‘silence’ alongside voice as a cultural variation, which may be particular to LGBT to have a say about expatriation opportunities. Taken together these three distinct contributions suggest the exclusivity of ERG and ally networks may limit LGBT voice opportunities. Related implications for organizational management include the possibility of embedding or connecting ERG systems and networks roles with other existing organizational voice and HR policies. The three contribution areas are discussed further in the remainder of this section.

Informality and social networking for LGBT voice

There has been a reported gap in extant literature concerning little understanding of informal social dialogue and the interactions between employees, co-workers, customers and managers as a serious channel for voice (Marchington & Suter, 2013; Townsend, Wilkinson, & Burges, 2011). This issue is further compounded when considering the voices of potentially marginalized groups who may be subject to discrimination, such as LGBT workers (Bell et al., 2011).

The findings suggest that the importance of informal communications and social dialogue cannot be over-stressed for the voices of LGBT employees, potential HR performance links through voice, and contributing further to stereotype theory and literature debates. Of significance is that the informality dynamic is not necessarily from employer to employee (e.g. hierarchical and top down), but across and between multiple agents within a communicative network focused on LGBT and other marginalized voice issues (e.g. horizontal and laterally diffused). Our data showed that such lateral voice networks and informal dialogue served the needs and interests around expatriation of LGBT employees to a high degree, with two related debates and implications.

First, the importance of informal voice can be seen to add to ‘stereotype threat theory’, considered earlier. In many ways, the ERG fora and its ally network helped LGBT employees rationalize and digest perceptions of potential harm through the opportunity to access information about host country environments, to learn and disseminate experiences of cultural diversity, along with data to reassure
themselves and spouse/partners of issues of concern when considering expatriation. Collins (2007) and Shapiro et al. (2015) report that negative stereotyping can reduce the performance of individuals. While our research did not address measures of HR and performance per se, it did show that ERGs can counter to some extent any negativity threat of LGBT stereotyping, providing opportunities to access important sensitive information of relevance to the individual, and to engage with like-minded and sympathetic LGBT allies, co-workers and other colleagues.

Second is a related addition about the importance of missing voices in the HR-Performance literatures. Voice is often a central component of HR and performance measures and models (Guthrie, 2001; Huselid & Rau, 1997). However much of the research in this area typically considers and seeks to measure formal and structured voice, including direct communications and joint consultative committees that feature in the HR-Performance equation, while little is considered with regard to informal voice and the performance social interactions between networks of workers and managers. To this our research adds the potential of weaving in missing voices not only for equality and justice, but as a neglected feature in future HR performance considerations. LGBT employees who can avail of, and access, such information necessary for expatriation may add to notions of discretionary effort, commitment, and contributions towards organizational goals.

However, while informal voice and the role of ERGs may be necessary as a conduit to meet some LGBT voice needs and even organizational performance goals, it may not on its own be sufficient. Informal social dialogue can be fragile and voice itself is often a power-centric dynamic in the employer-employee relationship. Therefore, the contribution of voice ‘depth’ of ERG structures and ally networks are of importance, and considered next.

**The depth to ERG voice structures for LGBT employees concerning expatriation**

To some extent the informal voice network diverts attention from the power centric role of employee voice insofar as management do not relinquish decision-making or devolve authority to the ERG or ally network. The informality, as important as it is for LGBT employees, signals a narrow depth and scope to voice.

The issue of depth can be traced to two primary sources of influence, both organizational structures and within LGBT employees themselves. Notwithstanding the importance of ERG structures for LGBT employees to obtain sensitive information and connect with allies, the functional role of the ERG remained somewhat marginal to the core HR policies for employee voice.

Similar to Marchington and Suter’s (2013) consideration of informal dialogue, in our data the role of ally networks did not necessarily ensure that the correct information would be obtained and, importantly, that access to communications on issues of a highly sensitive and personal nature were widely dispersed
as possible among LGBT employees, particularly for those who may not have ‘come out’. This issue connects with voice debates raised by Strauss (1998) and subsequently Wilkinson et al. (2014), concerning the need for structures to show transparency, equity of voice opportunity for workers, and clear fora where decision-making is seen to take place. Arguably, while informal voice provides a lubricant to exchange ideas and share information (Marchington & Suter, 2013, p. 309), there appeared a lack of depth to actual decision-making channels that voice is theoretically claimed to underpin. For example, referring back to Table 2 (employee reported perceptions) and Table 3 (managers’ perceptions of voice and support to LGBT employees), the occurrence of voice depth was limited and confined to some shallow scope and localized levels.

For LGBT employee perceptions, depth was more apparent for both ‘psychological’ type voice opportunities (e.g. company reaffirming it supports diversity) and ‘interpersonal’ communication flows (e.g. conversations with allies). Organizational support for a degree of depth on these issues may be admirable. However, the more substantive decisions including managerial support systems in a host location, matters of how things actually work in daily life in the host environment, specific benefits and terms and conditions relating to self, spouse/partner relocation were all less extensive and comparatively shallow. There were no reported data for joint consultation or actual negotiation on these issues, although that does not mean it is non-existent elsewhere. The levels of voice were mostly related to the local ERG itself, its network, or other informal contacts with experience of a host location. Furthermore, managerial perceptions (Table 3) showed depth had a narrow and formal focus on aspects such as pre-departure information or reported policy data, say, on a specific relocation package. Much of this was voice as a form of communicating policy rather than dialogue with a view to consulting about or implementing changes. Indeed, guarantees of employment upon return from expatriation were often noted, but with little sign of any further social dialogue about the nature of such guarantees whether in the same job, department, or division of the company upon actual return.

The above is not to dismiss informal social dialogue as irrelevant; indeed, quite the contrary, it appears that informal voice helps support and extends ideas of concern to employees and may in turn add value to organizational management. Yet at the same time, a shallow depth of formal voice and narrow scope of issues open for dialogue may limit the value of informal voice and question its long-term sustainability without corresponding formal channels for employees to articulate their concerns for LGBT employees, and about LGBT expatriation. We contest it is further compounded by missing voice nuances owing to sensitivity, and personal safety and security for the individual and their identity. The related implication, considered next, is the inference of engendered ‘silence’ in the debates and narratives about employee voice.
Employee ‘silence’ and missing (LGBT) employee voices

The third distinctive contribution is that the voice literature tends to neglect the possibly of pro-social and/or active ‘silence’ from employees. Research on concealable stigmas suggests that while voice mechanisms such as ERGs and ally networks represent evidence of ‘external activism’ on the part of employers (Jones & King, 2013; Jones, King, Gilrane, McCausland, & Cortina, 2013), a key difference for LGBT is the willingness of such employees to engage in ‘internal activism’ by joining the ERG forum and its related network. In other words, while ERGs and Ally networks may be in place to facilitate LGBT expatriation, the internal (perceived) stereotype threat may be so great among LGBT employees that they elect to opt-out as a form of self-selected ‘employee silence’. To this end, by consciously not joining ERG voice fora or seeking information from its network some LGBT employees may be viewed as perpetuating self-discrimination. However recent debates suggest that employee silence is much more complex and that employers, due to policy design or cultural differentiation, may engender a climate of silence when employees realize the voice system is shallow, weak or partial in providing a genuine opportunity to articulate their concerns, especially if such concerns might be highly sensitive and personal as in relation to LGBT issues. Both Donaghey et al. (2011) and Barry and Wilkinson (2015) point out that employers may structure voice arrangements in such a way as to encourage few or very narrow voice opportunities for employees, despite the appearance to the contrary in policy documentation. With this in mind, it is feasible that the global mobility of LGBT employees could be impeded by shallow voice channels along with added threats of negative stereotyping that is known to exist for LGBT groups. Consistent with other research, when employees choose to remain silent it can have spillover implications for organizational performance (Greenberg & Edwards, 2009; Morrison, See, & Pan, 2015). This is not to suggest LGBT employees limit their own potential to expatriate, but rather that ERGs and Allies may not be sufficient to help them overcome deeply rooted fears about putting their employment at risk, about their safety and security in the (international) workplace, or the effects of marginalization and stigmatization both at home and abroad, culminating in the normalization of silence.

The impact of silence is an important consideration when it comes to assessing previously missing employee voices. We have shown that there are various factors and motives prompting LGBT employee silence (e.g. to avoid embarrassment, to disguise minority sexual identity status). Of importance here is that the presence of ERG voice mechanisms does not necessarily imply the absence of silence (Brinsfield, 2012; Knoll & Redman, 2016). Related to this is evidence that while ERGs offer a voice mechanism that is linked to the opportunity of LGBT expatriation, the threat of stigmatization and stereotyping can fracture ERG voice and networks. Arguably, missing LGBT voices appear to arise from a combination of influences, including an individuals’ fear about stigmatization and stereotyping,
the uneven interplay of both formal and voice arrangements, and the perceived personalized (non-)utility of the voice opportunity. Indeed, it can be advanced here that the latter influences appear more important than the presence of any stated organizational policy intention. An important finding in this study is that ERGs and Allies, while worthwhile initiatives, have not yet reached their full potential as voice mechanisms for LGBT employees. To this end it can be suggested that ERG voice structures and ally networks for LGBT expatriation may underpin pockets of active silence and even represent a missed opportunity for organizations to embed further the goals of inclusiveness and diversity. An area of further study could be a more longitudinal examination of the interplay of ERG voice networks with other formalized employee involvement and participation mechanisms, including collective consultation and/or bargaining.

Our focus on ERGs and Allies as voice mechanisms to facilitate LGBT global mobility is a first step towards conceptualizing an ‘employee voice strategy’ for missing or minority groups such as LGBT employees (Brooks & Edwards, 2009; Matsunaga, 2015, p. 653). We suggest from our data that such a strategy may combine both direct and indirect communicative approaches along with formal and informal opportunities for LGBT employees to share ideas. It would, importantly, recognize a wider scope of issues and depth of coverage in order to move beyond silence and be able to contribute to decision-making. We note however that silence is not in or of itself a negative outcome and indeed it can serve as a protective coping mechanism for LGBT employees who feel the need to keep certain information and communicative channels private.

Conclusion

Extant literature about expatriates has focused predominantly on traditional assignees that are sent abroad to relatively safe locations, with only recent exception (Bader, 2014; Selmer & Leung, 2007; Tharenou, 2010). In this article we have focused on voice through ERG and Ally networks in relation to specific expatriation goals, taking into account that few countries may be considered ‘safe’ for LGBT to expatriate to and that many do work abroad only by assuming innumerable risks to their physical and psychological safety (McPhail & McNulty, 2015). We have gathered data from employees and managers to examine the role of ERGs and Allies in supporting and facilitating LGBT expatriation.

Our article contributes to debates about missing voice as well as LGBT expatriation in a number of ways. First, it draws attention to the role of ‘informality’ among social networks and the exchanges of information and communications for LGBT employees. Second, it examines the ‘depth, scope and level’ of voice opportunities through ERG networks and addresses debates about possible negative stereotyping. Using stereotype threat theory, the important related dynamic of employee silence can be noted in the missing voice narratives; in particular, the multiple influences shaping LGBT employee perceptions along with organizational
structures that may engender silence as a protective coping mechanism. It has been shown that discrimination and stigmatization still exists for many LGBT employees when it comes to the opportunity for them to have a say about matters of global mobility, even in spite of the best intentions of their company to promote expatriation diversity and inclusiveness via voice practices such as ERGs and ally networks. Hence, while ERGs and Allies were found to be useful voice mechanisms for global mobility among some companies in our study, there remains a clear gap in policy, the depth and scope of voice equity, risk management protocols, and silence outcomes. More longitudinal future research is suggested.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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