

Together in diversity: insights and wisdom from LGBTQ+ people working in STEM

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THE QUEER VARIABLE.
[HTTPS://PRIDEINSTEM.ORG/THE-QUEER-VARIABLE/](https://prideinstem.org/the-queer-variable/)

Reviewed by **Andrea Bandelli**

Abstract “The Queer Variable” is an edited collection of 40 interviews with LGBTQ+ people working in STEM. The interviews reveal the breadth of issues related to exclusion, discrimination, prejudice that LGBTQ+ people face; but also a remarkable progress and advancement of the whole STEM field to be more diverse, inclusive and equitable. The book is an empowering and enlightening reading for all those who are professionally active in STEM.

Keywords Professionalism, professional development and training in science communication; Social inclusion

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For many people active in the STEM field, positive role models and examples of what a future profession in the field looks like are often critical factors to guide career choices. Role models may come from family, school, movies, friends and many other sources; over and over again we hear stories of how a specific individual, real or sometimes fictional, instilled a passion for science and research that ends up being a choice for life.

For many of us however these role models do not exist. There is nobody to identify with, nobody that shares important aspects of a person such as ethnical and cultural background, gender identification, or sexuality. Even worse, people who belong or identify with certain minority groups and are active in STEM are still exposed to negative role models and barriers, or worse, bullying and discrimination. The result is that almost one third of LGBTQ+ people active in STEM have at some point considered leaving their jobs because of a hostile workplace or discrimination towards them. Not being able to be yourself at work — regardless of what your work is — means that you won't be happy to do your

work. Students are penalised too: LGBTQ+ students in STEM are considerably less likely to finish their studies compared to heterosexual peers, despite a higher interest and participation in research activities [Hughes, 2018].

Universities, industries and companies are haemorrhaging talent because LGBTQ+ people in STEM are being ignored. And yet, it is not rocket science to realise that more diversity and inclusion in STEM means better science — it has been well documented for years [Gibbs 2014]. Everybody benefits from a workplace that is inclusive and supportive and that can retain its best talent, rather than losing it to stress or to more competitive and more inclusive professional fields.

In the past years there has been significant progress to bring these issues to the forefront and increasingly to address them [Mattheis, De Arellano & Yoder, 2019]. The book “The Queer Variable” brings a wave of hope, optimism and empowerment in this regard, demonstrating the exceptional achievements of LGBTQ+ people in STEM, people who despite facing the barriers mentioned earlier, have fought against them and are a living proof of the richness and quality of science that is delivered when these obstacles are overcome.

“The Queer Variable” is an edited collection of interviews with 40 LGBTQ+ people who experienced the full range of issues — positive and negative — that queer people in STEM regularly face. Through their own voices they describe how unnecessarily difficult certain academic environments can be, and how many chances to do good science go to waste when institutions and their leaders implicitly and explicitly discourage LGBTQ+ people from advancing their careers in STEM. The book contains a wealth of good advice for university leaders, lab directors, teachers and many others in leadership positions on how to make their organisations inclusive, diverse and respectful of everyone.

The importance of more visibility for LGBTQ+ people and of more visible actions (such as gender-neutral toilets, Pride events, pronouns policy, etc.) is a recurring theme throughout the book. For so many queer people — and in general everybody who identifies with/belongs to a minority — the fear of being different, alone and inadequate for lack of visible models to relate to cannot be underestimated. More generally the book makes us reflect on something that is of universal importance in education: “we need to understand the value of good teaching; and the impact of bad teaching” (from the interview with Colin Kasl). Every time there is an unfair, prejudicial or discriminatory behaviour in education, the impact will be on the whole classroom. The accountability of institutions and their people is therefore essential, and quite a few interviews stress how important it is to ensure proper policies and follow up whenever incidents happen. At the same time, many interviewees also emphasise the importance to celebrate success and to be unashamedly proud of the progress that has been achieved.

The book reports many activist approaches. In several cases LGBTQ+ people become “accidental activists” — they organise themselves to enable the social change within their institutions and oftentimes beyond their workplace too, when there is a lack of policy and practice that the institution does not want to take responsibility for (such was the case for Beck Strauss, who got the whole campus to have gender-neutral and accessible toilets). We are reminded of the importance to learn from these movements and build on what has been done as a foundation,

instead of starting every time from scratch (Jeremy Yoder). In this regard the book is a good source of wisdom to know what has been done, what is important, and what can be done better.

There is a beautiful sense of humility that transpires from many of the stories. All the interviews include a question about what the interviewees would advise to those who identify with their stories. The answers are really heart-warming: embrace the value of diversity and the richness of thought and wisdom that it enables; don't be afraid to seek out support and help from the community and friends; and "truly listen and try to make it better for someone that is not you. That's how we make things better: by not only making it better for ourselves but by making it better for everyone." (Tyler Kelly)

The interview format works well to present each story within its own context. It would have been useful to also have a summary or a reflective essay to outline the main actions that can be taken to address the issues discussed in the interviews. Several interviewees point out that we need to move on from just having conversations to putting words in action. A list of practical steps that can be taken, referencing the experiences in the book for context, would have been a useful complement to the interviews and a useful resource for readers in leadership positions. Such resources exist elsewhere, and it seems a missed opportunity not to have them referenced or included in this book. Maybe this can be done in a future edition of the publication.

An advantage of this book, however, is that it is not written for an LGBTQ+ audience. The personal accounts of its protagonists help everyone to understand how to make science more collaborative, more interdisciplinary, more fulfilling and productive. The editors, Alfredo Carpineti and Shaun O'Boyle have done a brilliant work with a coherent approach to so many diverse experiences, capturing their insights, wisdom, and unbound strive for a better and just society.

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Author

Andrea Bandelli is a scholar in science communication and Head of International Relations at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. He has developed, managed, evaluated and directed several international projects on science, art, democracy and public participation. From 2016 to 2022 he was Executive Director at Science Gallery International. He has a Ph.D in Science Communication from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam on scientific citizenship and the role of public participation in science centers, and is a Cultural Leader at the World Economic Forum.



andrea@bandelli.com

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