A View From the Academe: Lesbian and Gay Faculty and Minority Stress

Raine Dozier
Western Washington University

This study examines the experiences of lesbian and gay faculty within the framework of minority stress theory. Previous research on minority stress has mainly relied on survey data to correlate stressors with negative outcomes among sexual orientation minorities. This study uses in-depth interviews with 9 lesbian and 9 gay faculty members at a regional, public university to illustrate the process of minority stress including the context of prejudicial events, how individuals interpreted discriminatory events, and the internal and external strategies used by participants to cope with minority stressors. The interviews suggest that aspects of minority stress such as expectations of rejection and the need to conceal identity are complex, requiring lesbian and gay individuals to continually monitor and negotiate their environments and interactions.

Keywords: discrimination, higher education, minority stress, sexual orientation

Individuals who belong to stigmatized minority groups often face ongoing minor prejudicial events and, sometimes, more significant acts of discrimination (Herek, 2009; Sue, 2010). Minority stress theories seek to describe the unique stressors experienced by stigmatized minority groups and the effects on their health and well-being (Fingerhut, Peplau, & Gable, 2010; Herek & Garnets, 2007; Meyer, 1995, 2003; Velez, Moradi, & Brewster, 2013). Much of the research investigating minority stress addresses sexual orientation minorities, describing the stress resulting from both exposure to discrimination and the need to continuously assess and respond to risks inherent in a variety of social and structural settings.

The purpose of this study is to detail mechanisms that produce minority stress. Minority stressors not only include experiences of discrimination, but also the internal processes that result from encountering inequality and prejudice. Much of the research regarding minority stress uses survey data to correlate stressors with negative outcomes such as mental health issues (Frost, Lehavot, & Meyer, 2015; Herek & Garnets, 2007; Lehavot & Simoni, 2011; Meyer, 1995, 2003; Smith & Ingram, 2004). Additional studies find that minority stress affects more than health outcomes, influencing areas as diverse as relationship quality (Rostosky et al., 2007), academic achievement (Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011), intentions to quit a job (Smith & Ingram, 2004; Waldo, 1999), and feelings about parenting (Bos, van Balen, van den Boom, & Sandfort, 2004).

Higher education institutions are particularly interesting settings to investigate the experiences of stigmatized minorities, especially lesbian and gay individuals. Academia is typically characterized as a “liberal” environment (Gross, 2013), and higher education institutions often strive to cultivate a diverse and inclusive environment in an effort to better serve students. Because of these efforts, the academic work environment has the potential to be particularly positive for lesbian and gay employees. However, institutional policies and procedures aimed at fostering an inclusive climate cannot always address institutional barriers such as unexamined heteronormative standards or the risks inherent in social interaction for lesbian and gay faculty.

Lesbian and Gay Individuals at Work

Lesbian and gay individuals are especially vulnerable to minority stress in the workplace. Although the prevalence of sexual orientation minorities in the workforce is unknown, population-based surveys estimate that between 1.4% and 1.8% of adults in the United States identify as lesbian or gay (Gates, 2014). As a result, lesbian and gay individuals are likely to constitute a small minority at work—they may be the only one or one of a few at their workplace or within their work unit. In addition, sexual orientation minorities have no federal protection against discrimination, yet have a history of experiencing discrimination in the
Lesbian and Gay Faculty

Few studies address the experiences of lesbian and gay faculty in the workplace, especially regarding prejudice and discrimination. The available literature mainly consists of personal narratives (Fowler & DePauw, 2005; Mintz & Rothblum, 1997; Randall & Eliason, 2012; Tierney, 1994) and reflections on the climate of the academy (Dolan, 1998; LaSala, Jenkins, Wheeler, & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2008; Rothblum, 1995; Tierney & Dilley, 1998). Very few articles incorporate empirical research (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; McNaron, 1997; Rankin, 2005; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010; Taylor & Raeburn, 1995). Recent research is limited to survey data collected from faculty, students, and staff regarding campus climate (Rankin et al., 2010) and a study of faculty experiences in science and engineering (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009). Because of the paucity of research regarding faculty experiences, this study provides a needed update to the literature.

Personal narratives and studies regarding lesbian and gay faculty suggest ongoing encounters with prejudice and discrimination, especially subtler forms such as invisibility, exclusion, and heightened scrutiny (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; LaSala et al., 2008). Climate surveys report that, relative to heterosexual faculty, a heightened scrutiny (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; LaSala et al., 2008). However, disclosure of sexual orientation also makes individuals more vulnerable to discrimination (Meyer, 1995; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Velez et al., 2013). Exposure to discrimination in the workplace decreases job satisfaction among lesbian and gay individuals, resulting in greater intentions to leave the job (Velez et al., 2013; Waldo, 1999). It is also linked to poorer physical and mental health outcomes (Smith & Ingram, 2004; Waldo, 1999).

Conceptual Framework

Meyer’s (1995, 2003) conceptualization of minority stress details four categories of stressors experienced by sexual orientation minorities: (a) prejudicial events and conditions (chronic and acute), (b) expectations of rejection or mistreatment, (c) the need to conceal identity, and (d) internalization of societal stigma. Prejudicial events and conditions can include direct discrimination such as harassment or employment discrimination (e.g., refusal to hire or promote), structural discrimination including legislative and religious discrimination, and subtle discrimination such as prejudicial comments and social exclusion. Expectations of rejection can also occur acutely or more subtly. Individuals can experience marked stress as a result of the anticipation of rejection during the process of “coming out” to friends, family, and coworkers. They can also experience chronic stress as they continuously assess the safety of particular settings in both the workplace and the community. The need to conceal identity is more complex than deciding whether to disclose sexual orientation. It can also include hiding or modifying aspects of identity such as behaviors, styles, and social relationships and continuously assessing environments to choose appropriate levels of disclosure. Internalizing societal stigma, termed internalized heterosexism, describes negative attitudes about one’s own nonheteronormative sexual orientation or gender expression or a negative evaluation of sexual orientation minorities, relationships, and communities more generally. Often individuals experience and respond to minority stressors from multiple categories simultaneously. For example, conformity to heteronormative standards of appearance and behavior can result from an expectation of rejection, the need to conceal identity, and, possibly, internalized heterosexism.

Minority stress is not solely based on an individual’s experience, but can also be influenced by the treatment of other group members. “Felt stigma” describes an individual’s awareness of the mistreatment of other members of their group or their group as a whole (Herek & Garnets, 2007; Scambler & Hopkins, 1986). For example, being exposed to accounts of antigay politics in the news or hearing about the mistreatment of a colleague can make an individual feel vulnerable even without directly experiencing a prejudicial event (Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, & Miller, 2009).

In his further development of minority stress theory, Meyer (2003) delineates minority stressors into distal—objective, external events such as prejudicial events, and proximal—internal processes such as expectations of mistreatment and internalized heterosexism. Although Meyer’s model especially focuses on internal processes, he emphasizes the importance of viewing internal processes as derived from social conditions and structure—that “states of mind [as] have their grounding in the realities of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination” (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998, p. 516).

Meyer (2003) also describes processes that may mitigate the effects of minority stress. Primarily, he asserts that a strong sense of lesbian and/or gay community cohesiveness and lesbian or gay identity allow individuals to evaluate themselves in a context apart from the dominant culture, leading to better outcomes. Studies support the idea that strong lesbian and/or gay community ties serve to ameliorate the effects of minority stressors (Fingerhut et al., 2010). For example, a study of lesbian and gay senior citizens found that a lesbian and/or gay social network decreases the...
likelihood of loneliness whereas a general social network does not (Kuyper & Fokkema, 2010).

Although Meyer developed the minority stress model to explain disproportionately negative mental health outcomes among lesbian and gay individuals, other studies have broadened the reach, using the model to investigate a variety of outcomes (Bos et al., 2004; Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011; Rostosky et al., 2007; Smith & Ingram, 2004). These studies establish a strong case for minority stress—

that prejudicial events, anticipation of prejudice, the need to hide sexual orientation, and the internalization of negative societal views about sexual orientation minorities increase the likelihood of negative outcomes whether psychological such as increased depression and substance abuse, relational such as lower quality relationships, or performance-related such as poorer academic outcomes.

Motivation for Study

This study sheds light on the process of minority stress in the workplace using data from a larger project designed to examine the experiences of lesbian and gay faculty more broadly. The workplace is an ideal setting to study minority stress because adults typically spend a significant proportion of their lives at work. In addition, whereas lesbian and gay individuals might be able to surround themselves with supportive networks outside of work, few can control the behavior and attitudes of coworkers or the general climate in the workplace (Waldo, 1999). Because they are less than 2% of the population in the United States (Gates, 2014), lesbian and gay individuals typically constitute a small minority in their workplace, meaning they may experience a variety of prejudicial events, yet are unlikely to have a lesbian and gay network that might ameliorate the effect of stressors (Kuyper & Fokkema, 2010; Meyer, 2003).

One of the weaknesses of the literature investigating minority stress among lesbian and gay individuals is the preponderance of studies that use survey data to correlate minority stressors with health outcomes (Frost, Lehavot, & Meyer, 2015; Herek & Garnets, 2007; Lehavot & Simoni, 2011; Meyer, 1995; Meyer, 2003; Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011). A paucity of studies use qualitative data to investigate minority stress (cf. Hequembourg & Brallier, 2009; Rostosky et al., 2007), although this approach could provide greater insight into the internal processes that create minority stress. This study is guided by the question, How do lesbian and gay faculty interpret, respond to, and anticipate prejudicial events? The purpose is not to revise minority stress theory, but, instead, to more fully illustrate the process of minority stress—the variety of events that can create both acute and chronic stress, the context of prejudicial events, how individuals interpret prejudicial events, and the internal and external strategies participants used to cope with minority stressors.

Method

Participants

This article draws on existing data collected for a university-sponsored project examining the experiences of lesbian and gay faculty at the institution. The participants are lesbian and gay faculty at a Master’s granting, state university in the Northwestern United States with approximately 15,000 students. The University is located in a relatively homogenous, small city with a population of approximately 80,000. The primary criteria for inclusion in the study were a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity and a position or former position as a tenure-track or tenured faculty member at the institution. The sample was limited to tenured and tenure-track faculty because of the relatively small number of interviews. Non–tenure-track faculty may face fundamentally different challenges because of their position in the academic hierarchy, thus a separate analysis of their experiences is warranted.

The author developed a list of potential interviewees through personal contacts, asking for recommendations, and employing snowball sampling by asking participants if they could recommend other faculty for the study (Browne, 2005). To protect privacy, the recommender first contacted the potential participant to gauge their interest before providing contact information to the author. All individuals recommended by other interviewees agreed to be interviewed. The author’s social location as an “insider” because of her queer identity and visible gender nonconformity in addition to her previous research addressing LGBT topics helped participants feel comfortable, both in meeting with her and disclosing potentially sensitive information.

The approach to cultivating contacts resulted in a list containing approximately 4% of tenured and tenure-track faculty at the institution. Of the 19 potential participants who were currently employed at the institution, 16 completed interviews, 2 declined to be interviewed, and 1 did not respond to scheduling attempts. The author did not interview all lesbian and gay faculty, but spoke with faculty until a point of saturation was reached, meaning that little new information or insight was gained from additional interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The significant percentage of tenure and tenure-track faculty on the contact list (almost 4%) and the high response rate (84%) to the request to interview suggests that the sample is fairly representative of lesbian and gay faculty at the institution.

Of the 18 participants, 14 were tenured (7 associate, 7 full professor), 2 were tenure-track, and 2 were former faculty members (1 associate, 1 full professor). All participants were open about their sexual orientation at work. On average, participants had worked at the University for 14 years and represented 11 departments in 5 colleges. For the sake of privacy, the colleges represented are listed rather than specific departments. The number of participants from each college is noted in parentheses: business and technology (1), education (5), fine and performing arts (4), humanities and social sciences (7), and interdisciplinary studies (1). The majority of participants were white with only 3 racial/ethnic minority participants. This proportion was comparable to the racial and ethnic distribution of faculty at the University.

Nine of the interviewees were male and 9 were female. Participants used a variety of words to describe their sexual orientation and their identity was summarized using their first relevant response to the question, “Can you tell me what words you use to describe your sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender presentation?” In their initial response, all male participants identified as gay men whereas eight female participants identified as lesbian women and one as queer. The participant who identified as queer is in a long-term, same-sex relationship and her experiences appeared to be similar to women in the sample who were lesbian-identified. With consent from the queer participant and for the sake
of simplicity, the author will refer to participants as “lesbian and gay” in this article.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected via semistructured, in-depth interviews designed to broadly examine the experiences of lesbian and gay faculty on campus and in the community. The interview guide includes a number of general, open-ended questions about faculty experiences while working at the University (see Appendix). The author’s aim was to offer participants the opportunity to tailor the interview, describing experiences and events they deemed important, then reflect on and interpret their meaning (Creswell, 2013). Interviews took approximately one hour and were conducted in the author’s office, the participant’s office, or in a public space such as a University coffee shop. Some participants viewed a public location as safer because they believed it was less likely to associate them with the anticipated campus report. For two participants no longer working at the University, interviews were conducted by phone. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by a transcriber with no ties to the institution to encourage participants to speak freely about their views and experiences. As the sole interviewer, the author verified the accuracy of the transcripts by carefully reading through them and using the recordings to correct any errors before beginning to analyze the data.

The author analyzed transcripts within a phenomenological framework meant to document experiences regarding a particular phenomenon, their context, and how they are perceived by the actors (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The analytical process included collecting experiences via participant-directed, semistructured interviews, reading resultant transcripts in their entirety to gain a broad sense of minority stress processes, identifying central themes in accounts from participants, then organizing the content within the themes into categories as specified by Meyer’s (1995, 2003) minority stress theory (Creswell, 2013).

Approaches to ensuring the quality of qualitative analyses vary widely. Some researchers attempt to address validity and reliability using strategies similar to those in quantitative analysis (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), whereas others reject a quantitative paradigm, asserting that the aims of qualitative analysis fundamentally differ (Wolcott, 1994). The goal of this study was to illustrate the process of minority stress among lesbian and gay faculty rather than make generalizable claims regarding the experiences of lesbian and gay faculty. To this end, the author sought to ensure accuracy and reliability, that is, that the data collected truly reflected the views and experiences of participants. During the interviews, the author practiced validation in situ, continually verifying her understanding of participants’ accounts through paraphrasing and asking follow up questions to clarify participant intent (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). The author also contacted participants to give them the opportunity to clarify or expand on particular statements or accounts of events that were going to be incorporated into the article. During this process, some participants chose to remove or edit accounts that did not accurately reflect their views.

Finally, in an effort to protect privacy, the author contacted participants when quotes or accounts used in the article might be identifying. As a result, some statements were deleted or edited as requested by participants. All accounts in this study that may be identifying were explicitly approved by the participants.

Results

Distal Stressors

Distal stressors consist of external instances of mistreatment including both overt discrimination and more subtle forms of prejudice. Discrimination is often conceptualized as events that affect material outcomes and may be prohibited by law. However, a variety of encounters do not meet the legal definition of discrimination, yet contribute to a stressful environment for minorities. These subtle distal stressors include stereotyping, exclusion, isolation, invisibility, and the assertion of heteronormative standards.

Discrimination. Participants described several instances of overt discrimination including attempts to block tenure and promotion, differential treatment relative to heterosexual faculty, and verbal attacks and harassment. In addition to creating significant stress for faculty, some of these instances resulted in negative material outcomes such as denial of internal research funding, inability to secure spousal employment, losing an election bid for chair, and in one instance, leaving the University.

One participant reported a contentious relationship with some members of his department, describing several negative incidents. The department voted to deny him tenure and the chair’s denial letter not only had several inaccuracies, but was particularly hostile. “There was a Dean at that point, she intervened at the Dean’s level, gave my application a proper review, and it went through.”

Three participants discussed concerns about discrimination within the context of spousal hires. They reported being misled about the possibility of a spousal hire or being denied spousal accommodation. Another participant noted that in her relatively large department “there are many, many spousal hires. They are all heterosexuals who are married. . . . I’ve never seen any indication that it would be acceptable for a homosexual couple.”

In addition to blocked opportunities, two participants from separate departments experienced egregious harassment—something prohibited by protective legislation at the state and institutional level. Even with explicit legal protections, these individuals reported ongoing hostile and threatening work environments. One participant recounted a discriminatory situation with another faculty member:

He called me a stupid faggot. And then professionally, he started referring to me as “Precious,” to where the nickname started to follow me in my professional circles . . . . [He was told] if he ever did anything again he would be dismissed. And literally 10 years after the first offense, he reoffended with a student and was finally dismissed . . . . It was 10 years fighting this harassment thing and I left . . . . without another teaching job . . . . I never felt like I was an important member of a family . . . . I wasn’t important enough to protect.

Two other participants noted what appeared to be a pattern of discrimination against gay faculty within their separate departments. One faculty member who had been a member of his department for 10 years reported:

It seems every gay faculty has been targeted for something in this department at one time or another . . . . It would be really hard to prove
that, but why is it the same chair has picked on all the gay faculty in the department, leading to an attempt to deny tenure for one, a demotion from coordinating [an] area when he’d been doing it for 15 years, and then pinpointing me because I decided to do something that would be better for the students . . .

Clearly, direct discrimination and prejudice such as the incidents reported by the participants result in a stressful work environment. Individuals must assess the severity of the incident, decide whether to take action such as filing a grievance, and remain alert for additional instances of discrimination or harassment. Yet minority individuals who are not directly affected also experience stress when an incident targets other members of the stigmatized group (Herek & Garnets, 2007; Scambler & Hopkins, 1986). The awareness of the potential for discrimination creates a hostile work environment for all group members as they must continuously assess the safety of environments and evaluate the meaning of experiences.

**Isolation and exclusion.** Although some participants described instances of direct discrimination that negatively affected their outcomes, participants mainly experienced less overt forms of prejudice including subtle hostility, exclusion and isolation, stereotyping, and heteronormative assumptions. All except one participant reported at least one incident of this type of discrimination, especially prejudice in interpersonal interactions.

Research suggests that faculty prize collegiality and opportunities to collaborate, and that academic social connections are very important to their job satisfaction (Ambrose, Huston, & Norman, 2005; Marston & Brunetti, 2009). Studies find that social connections can mitigate the everyday stressors faced by lesbian and gay faculty in the work environment (Herek & Garnets, 2007; Meyer, 2003). Whereas research suggests social connections are important to a positive academic climate, faculty who are sexual orientation minorities may have less access to these connections. Although a department may be viewed as collegial by members of the dominant culture, sexual orientation minorities may perceive it differently. A third of participants reported experiences of isolation and a lack of collegiality in their department.

We were invited to some parties early on, and it’s a very heterosexual department, they are all married to each other . . .. So I don’t know if it’s just that I don’t have a partner in the department, and that’s why I don’t get invited. We initially did, but that fell away.

In addition to social isolation, some faculty reported academic isolation in their departments including the failure to acknowledge accomplishments: “When I got my Fulbright, [an external person] congratulated me. No one in my department did . . .. [It was] the same year I was denied my full professorship.” Four faculty members reported feeling isolated because of devaluation of research or teaching that included LGBT content. One participant reported that, in his peer evaluation, a colleague wrote that “he’s pushing his gay agenda in this class” by teaching LGBT content in a course not focused on sexual orientation. Another respondent described her experience preparing her tenure file:

I was told by my chair that the work I did in GLBT studies would not be understandable to people and that it basically wasn’t recognized as a valid field. I was told . . . that my tenure letter needed to include a special explanation of why my field was even a field.

In addition to descriptions of exclusion and isolation in the department, faculty members described institutional exclusion. In a variety of ways, participants viewed LGBT students, staff and faculty as sometimes excluded or marginalized, especially as a valued facet of diversity. They were unclear whether diversity efforts on campus included sexual orientation minorities and one individual described LGBT diversity efforts as a “second tier, a lower tier.” Two participants described a diversity-related committee whose purpose was to rank the needs of minority employees on campus. Because lesbian and gay committee members had less representation on the committee, none of their needs or concerns was prioritized.

In addition to a lack of incorporation into diversity efforts, three faculty members described the visibly heteronormative orientation of the University which simultaneously signaled university values and excluded lesbian and gay faculty from representations of campus life:

Outside of University Relations they had all these very glossy posters and one was emphasizing how green the campus was. This faculty member and his wife had bought near the campus so they could bicycle to work . . .. There was something about it that irritated me. Again, the straight couple serves as a symbol of the University.

**Invisibility.** Another aspect of exclusion in the work environment is invisibility, operating on two fronts. On a broader level, the lack of acknowledgment of LGBT cultures, styles, and histories isolates lesbian and gay faculty by refusing to acknowledge their uniqueness relative to heteronormative culture and structures. On an interactional level, a preference for heterosexual and gender normative individuals can result in faculty feeling literally invisible. One butch-identified2 woman confirmed, “I think there are people who treat me differently . . .. [A man in a leadership position] likes girly girls, so girly girls are there for him and nongirly girls are invisible to him . . .. He’s not unique. There are a lot of them.”

Although this respondent did not believe her professional outcomes were compromised, the circumstance illustrates processes that create minority stress—the participant simultaneously experienced cultural and individual invisibility while being expected to engage productively in a career centered on public visibility through teaching and scholarship.

Another aspect of invisibility is an inability to see group members as distinct from each other. This can range from mistaking lesbian or gay faculty members for each other to failing to distinguish between two minority faculty members’ scholarly work.

So, it seems like she’s “the other one.” We get lumped together and it seems like it’s more about being lesbians than anything else. In fact, we are as dissimilar [in specialty] as we could be . . .. When there are presentations of work in the department, we get lumped together and our work is completely different.

The combination, then, of both socially and academically isolating faculty in the department while refusing to acknowledge their distinctness from each other can create ongoing stress for

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2 In this context, butch is used to describe masculine or gender nonconforming women who are usually, but not always, lesbian or queer identified.
Lesbian and gay faculty and minority stress

Sexual orientation minorities. In addition, stereotyping—assuming characteristics based on group membership—depersonalizes the individual, creating the stress of both coping with mistreatment and working to counteract stereotypes and assert individuality. Stereotyping can also cause lesbian and gay individuals to monitor behavior relating to sexuality and gender—areas that are particularly vulnerable to stereotyping for sexual orientation minorities.

**Invoking stereotypes.** Although there are numerous stereotypes regarding the gender and sexual behavior of sexual orientation minorities, the view of gay men as hypersexual especially influenced faculty in this study. More than half of the gay men in this study reported instances of heterosexual faculty and staff sexualizing them by making sexual remarks, telling gay jokes or sexual jokes, assuming gay men sexualize other men indiscriminately, and engaging in overly familiar behavior. One respondent described it as, “The adolescent things . . . like the faculty member saying, ‘I know what you’re doing in the men’s bathroom . . .’” or the “‘Hey, girlfriend’ thing.” Faculty reported a variety of inappropriate interactions with colleagues that illustrate not only prevalent stereotypes regarding gay men, but how heterosexuals engage them in everyday work life.

[This colleague] was off-the-wall, telling off-color, gay jokes . . . . [He] used to direct those jokes at me because he thought I would find them particularly funny because they were gay jokes. I think they want to be accepted by me and it’s their clumsy way of saying “I’m liberal. I’m out there. I have gay friends.”

There is this kind of Will and Grace phenomenon where people want to have a gay best friend. So I have run across that here . . . where people are like, “Oh great you’re gay, now I can be inappropriate with you and grab your ass.”

There have been times, and I’m thinking of one person in particular with whom I work in fairly close physical proximity—I think she’s crossed the boundaries. She’s taken liberties in terms of sexual banter that have made me feel uncomfortable.

It is important to note that sexualized interactions were experienced exclusively by gay men. Lesbian faculty did not report any experiences of sexualization, although two expressed concern about being viewed that way by students. Because women are often viewed as less sexual within heteronormative cultures (Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001), it may not be surprising that, relative to gay men, lesbians in this study were less sexualized. The above incidents illustrate a sustained process across multiple types of interactions that marginalize sexual orientation minority faculty, both isolating them from their colleagues and limiting their ability to fully participate in academic life. Continuously invoking stereotypes engaged gay participant’s stigmatized social position, resulting in chronic stress as they both negotiated prejudicial interactions and evaluated how to reduce their likelihood.

**Enforcing heteronormativity.** Social isolation can occur not only by failing to individuate between minority faculty members, but also by emphasizing differences between heterosexual individuals and lesbian and gay individuals. Much of this “othering” relies on gendered notions of appropriate behavior for men and women. Gender conformity regarding behavior, mannerisms, and dress can signal “insider” status and may offer greater opportunities for lesbian and gay individuals. Gender nonconformity, however, may limit the ability to participate in a heteronormatively structured environment and result in ongoing social sanctions for the nonconforming individual (Feinstein, Goldfried, & Davila, 2012).

Three faculty members believed that their relatively heteronormative lives contributed to their success at work. One lesbian participant explained, “I’m pretty middle of the road, middle class, and I fell in love with a woman . . . We have two kids, two cars, two cats, a house, I grow a garden . . . I am assimilatable.”

Another, while noting her success, believed discrimination “varies also according to our physical characteristics and the way we express our identities as well. If you’re in people’s faces, if you’re dressing differently from the norm, if you’re a butch type.”

Although these lesbian faculty members described successful careers, they were aware that their success was partially attributable to their “appropriately” gendered behavior and appearance. This awareness may create ongoing stress, not only for nonconforming individuals, but for all lesbian and gay faculty who encounter additional scrutiny as a result of stereotypes regarding gender and sexual orientation. Lesbian and gay individuals are held uniquely accountable for gender performance (Kane, 2006), and others may feel entitled to publicly comment on their gender transgressions. One gay man recounted an incident he felt called attention to his gender nonconformity:

This person said . . ., “Oh, I can tell this is going to be a good story because your hands are starting to raise above your belt level now. And you’re getting really animated . . . .” And although this statement . . . was completely good-natured, it once again felt as though I was being singled out . . . . It made me very self-conscious of how I present myself among colleagues . . . . When I hear statements like that, it’s “No, no, no, that behavior is outside of the gender norms here.” And so pointing it out just reminds me there are certain gender expectations of me that I have to meet.

As a result of the attention paid to nonconformity, some lesbian and gay faculty became vigilant, policing their behavior and appearance for heteronormative conformity and questioning their own “natural” choices. Alternatively, nonconforming individuals might choose to consciously challenge the gender standards, but this can result in another form of stress—tirelessly educating others and actively resisting attempts to enforce conformity. Regardless of strategy—whether choosing to self-monitor or do battle with heteronormative standards in the workplace—heteronormative gender standards create a minority stressor unique to sexual orientation and gender minorities.

**Proximal Stressors**

**Expectations of rejection.** The expectation of rejection is a significant minority stressor for lesbian and gay individuals (Meyer, 2003). Rejection includes many of the experiences described above such as exclusion, isolation, lack of individuation, and stigmatization, both at the interpersonal and institutional level. Anticipation of rejection is not only stressful, but can influence work outcomes. One lesbian professor reported:

So I was on this [administration] trajectory and lots of people said I should go for a presidency somewhere. There had been enough people who had tried for that and not been hired because of their sexual orientation that I didn’t even try.
In addition to choosing not to pursue particular opportunities and promotions, faculty members described two internal processes resulting from the expectation of rejection—increased vigilance and wondering whether circumstances were the result of discrimination.

**Vigilance.** Faculty members described heightened vigilance in a variety of circumstances. For example, three believed there were gendered dress expectations with which they should comply. Two additional participants worried that they might be discriminated against in seeking opportunities and felt vulnerable when exposing themselves to scrutiny, for example, by running for chair. One participant reported, “[I have a] great deal of awareness and sometimes anxiety about the meaning of actions and about the possibility of discrimination.” Another faculty member discussed a homophobic incident which, upon reflection, he attributed to a lack of vigilance. “I felt that it was personal, that I was being teased . . . . Then I started thinking, ‘Gosh, I didn’t realize I presented quite like that.’”

Because sexual orientation minorities have historically been characterized as sexual predators (Lee, 2008), faculty were especially vigilant in the sexual arena. Some faculty members, especially gay men, felt vulnerable to sexual allegations by students. In fact, taking precautionary measures was so deeply ingrained, gay faculty were not initially aware they engaged in it. No participant mentioned vigilance with students until directly asked about particular practices designed to reduce risk. When prompted, two thirds of gay faculty described strategies regarding campus bathroom use, meeting privately with students, or physical engagement with students. A participant who worked closely with students in a performance-related area described his continual awareness of his vulnerability:

I’m especially sensitive. You know, a coach might come up to a football student and hug them or tap them on the back or do their familiar gestures, and I think, “No way.” The minute I do something like that, even if it’s a genuine expression, there’s going to be one person who misconstrues that. I’m aware of those kind of boundaries that need to be established.

Only one lesbian faculty member reported explicit concerns about sexual allegations. She was the only gender nonconforming female participant and self-identified as butch. When asked if she took precautions with students, she stated succinctly, “I always have the door open with straight women in my office.”

For the participants, vulnerability to sexual allegations led to rumination about previous events, ongoing awareness about the possible misinterpretation of events and behaviors, and the modification of behaviors in order to reduce the likelihood of a negative outcome. It is notable that one of these behaviors—meeting privately with students, could be viewed as a job expectation. Placing restrictions on interactions with students could negatively affect perceptions of the faculty members’ commitment to students and teaching.

**Always wondering: attribution of events.** Although participants reported increased vigilance because of expectations of rejection in the future, half of them also described apprehension about the meaning of past events. Often a participant would recount a negative incident or outcome, then wonder whether it was attributable to their sexual orientation. Whether interpreting past events or anticipating future events, the ongoing possibility of rejection appeared to be a significant, chronic stressor for participants. I include a variety of comments here to demonstrate the diversity of events that made participants wonder whether they had experienced discrimination.

[The person in charge of research funding] until he recently resigned, was someone who was a notorious homophobe . . . . It wasn’t clear to me whether or not his ideas about people and sexuality influenced the committee or not.

We’ve been to dinner at several different presidents’ houses many times, but did the other deans invite us? No . . . . It’s crazy making because I don’t know if it’s because of being queer or not.

My salary was a couple thousand less than my peers. There was a statement made about my being single and that’s a good salary. Usually [my specialty is] paid a little more because there are fewer of us. I’m not sure [being gay is] the reason, but I have to say it was on my mind.

One of my concerns, right or wrong, was that they already had one of me . . . . I thought, “They are not going to hire another one.” I do happen to know that the first offer went to a married man and he turned it down . . . . He could have just had better publications. I have no idea, but I wondered. I had some anxiety.

For lesbian and gay faculty in the study, anticipating rejection meant anticipating prejudice in a variety of settings, resulting in greater vigilance regarding behavior associated with stereotypes, a belief that opportunities might be limited, and rumination about the meaning of past events. Although both past and future negative events might be unrelated to sexual orientation, persistent concerns that prejudice might be a factor created additional stress for lesbian and gay participants.

**Hiding and concealing.** One of the challenges of the Meyer minority stress model is that the delineation of distal and proximal stressors can imply that the individual is solely responsible for internal processes. However, external and internal stressors are inextricably linked. The internal process of anticipating rejection evaluates risk based on objective, external factors and is designed to reduce the likelihood of negative external outcomes. Thus internal processes can shape external events by limiting choices in interaction, appearance, and behavior for stigmatized group members.

In an environment where stereotypes might be invoked, participants described a process of awareness, vigilance, and monitoring of both the safety of the environment and their own behavior and appearance. Individuals who were gender nonconforming or in other ways marginalized sometimes aimed to conceal aspects of their identities. One participant described his awareness of the climate regarding gender at the University:

I think the gender conformity rules are much stricter here than I’ve experienced other places . . . . I think there is a visibility with me here that I haven’t experienced other places, and so I don’t know if I may be just a little bit gayer than some people or if the numbers are just lower here than at other institutions.

A female faculty member believed that conforming to heteronormative standards of gender facilitated success at the University.

I certainly felt a pressure as an administrator. I felt certain pressure for how I dress, which, to me, gets into my identity as queer, to be more [straight], because of what people want out of leadership.
Lesbian and Gay Faculty and Minority Stress

Assessing safety. Meyer (2003) primarily describes hiding and concealing as an individual’s decision about whether and when to divulge sexual orientation. However, sexual orientation disclosure is not a one-time event or a dualistic decision. Individuals must continuously monitor environments, assess safety, and choose appropriate levels of “gayness” including what to reveal about their relationships, styles, networks, and, for some, whether to temper their gender nonconforming behaviors and practices. Rather than “hiding and concealing,” this approach might be better-termed “managing outness.” Three faculty members mentioned an experience that sheds light on how sexual orientation minorities must manage their sexual orientation stigma in work environments. The incident occurred during a large meeting including faculty, administration, and members of the local school district. As a result, group members had varied levels of awareness regarding participants’ sexual orientation. Although this story is quite long, it demonstrates how minority stress results from everyday interaction in heteronormative environments:

I was at a meeting . . . we were all asked to introduce ourselves . . . The chair of this group asked us to say a little bit about our families. I knew I was not the only gay person in the room . . . “Oh,” I thought, “Is that allowable?” . . . So they started around the table, and people were talking about their lovely husband or lovely wife, darling children . . . I looked across the room to another man I knew was gay . . . All we did was exchange a look for a second or two and I knew exactly what he was thinking: “You are about as in shock as I am and you’re wondering what you’re going to say.” I knew there was another person in the room, in the administration, who was gay, but not out publicly . . . I wondered how that person was going to handle this. My turn came up first and I talked about my partner and how many years we’ve been together, that we have two lovely little [dogs] . . . and if I am ever allowed to get married, I think I probably would do so. So the next person who is not out, made no mention whatsoever of orientation, simply said their name and position and simply didn’t answer the rest of the question . . . I thought that was a quite sophisticated option . . . Then when it came to the other fellow’s time, he did about what I did. He made a humorous comment like I tried to, to put people at ease. He talked about his partner and how many years I thought he did quite well and I was quite proud of us for hanging in there in slightly different ways, and I think we made our point as well.

I include this lengthy account because it demonstrates the process of minority stress attributable to common, unexamined work practices. In this situation, faculty had to manage impressions and make important decisions quickly and publicly. They could choose to come out while maintaining a nonthreatening posture by under-scoring their normalcy (e.g., dog owners), combat stereotypes by asserting their heteronormative lives (e.g., gay men as partnered and monogamous), or, as did one faculty member, deem the environment unsafe and refuse to address the issue. No matter how they chose to proceed, participants described a stressful process that included shock and surprise about the situation, anxiety about how to proceed, an assessment of the safety of the situation and all group members, and, finally, the vulnerability engendered by the actual event of disclosure. Thus an event that, through a hetero-normative lens, may seem quite innocuous, can create a great deal of stress for sexual orientation minority individuals who must choose how to manage the present situation then grapple with possible outcomes including discrimination and mistreatment by others, increased anticipation of rejection in other settings, and an escalation of self-monitoring to reduce risk.

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to examine minority stress among lesbian and gay faculty at work. The university in this study could be viewed as particularly supportive because it has worked to foster a positive climate for sexual orientation minorities through policies, initiatives, and explicit, public stances taken by leadership. Although this analysis focuses on incidents associated with minority stress, the great majority of participants were satisfied with the campus climate and very few reported serious acts of discrimination. Even within this relatively positive environment, most participants reported being exposed to prejudicial interactions, unexamined heteronormative practices, and/or exclusionary treatment.

Faculty participants in this project demonstrated the pervasiveness of prejudicial treatment at work, especially ongoing subtle discrimination, termed microaggressions. In this institution, exclusion and isolation affected some lesbian and gay faculty’s ability to collaborate and participate in the collegial functioning of their academic department. The failure to individuate between lesbian and gay faculty members and the emphasis on their differences relative to heterosexual faculty invoked their stigmatized status, leading to ongoing stress among participants. In addition, engaging stereotypes (e.g., gay men are hypersexual) produced multiple stressors: the experience of a prejudicial incident, anticipation of future prejudicial events, and increased vigilance regarding behavior that could be construed negatively. Even when an individual did not directly encounter prejudice, incidents experienced by other group members heightened participants’ sense of vulnerability and increased stress in the workplace.

As a result of both personal mistreatment and belonging to a stigmatized group, the lesbian and gay individuals in this study experienced ongoing proximal stress due to “expectations of rejection” and “hiding and concealing.” To date, the evaluation of proximal stressors has primarily focused on measuring their intensity through responses to basic survey questions. Qualitative approaches allow for a more nuanced understanding of dynamics not easily captured in survey data. In this study, conversations with participants revealed both the meaning ascribed to instances of prejudice, and, importantly, the internal and external processes engaged in when negotiating potentially prejudicial settings.

Participants illustrate the complexity of internal processes which go beyond simply expecting rejection and hiding sexual orientation. Expecting rejection does not require a dualistic decision about whether to disclose sexual orientation. Instead, dependent on setting, lesbian and gay individuals must assess whether to suppress a variety of aspects of identity and behaviors that might be viewed as contrary to heteronormative standards. These decisions about self-disclosure rely on the likelihood of rejection, that is, the probability of prejudice and discrimination. Whereas Meyer (2003) sought to delineate distal and proximal stressors, this study demonstrates their interdependence. Internal processes such as heightened vigilance and monitoring behavior are not without cause, but grounded in specific external threats—individuals assess situations and choose appropriate actions based on the likelihood of discrimination and mistreatment. In addition, participants
in this study continuously questioned whether undesirable outcomes (e.g., denial of promotion, a lower salary, loss of funding) were attributable to discrimination. This ruminative suggests that, for stigmatized minorities, proximal stress can become a continuous “static” in the background of everyday experience, particularly when engaging with dominant cultures.

The sample for this study has several weaknesses. Most important, the participants worked at one regional, Northwestern public university within a fairly homogenous, college town setting. The institution is less diverse racially and ethnically than most of the United States. As a result, this study offers little insight into the potentially differential experiences of lesbian and gay faculty who are racial and ethnic minorities, have a disability, or are immigrants to the United States. Also, schools with more diverse populations may have a greater commitment to diversity and inclusion generally, resulting in a more supportive environment for lesbian and gay faculty. In addition, because the study was conducted in the Northwestern United States and in a nonmetropolitan, nonrural setting, it limits our understanding of the influence of geographic location on faculty. For example, studies suggest that strong ties to a lesbian and/or gay community can mitigate the effects of minority stress (Herek & Garnets, 2007).

Future research could address some of the limitations of this study by broadening the sample. A larger study could incorporate faculty across the United States from a variety of settings, including LGBT faculty who hold multiple minority identities such as racial and ethnic minority faculty, who have disabilities, and faculty who have immigrated to the United States. Although this study has primarily addressed factors that contribute to minority stress, research suggests some factors can mitigate the effects of minority stress. In addition to lesbian and/or gay networks, studies find that resiliency can improve outcomes for sexual orientation minorities (Meyer, 2003; Rostosky et al., 2007; Russell & Richards, 2003).

Although this study has primarily addressed factors that contribute to minority stress, research suggests some factors can mitigate the effects of minority stress. In addition to lesbian and/or gay networks, studies find that resiliency can improve outcomes for sexual orientation minorities (Meyer, 2003; Rostosky et al., 2007; Russell & Richards, 2003). However, a focus on individual strategies such as building resilience runs the risk of characterizing minority stress as an individual problem rather than structurally determined (Meyer, 2003). Internal processes are not derived in a vacuum, but are a consequence of the external social structural environment, occurring as a result of stigma, historical discrimination, and prejudicial events. Without prejudice and discrimination, proximal stressors and the resultant need to foster resiliency would not exist. In other words, it is not increased resiliency, but in eradicating structural and interactional inequalities that negatively influence the work experience of sexual orientation minorities.

References


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Appendix

Interview Guide

Demographic Questions

1. How long have you been at [the University]?  
2. What is your title?  
3. What department do you work in?  
4. What words do you use to identify your sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender presentation?  
5. What words do you use to describe your race/ethnicity?  
6. How would you describe your relationship status?  
7. Do you have children? If so, what ages?  
8. Where do you live?

Retention

1. Can you tell me how you came to [the University]?  
2. How was the hiring process for you?  
3. Can you tell me a little about your experience working at [the University] as a sexual orientation minority?  

Follow up:  
- Anything else that is positive for you here at [the University]?  
- Anything else that is difficult for you?

4. How about in [the City], generally, how has your experience been as a sexual orientation minority?  
5. Have you considered leaving [the University]? If so, why?  
6. What has made you stay?  
7. Do you have any possible solutions to some of the difficulties you have faced?  
8. Do you have any ideas how [the University] could be more supportive of LGBT faculty?  
9. Do you feel that you have experienced discrimination, either subtle or direct, here at [the University]?  

Follow up: Can you tell me a little about that?  
10. Is there anything else you’d like to say about your experience as an LGBT faculty member?  
11. Is there anything else you’d like to add about your perceptions of the climate for LGBT individuals on campus?