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To cite this article: Ryan J. Watson, Christopher W. Wheldon & Stephen T. Russell (2015) How Does Sexual Identity Disclosure Impact School Experiences?, Journal of LGBT Youth, 12:4, 385-396

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2015.1077764>



Published online: 06 Oct 2015.



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How Does Sexual Identity Disclosure Impact School Experiences?

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Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals disproportionately report negative academic outcomes and experiences as a result of stigma and discrimination. No research to date has investigated how being out in different social relationships may affect these youth. We compare youth who are out to family, friends, and people at school to understand which patterns of disclosure are related to school experiences. More complex patterns of “outness” were associated with lower academic achievement and more harassment, whereas being out to no one or everyone was associated with the best outcomes. These findings have important implications for scholars, stakeholders, and counselors.

KEYWORDS *Academic achievement, bullying, harassment, identity disclosure, LGBT*

Coming out has been described as a developmental process in which individuals with same-sex sexual identities acknowledge, explore, and disclose their sexual attractions and behaviors (Coleman, 1982). An important de-

Received 16 May 2014; revised 11 October 2014; accepted 12 October 2014.

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velopmental step in the coming-out process involves telling others. One context where many youth choose to disclose their sexual identity is at school, which is an important context for all youth, and especially lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB), or nonheterosexual, youth, as it serves as a primary point of socialization and identity development. However, studies have found that heterosexuality is broadly enforced as the social norm throughout most schools (Snyder & Broadway, 2004) and thus many youth feel unsafe disclosing their sexual identity at school.

CONTEXTS IN WHICH YOUTH COME OUT

Two of the most salient social groups for identity disclosure in which young people often seek acceptance and support are peers and family. Often coming out to peers occurs before coming out to family members (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006). A recent study surveyed 7,261 students and found that two-thirds were out to their peers at school and 40% had come out to school personnel (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). LGB youth may have different coming-out experiences at home compared to school (Shilo & Savaya, 2011). The issue of how coming out in different contexts (e.g., at home or at school) and to different people (e.g., family, friends, school acquaintances, school personnel) is an important consideration when seeking to understand the coming-out process and its related outcomes. The importance of coming out on psychosocial health outcomes for LGB youth has been addressed in the extant literature (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003; Gonsiorek, 1988; Meyer, 2003); however, less is known about how the process of coming out is related to school experiences.

Previous research has suggested that many LGB youth experience compromised opportunities for academic success (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Herdt & Boxer, 1993). Using nationally representative data, one study found that sexual minority adolescent boys reported lower grades than their heterosexual counterparts (Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). Other research has confirmed that sexual minority youth are more prone to school-related problems, including feeling less socially integrated, having difficulty paying attention in class, and skipping classes more often, which can lead to lower academic achievement (Pearson, Muller, & Wilkinson, 2007). In addition, experiences of school-based victimization among sexual minority students were associated with lower academic achievement, aspirations, and performance (Kosciw et al., 2010). In another study, youth in New Zealand who came out as LGB reported lower levels of educational attainment. This low performance at school was associated with increased bullying and verbal assault (Henrickson, 2008). Most studies inquire whether youth have disclosed their sexual identity to others broadly, yet few studies have differentiated among the different environments in which youth might come out. The

existing research does not shed light on whether academic achievement and school-related problems, like harassment, are associated with being out to different targets of disclosure at home and school.

THE COMING-OUT PROCESS

Disclosing one's sexual minority status typically begins in adolescence (Grov, Bimbi, Nanín, & Parsons, 2006); however, coming out is an ongoing task, as individuals must decide to disclose their sexual identity in different contexts and to different people throughout their life span. In fact, there are several different spaces where youth might choose to disclose their sexual identity. These spaces often exist in isolation from others (e.g., community-based organization outside of school) or may intertwine with other contexts (e.g., gay-straight alliance networks at school, church). LGB youth are forced to be continuously aware of whom they are out to and be mindful of how to manage their disclosure across contexts. Research has been critical of the in-the-closet/out-of-the-closet dichotomy and contests that nonheterosexuals move into and out of the closet across the life span and across different contexts, noting particular differences across race and class (McDermott, 2006; Mezey, 2008). There is reason to believe that youth might experience different outcomes depending on how they have disclosed their sexual identities. The current study investigates whether being out in certain contexts and not others affect youth's experiences at school.

It is assumed that LGB youth, after disclosing their sexual orientation, may receive positive and/or negative feedback that will in turn impact academic and school experiences. As such, the results of coming out can be validating or deleterious depending on the reactions from others. Previous research has shown that the mental health consequences of disclosure are context dependent, and choosing to disclose in certain contexts may result in more desirable mental health outcomes (Legate, Ryan, & Weinstein, 2012). Negative reactions to coming out, in particular the experience of victimization, predict a host of negative outcomes for LGB youth (Mishna, Newman, Daley, & Solomon, 2009; Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2014; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996). Studies have linked LGB victimization with substance abuse (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2009), suicidal ideation (Haas et al., 2010), and compromised mental health (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). In addition, LGB youth are faced with complex decisions regarding sexual identity disclosure across multiple contexts.

CURRENT STUDY

It is clear from the existing literature that the coming-out process—and in particular the task of self-disclosure—is a highly salient issue for LGB youth

and is associated with various psychosocial outcomes. It is less clear how the individual or group to whom one comes out relates to experiences at school (i.e., academic achievement and harassment). Being out at school has shown to be associated with more harassment yet, at the same time, feeling less socially isolated (Kosciw et al., 2010). Therefore, LGB youth appear to experience a range of consequences resulting from coming out, which we theorize is related to the contexts (people and places) in which they are out. The degree to which coming out in different contexts negatively (e.g., lower grades and more frequent harassment) or positively (e.g., higher grades and less frequent harassment) relates to school-related consequences is largely unknown. The objective of the current study was to determine how patterns of “outness” (i.e., coming out to different people across social environments) relate to academic achievement and experiences of harassment at school. The following research questions will be examined: (1) What are the differences in academic achievement among LGB youth based on their patterns of outness? (2) What are the differences in frequency of school-based harassment among LGB youth based on their patterns of outness?

METHOD

Middle and high school students in California ($n = 1,031$) participated in the Preventing School Harassment Survey (PSH). The California Safe Schools Coalition administered this survey for multiple years with the purpose of collecting data on school climate and experiences of youth; data for this study were taken from the 2008 PSH survey. The recruitment oversampled LGB youth, but heterosexual youth also participated. To reach LGB youth specifically, data were collected through high school gay–straight alliance (GSA) clubs and through community-based LGB youth-serving organizations. Paper copies of the survey were distributed through the GSA Network to high school GSAs in California. GSAs and community programs that support LGB youth were also notified about the online edition of the survey; 20% of respondents participated using the online format. For more information about data collection, see Thompson, Sinclair, Wilchins, and Russell (2015).

Respondents ranged in age from 12 to 18 years old ($M = 15.74$, $SD = 1.23$). More than half (63%) of the sample reported their gender as female. In total, 375 youth identified as LGB. The sample was racially and ethnically diverse: 13% identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, 10% as Black/African American, 26% as Hispanic or Latina/o, 35% as White/Caucasian, and 17% as multiracial. Of the 375 LGB youth, 18% of participants were out to their parents, 41.5% were out to their friends, and about 19% were out to others at school; more females had disclosed their sexual identities to their parents, and more males were out to others at school. These differences were statistically significant, so we controlled for gender in our model.

Measures

Academic achievement. Participants reported their academic achievement by describing the grades they received in school over the past year. Responses ranged from 0 (mostly *F*s) to 8 (mostly *A*s). We coded this so that 4.0 corresponded to mostly *A*s, 3.5 to *A*s and *B*s, 3.0 to mostly *B*s, 2.5 to *B*s and *C*s, 2.0 to mostly *C*s, 1.5 to mostly *C*s and *D*s, 1.0 to mostly *D*s and 0 to mostly *F*s.

Being out to others. To assess different contexts and social relationships in which LGB youth were out, youth were asked, “If you identify as LGB, which other people know?” with answer choices of 0 (*None*), 1 (*A few*), 2 (*Most*), and 3 (*All*) for four different categories: my friends, my family, adults at school, and other students. The responses to “adults at school” and “students at school” were highly correlated ($r = 0.88$), so these responses were combined into one variable labeled “others at school.”

Harassment at school. Participants reported the number of times in the past year on school property that they were harassed “because [they] are gay, lesbian, or bisexual or someone thought [they] were.” This item included harassment for both actual and perceived sexual identity. Response options included 0 (*Never been harassed*), 1 (*Once*), 2 (*Two to three times*), and 3 (*Four or more times*).

Data Analysis

To assess how coming out in different contexts (i.e., being out to others) was related to academic achievement and experiences of harassment at school, we used general linear modeling (GLM) to predict grades and levels of harassment after controlling for gender, race/ethnicity, and parental education. Tukey follow-up tests were conducted to determine if being out in more contexts was associated with better academic achievement and experiences of harassment. For descriptive purposes we present follow-up analyses in which three key variables—out to family, out to friends, and out to others at school—were dichotomized by their corresponding medians, such that the upper 50% of individuals who were out to a certain group of people were classified as more likely to be out to that subgroup.

RESULTS

We examined academic achievement ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 1.07$) and harassment ($M = 1.10$, $SD = 0.75$) for LGB youth. We first conducted a GLM with three main effects: being out to (a) family, (b) friends, and (c) others at school. All three main effects were significantly associated with harassment and academic achievement. Next, we added the interactions to the model

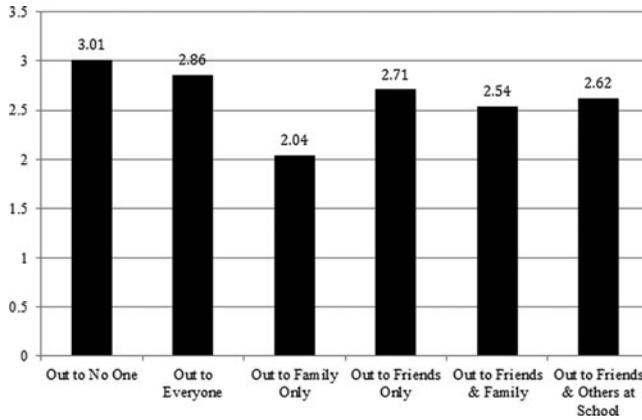


FIGURE 1 Academic achievement by patterns of outness among LGB youth ($N = 375$).

(i.e., family \times friends, family \times school, friends \times school, family \times friends \times school). In both models, the three-way interaction between being out to family, friends, and others at school was significant. Being out to family, friends, and others at school was significantly associated with grades ($F(1, 367) = 5.30, p < .05$) and harassment ($F(1, 367) = 9.72, p < .01$) for LGB students.

Follow-up analyses to interpret the interaction for grades and harassment are presented in Figures 1 and 2, respectively. Youth who were more likely to be out to no one ($n = 99$) reported the highest grades and lowest rates of harassment. Youth who were more likely to be out to everyone ($n = 44$) reported the next highest grades and next lowest rates of harassment. Youth at opposite extremes (i.e., out to no one and out to everyone) reported the highest grades and lowest harassment. The more complex the pattern of outness, the lower the grades and more harassment were reported. For example, youth that were out only to family ($n = 15$) reported the lowest

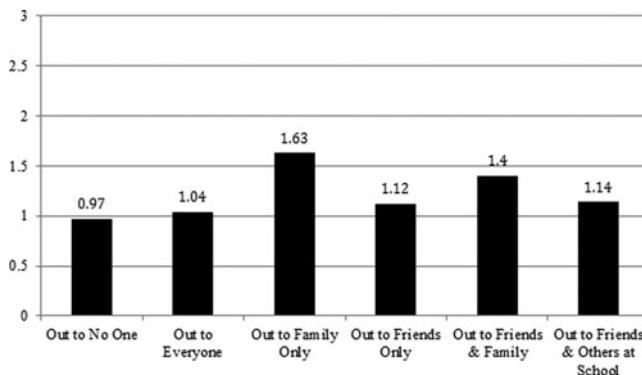


FIGURE 2 Experiences of harassment at school among LGB youth ($N = 375$).

grades and highest rates of harassment of any combination of disclosure. Youth that were only out to friends ($n = 114$) reported moderately higher grades and lower harassment compared to those out to friends in combination with family ($n = 74$) and others at school ($n = 29$). Those who were out to the least number of people were harassed the least, and those who were out to the most number of people in each category were harassed the most.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the current study suggest that coming out to different groups of people (i.e., at school and/or at home) is associated with academic achievement and harassment depending on the patterns of outness. Youth who were not out at all or out to everyone reported the highest grades and lowest rates of harassment; these youth had to manage their outness the least. The findings were more complex for youth who had to manage being out to different combinations of targets of disclosure. For example, we found that being out to more friends solely or in combination with other groups of individuals (i.e., family members) was generally associated with higher grades and less school harassment. In addition, youth who reported being out at home but not at school reported the worst grades and more harassment.

This study supports current literature that links others' knowledge of sexual identity with improved personal outcomes (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Russell, Watson, & Muraco, 2012) and suggests that this effect may be moderated by patterns of self-disclosure. Students who feel the need or are required to constantly manage to whom they are out may perform worse at school, while students who are out to the majority of others in their social environment perform better in school. But of course the question of cause and effect could operate in both directions: It may be that due to their experiences of harassment at school, some youth were attempting to conceal their LGB identities at school and were out only at home. Although the direction of this association cannot be determined in this cross-sectional study, the results are relevant for school counselors and school administrators who traditionally might think that the more out a student is, the more discrimination and harassment she or he might endure. Although out LGB students may indeed be targets of harassment at school, those who remain in the closet may experience maladaptive developmental outcomes as well.

The results of this study suggest different experiences for youth based on the context and social relations that define their being out. This leads to two important questions: Are LGB youth so involved and concerned about how to negotiate coming out to others that they may ignore their studies and thus perform lower than their heterosexual counterparts? Or can problems with coming out be attributed to the school context, in that schools that engage youth academically are more helpful in encouraging LGB youth to express

themselves, therefore allowing them to come out to more individuals? In addition, youth are required to balance their desires to come out to others but also blend in and thrive in the school climate that may be hostile to individuals that do not conform. These tensions likely come into play in youths' decisions to come out at home and/or at school, and stakeholders should help youth consider these delicate decisions carefully.

Although school-level variables were not part of this study, these are important questions to consider when counselors and school administrators work to understand how school climate affects individual-level processes, such as identity development.

Our findings also suggest that if students cannot disclose their sexual identity to multiple groups at the same time, their achievement may be undermined. With the exception of those youth who did not disclose their sexual identity to anyone, youth that were out to only one or two targets of disclosure reported lower academic achievement and higher rates of harassment. It is compelling that youth that were only out to family fared the worst. Because LGB individuals must oftentimes rely on surrogate support systems such as friends (in comparison with families that may lack the tools to socialize their nonheterosexual child in a heteronormative society), it may be particularly difficult for young people to disclose their sexual identity to family members only. We suggest that counselors and school administrators be aware of the challenges LGB youth may face in managing their sexual identity disclosure to multiple groups and be attuned to patterns of disclosure described in this article.

In summary, our findings implicate that it is not as simple as youth being better or worse off based on their decision to disclose or not disclose their sexual identity. There are both advantages and costs of remaining in the closet or disclosing sexual identity to multiple groups of individuals; youth that disclose their sexual orientation during high school may be doing so when conforming and fitting in is most important. Our findings corroborate past research that implicate others' knowledge of one's LGB status as associated with poor academic outcomes: One study found that LGB exclusion at school explained 10% of the variance in grade point average that was not attributed to prior levels of achievement (Murdock & Bolch, 2005). Those youth that reported exclusion based on their sexual identity—and thus had come out to others—also reported lower grades. The youth that experienced both LGB exclusion and harassment reported significantly lower grades than their counterparts who were not harassed.

Limitations and Implications

There are limitations to this study. First, the study relies exclusively on self-reports. Although commonly used in scientific research, such reports may be subject to self-reporting biases. For example, Pearson and colleagues (2007)

report the advantages of using school reports of grades (i.e., data from transcripts) over self-reports, especially in a nationally representative sample. Another limitation of the data is the restriction of variability in the “being out to others” variables: We chose to dichotomize the coming-out variables at the median values because there was not sufficient power to detect differences if we had dichotomized the variables simply as “out” and “not out.” In addition, 15 of the 375 youth were out only to family members, which represents a small—yet interesting—group of young sexual minorities. Future research should explore the circumstances in which youth would disclose their sexual identity only to family, and not friends, for example. Further, the study was conducted in 2008 in California. Given the rapid pace of social change and societal acceptance regarding LGB issues, generalizability to youth in other regions or to contemporary youth in California may be limited. Last, the sample focused only on lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. Transgender youth may report different patterns of disclosure; this disclosure might relate differently to academic achievement and harassment. Researchers should explicitly identify transgender participants in future studies and explore whether this population is unique from the LGB sample we have identified.

Future research should be decisive in measuring multiple groups to whom LGB youth come out besides family and friends. As this study has demonstrated, multiple contexts and social relationships are influential on youth development, and further study may yield deeper understanding of factors associated with coming out, as well as achievement and well-being for LGB youth. Researchers should explore gender and race differences; should these exist, we can further understand issues of intersectionality between race, gender, age, and sexual orientation. For example, how might the experiences differ in elementary, middle, and high school? Youth might carefully navigate the people to whom they come out by choosing those individuals that seem safest. This finding has important implications for stakeholders: Counselors can help youth navigate the complex process of coming out, as timing and targets of disclosure may differ across multiple contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors thank the Gay–Straight Alliance Network for their role in collecting the data, the California Safe Schools Coalition Evaluation Committee for access to the data, and Jenifer McGuire, Cesar Egurrola, Craig Talmage, Jacqueline Larriva, and Nicole Lehman for assistance with data preparation.

FUNDING

The authors acknowledge financial support for this research from the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship under Grant (No.

DGE-1143953) provided to Ryan J. Watson, and thank the Crossroads Collaborative for feedback and assistance in preparing this manuscript. This research was supported by a contract from the California Endowment to the California Safe Schools Coalition.

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