MINIMIZATION OF THE HIDDEN INJURIES OF SEXUAL IDENTITY: 
CONSTRUCTING MEANING OF OUT LGB CAMPUS LIFE

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ABSTRACT

The concept of hidden injuries was first described by Sennett and Cobb (1972) in reference to minority class statuses, though this concept can be applied to sexual minorities. Although universities are historically spaces where sexual identity issues are explored, identifying as non-heterosexual can impact the lives of college students, inflicting hidden injuries that are not readily apparent, but that have lasting consequences for the targets of heterosexism and homophobia. Sixteen out lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) college students were asked how they make meaning of incidences of heterosexism and the campus climate. A focus group was conducted with three of the individual interview participants, exploring similar questions. An analysis of the students’ responses yielded four general themes. First, the overwhelming majority of students tended to minimize incidences of heterosexism and homophobia in their lives. Second, there was a desire on the part of many respondents to support heteronormativity and develop an identity apart from, rather than integrated with, sexual identity. Third, the campus climate was generally portrayed as positive, though typically in reference to less-supportive milieus. Finally, among some participants, there was the potential for resisting heterosexism, suggesting that the damage done by these hidden injuries can be countered.
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INTRODUCTION

Hidden injuries are subtle but powerful constraints social structure places on a minority group, often causing psychological or emotional strife that those not in the group do not have to concern themselves with if they do not wish to. In particular, this concept has been used in discussions of class, with Sennett and Cobb’s (1972) exploration of the emotional and intrapersonal difficulties of working-class persons that go largely unnoticed by the middle class or elites with political power. Minority class statuses, as well as race and gender statuses, carry with them the “hidden injuries” that continue to perpetuate oppression in subtle ways, impacting the psyche of those targeted by these societal power structures.

The hidden injuries of sexual identity, however, are largely unexplored by sociology. Certainly, it would be hard to deny that sexual minority persons face discrimination and live with hidden injuries. There are a number of possible reasons for the discipline’s dearth of literature on inequalities and concerns that face gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals. Status as a sexual minority is grounded fundamentally in identity (Cass 1979). That is, one has to claim sexual identity and its political implications, regardless of same-sex sexual behavior. Categories that have social meaning, such as gay and straight, can be shifted between given social, temporal, and sexual context. These difficulties also make the act of gathering data in and of itself
complicated. If self-identification is a cornerstone of sexual identity, then should data be collected on persons still “in the closet,” or persons who may engage in same-sex sexual behavior, but do not identify as queer? The inability to quantify these concepts neatly can make them difficult to conceptualize through a sociological lens. Also, the merging of sociology and queer theory is complicated when sociology focuses on mechanisms and institutions, whereas queer theory tends to focus on culture (Jackson 2005).

Although there is currently little activity within sociology investigating these concepts, the discipline’s attention to structure could be well-employed in an analysis of the structures that perpetuate heterosexism. Pharr (1988) describes heterosexism as an assertion that the “world is and must be heterosexual” (p. 338). Feminist and queer theorists have discussed how this system of privilege and oppression around issues of sexual identity leave those who do not identify as heterosexual unable to fully express themselves without fear of negative social sanctions or violence (Connell 1992, 1987). Though heterosexism adversely affects all persons, including homosexuals, out queer persons have to consciously navigate a society that continues to systematically disadvantage them and label them as “less than.” Simmel (Wolff, 1950) articulated the concept of “the stranger” more than a century ago: a person who is simultaneously in the community, but not part of it. The tension he articulated applies to non-heterosexual persons today, as they remain on the periphery of citizenship (Phelan 2001, Stein 2001). These social mechanisms perpetuate the hidden injuries that impact sexual minority people.

Adrienne Rich (1980) developed the theoretical concept of compulsory heterosexuality to elucidate the power of heterosexism. Rich argued that heterosexuality
is not only the *preferred* expression of female sexuality, but the *only possible* form of expression. Because of this, Rich argues that all women – not just lesbian women – are subject to the pulls of the mechanism of gender that regulates their sexual behavior. Lesbian-baiting, the systematic omission of the lesbian experience, and objectification of women’s bodies are some of the ways Rich argues that society continues to exert control over women and their sexuality. Lesbian women, then, are particularly at risk for having their experiences ignored, denied, or left unexplored. The concept of intersectionality illustrates the dynamic interplay between one’s overlapping social identities (Collins 1990). In particular, social groups that are the targets of oppression may have their experiences silenced because of mechanisms similar to compulsory heterosexuality. Other theorists have extended Rich’s concept of compulsory heterosexuality to queer men (e.g., Connell 1992). Although men’s sexuality is not regulated in precisely the same way as women’s, the expectation of heterosexuality and fallout of heterosexism affects everyone, regardless of gender or sexual identity. The queer student’s experience, therefore, will be markedly different from those of a heterosexual student’s because the intersection of sexual identity and gender affect one’s perception of the world.

Heterosexism is a powerful force that has been shown to have pointed effects on students, and researchers have identified its many faces on college campuses, purportedly some of the most liberal spaces in modern society. However, although there have been several qualitative studies of queer college students’ experiences within certain aspects of the academy, there has been little intensive investigation of how students actually conceptualize the greater, overarching concepts of homophobia and heterosexism. That is, prior studies have discussed in what ways heterosexism and homophobia affect
students and in what specific environments they manifest themselves, but few have attempted to describe students’ *constructed meaning* about these experiences. This study fills the gap present in the current literature concerning students’ experiences with heterosexism and homophobia, especially how these experiences are influenced by structural factors within the university. By analyzing how out LGB students make meaning of homophobia and view their existence within a historical framework, more knowledge about the obstacles facing them can be investigated. In filling this gap, a more comprehensive understanding of how these out students navigate the complex environment of the college campus can be gained, yielding potential directions for making higher education a more positive experience for students of all sexual identities, and for addressing the hidden injuries left by heterosexism and homophobia.

For this study, two research questions will be investigated:

1. *How do out LGB undergraduates make sense of heterosexism and homophobia in their lives?*

2. *How do out LGB undergraduates conceptualize the campus climate toward sexual minority persons?*
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

University campuses are arguably some of the most liberal spaces in American society. College campuses have traditionally been environments where issues of sexual identity are discussed, engaged with, investigated, and explored; many undergraduate students who come to college use their time on campus to explore and crystallize their sexual identities (Evans & D’Augelli 1996, Rhoads 1997, Stevens 2004). Higher education institutions, in addition to furthering research and scholarship, also foster the learning and development of undergraduate students (Barr & Tagg 1995, Pascarella & Terenzini 2005). For queer students, like their straight peers, the college campus is an environment where a valuable, unique intellectual and social transformation takes place.

Heterosexism, however, is still present in all areas of American society – and particularly in the academy (Brown et al. 2004; Rankin 2003, 2005). Queer students, including lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students, have been shown to be disadvantaged in several ways on college campuses. The classroom has been shown to be an environment where heterosexism is enforced, both on students (DeWelde & Hubbard 2003, Eyre 1993, Farr 2000) and instructors (Ewing, Stukas Jr., & Sheehan 2003; Russ, Simonds, & Hunt 2002; Sears 2002), curtailing expression and contributing to an environment that may stifle learning. The residence halls, an environment where many first year students live and learn from one another, may be environments of
heterosexism where other students (Evans & Broido 1999) and student residence life staff (Evans & Reason 2001, Robinson 1998) may be insensitive or hostile toward their queer peers. Greek life has typically been hostile toward gays and lesbians (Yeung & Stombler 2000). But perhaps most importantly, sexual minority students may be less likely to remain in college or persist to earn their degree (Sanlo 2004), which can have a significant negative impact on earnings and occupational prestige later in life. The multiple forms of heterosexism on campus have a powerful influence on these college students, impacting how comfortable they are, how honest they feel they can be, and how engaged they are with others (e.g., Burn, Kadlec, & Rexer 2005; Evans & Broido 1999).

In spite of a reputation of liberalism and progressiveness, higher education has proven it is not immune to heterosexism’s hidden injuries of discrimination and stratification.

Simultaneously, universities do not exist in a vacuum. Societal attitudes toward diversity – particularly sexual orientation – are affecting perceptions of sexual minority persons. Specifically, the greater social milieu has impacts on higher education institutions and their students. This generation of college students, dubbed “the millennials” by those who study the development of traditionally-aged college students (Coomes & DeBard 2004, Strauss & Howe 2003), has more positive attitudes toward queer persons than ever before. With “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy” and “Will & Grace” on television, and having seen out stars such as Ellen DeGeneres and Ian McKellen, queerness has hit mainstream popular culture and caused a shift in mindsets (Broido 2004, Coomes 2004, Seidman 2005). One of the first theorists to analyze LGBT college students described how many were not at all comfortable with coming out
(D’Augelli 1989). However, more and more, people are coming out at a younger age (Broido 2004).

As a result of these myriad social changes, some hypothesize that there has been a shift in attitudes toward diversity that has led to a more favorable cultural milieu for queer persons (Altemeyer 2001, Avery et al. 2007, Newman 2007). This suggests that the college experience for many non-heterosexual students will likely be a more enjoyable one than it was even a decade ago. This “favorable” climate, however, could be a product of increased political correctness as opposed to a shift in actual attitudes. Bell and Hartmann (2007) discuss the phenomenon of “happy talk” – using a veneer of acceptance to camouflage prejudices. This language of political correctness could obscure the true power of heterosexism. Likewise, Jurgens, Schwitzer and Middleton (2004) found that, although college students’ public attitudes about sexual orientation were generally positive, strong beliefs on both ends of the spectrum tended to be tempered to find a more acceptable middle ground when communicated to others. Also, although society may be more accepting of sexual minority persons, this does not mean that heterosexism and homophobia have been completely eradicated. The potential for hidden injuries still exists.
METHODS

As this study is concerned primarily with how LGB college students construct meaning of their on-campus experiences, qualitative methods will be used to investigate the research questions of interest. Qualitative methods are useful in unearthing the underlying subtle social processes that may not be made readily apparent through other approaches (e.g., Geertz 1973), particularly in examining queer sexualities (Gamson 2003). Also, because the construction of meaning is a primary concern of this research study, it is imperative to obtain respondents’ own personal interpretations of events and mental constructs of interest (Evans & Broido 1999, Lincoln & Guba 2003, Walters 2000). To obtain a full picture of how out lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students engage with heterosexism and construct an interpretation of the current social milieu and its relation to campus life, two qualitative research methods are utilized: semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

Sample of interest. Self-identified out LGB undergraduates are the demographic of interest for this study. The study is limited to persons who already identify with the LGB community. Needs, concerns, and developmental milestones are largely based on where one is in his or her sexual identity development (Cass 1979, Fassinger 1998, Gortmaker & Brown 2006). Undoubtedly closeted students will perceive heterosexism and homophobia far differently than will students who have publicly claimed an LGB
identity. Therefore, this study does not attempt to generalize as to how all self-identified lesbian, gay, or bisexual students interact with heterosexism and homophobia, as students who are not out may interact with these social mechanisms in markedly different ways. Based on an author evaluation of the transcripts, five (31.25%) of the respondents appear to be at Cass’s third stage of identity tolerance, seven (43.75%) gave indications they were at Cass’s fourth stage of identity acceptance, and the remaining four (25%) appeared at the fifth stage of identity pride.

Two target universities were used in this study. The first is a large, urban, public, four-year university in the Rust Belt region of the country. The second is a large, rural, public, four-year university in the Midwest. Participants were solicited using email listservs and electronic newsletters through student organizations and student services offices. Respondents had to be “out in their everyday life” (as they defined it) and under the age of twenty-five. The final sample consisted of sixteen students, eight from each institution. Fifteen participants were current undergraduate students, and one respondent had graduated with her undergraduate degree less than three months prior to the interview. The final sample consisted of eight gay males, five lesbian females, two bisexual males, and one bisexual female. Fourteen respondents were white; one bisexual male was Black, and one gay male was Latino.

Interviews. Interviews are a useful way of obtaining detailed, personalized accounts (Weiss 1994). Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with all sixteen respondents to get a sense of their experiences with heterosexism and homophobia while at college, as well as their interpretation of campus and national cultural attitudes toward non-heterosexual persons. The interview guide provides a
means of investigating these research questions. (See appendix A.) Keeping in the spirit of feminist qualitative research, the interviews were semi-structured in nature. Although the list of interview questions attempted to solicit responses from the respondents on topics of interest, the interview structure allowed exploration of issues brought up by the respondents as being pertinent topics of conversation.

Focus groups. Focus groups permit for the exploration of ideas and concepts with other respondents to promote the mutual development and exploration of concepts of interest to the research question (Kreuger & Casey 2000, Mertens 2004). Particularly because heterosexism and homophobia have the potential to be manifested in subtle forms of discrimination, group techniques may be necessary to raise consciousness amongst respondents (Hanisch 1970, Worrell & Remer 2003). To supplement the individual interviews, focus group data can help to further illuminate the research questions related to lesbian, gay, and bisexual students’ perceptions. One focus group was conducted for this study at the Midwestern institution. Focus group questions had some similarities to the individual interviews, but allowed respondents to explore topics of mutual interest together. (See appendix B.) Three students who had also participated in an individual interview were present for the focus group. One respondent was a white lesbian, one was a Latino gay male, and the other was a white gay male. (See table 1 for an overview of all respondents and themes that arose during the research process.)
RESULTS

Based on the research questions, four primary findings were developed from the students’ responses in interviews and focus groups. (To protect students’ identities and confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used throughout this work.)

Finding 1: Students tended to minimize incidences of heterosexism and homophobia. Although all of the students interviewed could easily recollect an instance of heterosexism or homophobia, the overwhelming tendency was to downplay the importance of such events. However, when asked to recollect the last time they experienced heterosexism or homophobia, students commonly responded that they overheard something within the last day, even if the comment was not directed explicitly at them. For instance, Chris, a white gay sophomore at the Rust Belt university, said:

“I would say you hear that kind of stuff all the time. Like, every day I hear that kind of stuff. I mean, like, walking up and down [a major street near campus], like – it may not necessarily be directed at me, but you hear, like, things like that going on in different conversations...”

However, Chris did not seem to be overly troubled about “hear[ing] that kind of stuff all the time.” Rather, he described it as something that was no big deal. Later in the interview, Chris shared a specific instance of homophobia directed at him: two gentlemen making an obvious, hostile reference to his sexual identity. But Chris minimized this as well:
“One time I was just walking, I was talking on my phone or something like that, and I was standing on a certain place, somewhere on campus, just standing there talking, and these two guys walked by and said, ‘Oh, HE’S not gay!’ Like, as in pointing out the fact that I obviously was, which was just kind of awkward, and I just laughed it off, I was like, ‘OK, [laughs], like you made your point.’”

Though Chris recognizes these instances as homophobic, he consistently minimized and normalized their existence in his life.

Similarly, Kate, a white lesbian and recent graduate from the Rust Belt university, recounted an instance on her lacrosse team:

“Apparently, there was a lot of talking behind my back, so there’s some stuff you see and some stuff you don’t. I was on it for three years; two of the years were very good years. The third year, there were a couple sophomores who apparently... you know, didn’t like me for whatever reason. And whenever they could make a comment about me, they would call me a dyke, whatever. Like – say it to my face, don’t say it behind my back. It’s not going to hurt me either way. ...It was something to use against me, you know, like – growing up I was always made fun of ‘cause I was a redhead. So, I felt it wasn’t because I was gay – it was because they didn’t like me and it was something to use against me, to say about me. So I didn’t take it too personal.”

Obviously, Kate recognized this instance as tinged with homophobia. However, she chalked it up to “girls being girls” – finding whatever difference they could to belittle her. Also, instead of seeming angry about the incident, Kate took an indifferent stance. She seemed upset and affected by the behavior, but did not ascribe the incident to homophobia. As Kate said, she “didn’t take it too personal.” She emphasized this later in a succinct personal philosophy:

“There’s always that one or two people who are very homophobic and make the derogatory comments... but it’s the vocabulary, and I guess I’m desensitized toward derogatory comments; they don’t
Kate has made the decision to construct meaning around derogatory comments in a way that permits her to avoid feeling anger or sadness; rather, she has become “desensitized” and decided she won’t “let them affect” her.

Jon is a white gay male, and is currently a junior at the Rust Belt university. He echoes this idea, describing in detail the environment he grew up in and how it led to his subsequent desensitization:

“And, like, my stepfather – he’s the guy with whom grew up with most of those years – he’s the one who... I think that when you have someone like that in your life who’s always like, ‘Faggot,’ blah blah blah blah blah, and very negative – you kind of like grow accustomed to it and you don’t really think about it or let it hurt you as much. So I really think you kind of really become numb to it."

Years before he came out, Jon grew up in a household where his stepfather used epithets to describe gay people. As a result, Jon has become “numb to it” – to the instances of heterosexism he encounters in his everyday life. Doing so helps him to avoid the pain that grappling with homophobia might cause him.

Nate, a white, gay sophomore who works in a residence hall on campus at the Rust Belt university, said he heard something heterosexist “about two or three hours ago.” However, he also downplayed the comment’s contribution to a heterosexist environment:

“I was at work, and some of the freshmen were walking by and said, ‘Oh, that’s so gay.’ That, I kind of just... it used to bother me, but now I really just don’t care. Because I think I’ve come to learn that a lot of people who say it don’t really think about what they’re saying. People might say, ‘Oh, that’s so gay,’ but that
“doesn’t necessarily mean that they have a problem with gay people.”

Nate found a way to construct meaning of the recent heterosexist event that allowed him to reframe it more positively. Instead of expressing anger or sadness at the other students’ cavalier use of language, he has chosen to excuse it instead, chalking it up to ignorance.

Indeed, ignorance was a theme that ran through many of the interviews. Homophobia was excused as a manifestation of the ignorance of others. Focus group members Patty, a white lesbian, and Edgardo, a Latino gay man, both from the Midwestern university, talk about how they can excuse heterosexism and homophobia on the part of their straight peers:

**Patty:** Oh, I hear [heterosexist comments] every day. But it, you know, they don’t have any homosexual friends, and they don’t understand, so I don’t think that you can correct everybody. They’re going to use it anyway. So... I don’t know. There’s just a lot of people out there that just don’t KNOW that there’s homosexuals on this campus, ‘cause they just don’t think about it. So that’s an issue, too.

**Edgardo:** Yeah, I hear it pretty regularly. But at the same time, I feel I am completely safe being on this campus being completely out, and I’ve never had to hide it. And no one’s ever confronted me about it. I do understand that it’s an agriculture-based campus, and that progress here is moving really fast if you ask me. So I just never really encountered that, and – I guess it goes back to me just ignoring it, and thinking that people are kind of raised around that, and that’s all they know.

Because they can attribute heterosexism and homophobia to others’ ignorance, Edgardo and Patty can live with the tension of being out while simultaneously ignoring the hidden injuries inflicted by their peers.
This tension is not confined to strangers, however. Respondents also discussed how homophobia and heterosexism manifest themselves in close friendships – and how they continue to minimize its impact on their lives and relationships. Jon talked about his friends back home:

“Of course some people were like... my [home state] friends are a little more like, ‘Well, that’s great, but I still don’t like homosexuality.’ And that’s one of the things that you just have to kind of have to deal with.”

This appeared to pain Jon when he discussed it in the interview. However, to maintain these friendships, Jon decided to “deal with” it. In her individual interview, Patty also discussed encountering the hidden injuries of homophobia in friendships:

“I mean, my friends – actually, my friends are more homophobic than I would care to know. They really are homophobic. They don’t understand – they don’t understand it, that’s the thing. But they still accept me for who I am.”

Even though she acknowledged that her friends are homophobic, Patty is able to reconcile their homophobia and believe that they still accept her.

One respondent, Matt, a white gay male junior at the Midwestern university, had a unique take on heterosexism and homophobia that managed to leave the prevailing structure unchallenged. When asked to recollect a recent incidence of heterosexism he experienced, Matt talked about his heterosexual roommates saying “that’s so gay” while playing a video game:

“But, when it comes to my roommates, you know, they obviously love me and they’re obviously not doing it out of bigotry. What I’m not okay with is when I hear my gay friends say something like that, when they know how much it hurts everybody. Because it’s not right. Because they’ve had to experience that. And a lot of gay people say that they can use those comments because, you know, they’ve been used against them or whatever. And I’m like,
absolutely not. You’re telling straight people it’s okay to say things like that. When in all reality, it’s not. Shut up, you know – stop being a bigot against your own people.”

“That’s so gay” or variations thereof were the most common variation respondents talked about when asked to describe a recent encounter with homophobia. Matt, however, ascribed his anger about this phrase to other queer people instead of straight people. Matt has chosen not to confront members of the dominant group, excusing their behavior completely. At the same time, he discussed his frustration with members of the queer community attempting to take back such phrases as a true perpetuation of heterosexism.

Some students discussed how their future careers would be impacted by coming out in college. These young people felt they had to reconsider their job options because of their sexual identity. Joy, a white lesbian freshman currently attending the Rust Belt university, was initially interested in going into the military after she completed high school. She came to realize, though, that this would not be a viable option for her:

“And I was actually thinking about going into the military a long time ago up until then, and I didn’t know because I was just starting to come out to people, and how that was changing, how that was affecting what I really wanted. And I liked the idea – I liked being out to all my friends. I liked the idea and the thought in my head of being able to hold hands with whoever [sic] I wanted to hold hands with, being able to say, you know – I liked it when I went back home to visit, to introduce to my friends my girlfriend. To be like, ‘This is my girlfriend.’ And that felt nice, because I had never really done that before. Because my first relationship had been really hush-hush, really quiet. And I realized I didn’t want to have to be hush-hush for the rest of my life. I don’t want to feel like I have a relationship that I have to hide again.”

Joy did not question the heterosexist institution of the military. Instead, she chose to circumscribe her career options, changing “what [she] really wanted.”
Similarly, Jared, a white gay male attending the Midwestern focus institution, had initially considered a career in politics, following his family’s tradition of public service. However, it soon became apparent to him that he would have to reconsider his options:

“One of the things I dealt with at one point when I was coming out, and I don’t know if I was having delusions of grandeur. As far as what I wanted to do with my life. But, at one point... I had to... accept... either, that I was not going to go on a certain path, or I would still strive for that, but... it would be more difficult being gay. Um, politics, probably. Something more – yeah, definitely politics. How could you be elected in a state like this, to be an out gay?”

Though Jared was not as passive as Joy was in her acceptance, he was unsure as to how he would navigate the heterosexist environment in his home state. As a result, he came to the conclusion that he will have to accept the political and social milieu of his conservative state and change his career options as a result.

Perhaps the strongest expression of heterosexism and homophobia is physical violence against LGB people (or people perceived to be LGB). One interview respondent – Mark, a black bisexual male at the Midwestern target institution – described an act of violence targeted at him because of his sexual identity. Mark was in elementary school at the time and was not out yet. Two young men, though, had started to make fun of him for his effeminate demeanor:

“And there was one day when I was walking home, and there were two guys that I took classes with in elementary school. Basically were just teasing as usual. However, they decided to make it more physical, and they basically roughed me up. That’s really the best way to describe it.”

Mark, though, did not seem angry about the violence he experienced, nor did he question the perpetrators’ motives. Instead, Mark internalized this violence:
“It was also a learning experience. That was a big factor. It made me stronger. And I mean, if I were to go do that again, I think more than likely, I – I would do the same thing.”

Mark was able to minimize even physical violence, chalking it up to a “learning experience.”

Heterosexism and homophobia have had dramatic impacts on the lives of all these students. However, the overwhelming majority have decided to conceptualize heterosexism and homophobia in such a way that excuses the behavior or does not challenge the social order that continues to disadvantage them. Passing comments, career decisions, even physical harm are chalked up to ignorance or something to be dealt with. This way of making meaning of heterosexism and homophobia permits the continued affliction of hidden injuries, both on themselves and on others. Though minimization may make day-to-day life bearable, most students interviewed were unable to articulate how these incidences played into a larger social structure of privilege and disadvantage.

Finding 2: Although the out students interviewed were comfortable with their sexual identity, there was still a desire for heteronormativity. Several of the students interviewed also talked about how they conceptualize the acceptability of being gay or lesbian with regard to stereotypes. Entertainment and media were commonly referred to as perpetuating “negative” stereotypes of LGB people. Nate had recently watched “Will & Grace” on television, and he was pleased overall with how he felt it portrayed gay men. He did feel that it was “mostly positive” in its representation, but it “had some negatives:”

“That gay guys aren’t all completely shallow, and they don’t all fit negative stereotypes. They can be successful. ...Negatives on the show? Just when they do, like, stereotypical things. Like, um, I
Interesting, Nate commented on how much he likes the show, but disliked it when the characters played into these stereotypes. He felt that the characters should portray themselves as “successful” by heterosexual standards.

Another heteronormative theme that emerged was the desire for others to get to know them before coming out; that is, developing an identity with friends apart from instead of integrated with sexual identity. This concept was very important to Kelly, a white bisexual female who is currently a junior at the Rust Belt university:

“When you think about it, I guess I’m not very out to [people on campus]. I want people to, like, get a perception of me before I tell them. I don’t know why. But I’ve never had a really negative reaction since I’ve been to college with telling anybody, so I don’t know why I decided I needed to say something.”

Kelly remarked three times in the interview how important it is for those on campus to “get to know her” before she discloses her bisexual identity to them. Whereas her heterosexual peers do not have to make critical decisions about how they will present their sexual identity to friends, faculty, staff, and family, Kelly has charted a course where she avoids this disclosure until necessary. In this way, she hopes that others will not have their opinions about her negatively impacted by her sexual identity.

Much like Kelly, Matt expresses a desire to develop an identity apart from, as opposed to integrated with, his sexual identity. He talked about coming out to his parents and how they reacted to his disclosure:

“So I told my parents, and they were like, ‘Keep it low key and you can do whatever you want. Just don’t embarrass the family.’ So that’s what I did until I came to college. So, they’re like, ‘Keep it’
they still love me, of course, but as long as I, you know, kept it to a whisper, they didn’t have a problem.”

Matt’s parents were fine with his gay sexual identity, so long as he “kept it to a whisper.”

When asked how such a caveat made him feel, Matt replied:

“I was fine with it. But because, like, I – at that point, I already had my own identity. They don’t like negative attention. So no attention is better than negative attention. So nobody knows all your dirty little secrets, you know. Which is completely fine.”

To preserve his family’s reputation and avoid social sanctions, Matt said he had no qualms about keeping his sexual identity hidden from others.

Others did not completely obscure their sexual identity, but instead minimized the importance of their identity in their everyday life. Dean, a white gay male senior at the Midwestern university, did not want his sexual identity to define who he was:

“I would say if you can’t tell, you’re either very, very behind the times, or headless. A or B. I wouldn’t call myself a flamer, it’s just that I don’t have a problem mentioning it to anybody and everybody – because I think it’s something we have to get out there, you know? Especially with my experiences telling people in [my hometown], they knew me for so long and they knew who I really was. I think that being gay is such a really small part of us. It’s not like being gay is everything about me and everything I am is gay and everything I do is gay and everything that I’m around with is gay, you know? Being gay is a relatively small part of my life.”

Although he is completely out, Dean did not want his sexual identity to be a defining factor – and he definitely does not want to be labeled as a flamer. Jessica, a white lesbian junior also at the Midwestern university, echoed this sentiment by separating her identity into several categories, some of which did not carry social meaning:

“And being gay is just one aspect of your life. As far as just being gay in general... it’s not everything about me. I’m still a musician. I still go to church. I still love to do sports and go shopping, you
know, and everything – everything under the sun. That’s where people fail to recognize that.”

The “people” who fail to recognize that being gay is not the totality of one’s identity that Jessica is speaking of is other queer people. Dean and Jessica conform to heteronormative behavior not by concealing their sexual identity as Matt and Kelly do, but by emphasizing their relative normality in other ways.

These students are out and express a relative comfort with their personal sexual identities. At the same time, it is important to these three students to continue to portray themselves in ways that they feel are more acceptable to heterosexual persons, constricting their range of behaviors. Behaving inappropriately could result in sanctions from family, friends, and others. These students have constructed meaning of their sexual identity in such a way that allows them to integrate with a world in which heterosexism and homophobia still exist without challenging this structure, perpetuating the hidden injuries of heterosexism.

Finding 3: Students generally describe the campus climate as positive. However, the climate was often portrayed as positive in reference to less-supportive environments. Several studies, particularly the Rankin study (2003, 2005), have continued to remind those interested in studying the lives and experiences of queer students that heterosexism and homophobia are still present on American campuses. Despite this, students’ tendency to minimize their own personal encounters with heterosexism and homophobia carried over to their descriptions of the campus climate, lending to rosy depictions of the university. Chris believes his campus is a relatively positive environment:

“I think we’re pretty lucky here, just because there’s a really large gay community outside of campus, and there’s a large gay
I think there’s a lot of support that they offer that and things like that, like with the Multicultural Center and just with the different organizations that they offer, and the different programs they offer and things like that. ...So there’s a lot of different things like that going on that I think are pretty cool. And then... I just think... as far as, faculty and things like that goes, that I think most people are really, like, open and receptive and understanding and tolerant and things like that as well.”

Later in the interview, he goes on to say:

“I think [this] is an awesome campus, as far as being accepting and things like that. I think there’s a lot of things that they could probably work on, or things that could be better. But I think as far as all campuses go, [this one’s] probably one of the best ones to, that, that, to be on, for acceptance.”

Chris’s comments are particularly interesting because his is the only campus he’s attended as a student. Therefore, it is likely that he has no other frame of reference; how does he know that his campus is one of the most accepting?

Many students, though, did frame a comparison, setting up their campus climate against far less supportive environments. David, a white gay junior from the Rust Belt university, framed his campus climate as positive in comparison to worst-case scenarios. He talks about another institution that he has some experience with:

“So it’s really – it’s a much more positive environment here than at, say, [a local, private, religiously-affiliated university]. Which I have some knowledge of. Which is much more, like, they had a pride organization, but nobody wants to go there because they’re afraid they’ll be labeled as gay. And they don’t really want that to happen, even though they all know each other.

David talked about how the university is a safe space for him as a gay man, but that is further reinforced because the environment of another local university is more hostile;
that is, his university is positive in comparison to a more hostile environment. He went on to talk further about his experience in the classroom with professors:

“Because to be honest, if I can tell – the vast majority of the teachers and professors here are all for gay people. And if they’re not all for gay people, then they just don’t care. Which, you know, apathy is next to – whatever, that sounds great to me! So like, I’ve never had a teacher who was like, ‘I can tell I hate gay people.’ Like, that’s just never been an issue. So like, coming out to my – I’ve actually come out to professors before, for various reasons. And they don’t care. So that’s great, great news.”

David perceives his campus as accepting because the professors “don’t care” about sexual identity as compared to actively espousing hostile views. Apathy “sounds great” to him.

Though most students made largely sweeping generalizations of the positive environment on the campus, there were some more sophisticated responses that looked at pieces of the campus as opposed to the whole university. Jessica talked about how the music department, where she is a major at her university, is accepting, particularly in comparison to other departments:

“But if I was in the engineering department or some other department, I don’t know! I have no idea, you know? This is just my story, it’s – it’s an arts. I’m an arts major. It’s obviously – people are going to be a bit more open minded, just stereotypically. But, you know, stereotypes are there for a reason, and they ARE open-minded about it.”

Jared also talked about how, although the campus climate is supportive, spaces that are less positive may promote silence about sexual identity issues:

“I think there are elements that don’t promote it, but there are elements of the university – smaller, the minority, different parts of it – like, I would say Leadership Studies, Women’s Studies, some of those departments that do promote it – but… as far as how many other people are in organizations like I’m in, like student senate or [an honorary organization], some of the traditional, mainstream
organizations, and even, I would say, many of the professional organizations – any more, I don’t know if gays are in those, involved in those. But that’s just something I felt at one point. Like, ‘I’m the only one,’ you know?”

Jessica and Jared were able to view the campus through more discriminating lenses. Although the university as a whole appears supportive, the contexts of space and place determine to what level this positive environment is actually manifested, with a less-supportive space serving as a comparison to the more-supportive spaces. Many of the students’ evaluations of the campus climate for sexual minority persons were positive, but many of these students framed the environment in comparison to less-accepting environments. In other words, although the students may be experiencing heterosexism and homophobia on the campus, many of them believe that it could be worse if they were elsewhere, making the campus’s climate positive by default. This rosy outlook could be preventing these students from making incisive critiques and taking meaningful action to promote more support for sexual minority students on campus.

Finding 4: Though hidden injuries were apparent, some respondents demonstrated resistance, engaged in advocacy, and promoted social change. Though most students in this study engaged in minimization, reinforced heteronormativity, or framed their environment as positive simply in comparison to worst-case scenarios, not all did. A core few were able to actively confront heterosexism and homophobia. Additionally, some students who did engage in these patterns resulting from the hidden injuries of heterosexism were still able to show resistance to the oppression encountered in their lives.
Claiming an identity in and of itself had the potential to be a form of resistance.

Gregory is a white sophomore male currently attending the Rust Belt university. When asked about his sexual identity, Gregory demonstrated how that question is not as cut-and-dry as other respondents had made it to be:

“In social norms, I identify as a gay male. Just because that’s the easiest to explain to people and stuff like that. Whereas usually I just call myself queer, because I don’t identify myself fully as male, and I don’t identify myself fully as homosexual. And when I have the opportunity to divulge [sic] into that, I can be like, you know, I’m queer, and like, I can go into more details about it. But in most cases, it’s just like, gay male – because heterosexuals don’t fully understand all the different possibilities, and how gender and sexuality are separate, but there are times when they are separate. Queer... I use as a broad term. Just because, like, it’s something different from the norm. And that’s how I see myself.”

Gregory identifies himself as queer, and acknowledges the frustration he encounters, both from straight persons and other gay persons, in explaining his true identity. For Gregory, whose gender and sexual identity are not easily described, the way he labels himself is a way for him to buck against the gender-normative categorization imposed on him.

Jon engaged in a great deal of minimization in his interview, but shared one anecdote in particular that demonstrated his potential for further resistance. Jon grew up in a religious household, and his family is very active in a Protestant congregation back home. While struggling with his sexual identity, Jon got into a confrontation in the middle of a worship service with his pastor:

“And actually one reason that I fell out of the church that I was baptized in and that my family was a part of and everything was because they said, ‘Well, if a gay person comes to their door and you let them in, then you’re committing the same sin.’ And I was like, ‘Wait – so if some gay person comes knocking on the door because their car blew up down the road, we’re supposed to be like, “No! Stay away!”’ Like they’re Satan or something? So I
rose up out of the pews and I was like, ‘Didn’t Jesus say to love everybody?’ So me and the preacher got into a fight, so I walked out – and I didn’t look back.

Jon found that the environment of his home church did not make sense with his conceptualization of his identity as both a gay man and a Christian. Even though Jon tended in other aspects of his life to excuse heterosexism and homophobia, he was able to show active resistance in a context that proved particularly upsetting to him.

Whereas most respondents weren’t bothered by comments such as “that’s so gay,” Jessica took a completely different line of thinking – and subsequent line of action:

“I was standing in choir, and…. One of the men in our department, who’s straight and ignorant, pointed to his music and went, ‘Oh, that’s gay.’ I looked at him and I was like, ‘Really? You’re going to use that as an insult? You’re seriously gonna use gay as an insult? You’re going to use it as a slang word? There’s so many more words to use in the English language, and that’s the only one you can come up with? It’s pure ignorance. You are so IGNORANT!’ You know, and I just kinda went off on a tirade.”

The majority of students interviewed would not have reacted to this situation in the same way. Jessica, on the other hand, recognized that the actions of the young man she confronted contribute to a larger structure, both in the university and in society in general, that continues to leave LGB persons at a disadvantage.

Jared is a member of the university’s student governing board. He is not demonstratively out to them, but he took it upon himself to draft a non-discrimination bill for passage by the student senate. Although the measure was largely symbolic, as the student government had no real power to enforce it, Jared talked about its personal importance:

“I sponsored a resolution in senate last semester in favor of non-discrimination policies at the state, local, university, and national
level. So I was the main driver behind that. With just a lot of people, they didn’t think it was an issue any more, thought it already was a part of non-discrimination policies. And I think that’s generally across the board what a lot of students assume for gay people. I think they know – they may know that we don’t have marriage rights in a lot of states, but as far as all the other rights, I think that they have generally accepted it, you know. But... looking back, as far as what motivated me to do that, I think... just something that I FELT... needed to be done. And it was the right moment, as far as there being policies being considered before all of these institutions.”

Jared used his position on the student government to advocate for the queer community to the larger student body. Even though there were a number of practical reasons Jared considered for writing his bill, ultimately it was something that he was convinced was necessary for reasons of morality and justice. (The measure passed unanimously.)

The focus group proved to be a space where students could interact with each other and “call each other out” on thoughts or behaviors that reinforce heterosexism.

Edgardo was discussing the university administration’s attitudes toward the queer community. Earlier, he had discussed how he believed the apathy present on the campus was positive for LGB students. Jared, though, challenges him on this assumption:

Edgardo: I think they want to ignore it rather than make a problem out of it. Which is good for us, in a way.
Jared: Except that it doesn’t allow it to be ever changed!

The focus group acted as a sort of consciousness-raising group, allowing the students to engage with each other and discuss issues of heterosexism and homophobia that impact their lives. Edgardo had to reconsider his position and think about whether or not ignoring the LGB community was a positive way for the administration to interact with sexual minority students.
DISCUSSION

These sixteen students’ responses demonstrate that heterosexism, homophobia, and heteronormativity still exert a powerful influence on the lives of LGB students. As a result, a number of “hidden injuries” are made manifest: students minimize instances of discrimination in their everyday lives; respondents come to view their sexual identities as disintegrated with their selves or as less desirable; and the campus environment is consistently described as positive, in spite of the heterosexism that exists, in reference to other, less-supportive milieus. Out LGB students in this sample appeared to construct meaning around issues of heterosexism and homophobia by minimizing – excusing, ignoring, or avoiding – its existence in their lives. All of the students interviewed said in general that “those kinds of things” happen “every day.” At the same time, when pressed to explore individual instances of heterosexism and homophobia, many respondents were able to focus on specific incidents that affected them recently – but continued to employ minimization techniques to downplay their importance.

These findings may come as a surprise to many for a number of reasons. The university has historically been a space where liberal, progressive attitudes are fostered. This generation of young persons has been exposed to more diversity than ever before, prompting more permissive attitudes toward all social identities. The American cultural climate, too, has become more accepting of difference than it had been historically.
However, even in some of the most permissive social, temporal, and spatial contexts, heterosexism and homophobia is still able to exact these hidden injuries on out LGB students.

*Why minimization?* It is tempting to believe the students’ statements that homophobia and heterosexism encountered on a daily basis really is “no big deal,” as Chris put it. Many who have come out are able to integrate identity with a heteronormative, homophobic society and continue to function (Cass 1979). Although they should be applauded for their courage and mettle, these hidden injuries, perpetuated on the college campus, could have enormous consequences for the lives and well-beings of these students. For instance, as Sanlo (2004) has mentioned, it remains unknown if there is an impact on the educational attainment and persistence of LGB students. These hidden injuries of heterosexism could have serious educational – and, subsequently, psychological and economic – consequences for out LGB undergraduates.

A few possible explanations for these students’ constructed meaning of homophobia as relatively unimportant should be mentioned. One is that the students are employing coping mechanisms to navigate their everyday life. Griffin (1991) outlines four ways gays and lesbians may strategically manage their identities: passing, covering, being implicitly out, and being explicitly out. Using an updated version of Griffin’s model, Chang (1999) describes four strategies bisexuals, lesbians, and gays may use to combat discrimination: quitting, silence, social support, and confrontation. Interestingly, though all of the students in the study managed their *identity* by being explicitly out (with a few exceptions, usually extended family), many chose to manage *homophobia* using
silence. In doing so, these students may be attempting to minimize the stress that confronting these incidents could generate.

A second explanation, as supported by the literature on millennial students, could be that the attitudes of this cohort are shifting toward the minimization of difference. This generation of students have been raised all through elementary school with diversity curricula that emphasize “food, fashion, festivals, and fun” (Brodio 2004, p. 82). The progression of millennial student attitudes has also moved toward a more favorable view of various minority populations, including gays and lesbians (Olander, Kriby & Schmitt 2005). As such, the students’ tactics of minimization may be a generational trend. Differences could be minimized because of a desire to connect and accentuate similarities (Coomes 2004, Coomes & DeBard 2004).

A third possibility could be that students are constructing meaning of homophobia as insignificant because “the grass is greener;” that is, attitudes toward queer persons are more positive than they used to be, or their current environment is more positive than other environments, even if they remain definitively negative. Many students interviewed were able to discuss how they believe Americans’ attitudes toward non-heterosexual persons are improving and the relevance of increased media representation. However, because these students are using a comparative lens through which to view their experiences, they may not be detecting heterosexism or homophobia, or they may not be ascribing a negative connotation to it.

These findings may appear to contradict works, like the Rankin studies, that demonstratively illustrate that queer students are reporting higher levels of heterosexism and homophobia on college campuses as ever. However, this work and Rankin’s
comprehensive quantitative overview of the campus climate are not necessarily in conflict. Students quite easily identified instances of heterosexism and homophobia on campus, and many could talk about episodes that occurred less than 24 hours prior. This work’s focus, though, is on how the students conceptualize these instances and integrate their meaning into their everyday life. Prima facie, most respondents discussed the negative aspects of homophobia, much as Rankin’s respondents do. On the other hand, those interviewed overwhelmingly dealt with this negativity through the mechanisms of minimization and supporting heteronormativity outlined in this study. Exploration of these personal-level mechanisms are important in understanding the true impact of the campus climate on LGB students’ lives.

**Limitations.** There are some limitations to the findings of this study. The decision to not include other categories of queer students, such as transgender, intersex, or genderqueer students, has been made to prevent inaccurate generalization. Though these groups are frequently lumped together with LGB persons in literature as they are the mutual targets of the mechanisms of gender, hegemonic masculinity, and homophobia, the actual needs and experiences of these groups are often quite different from those of LGB persons (Beemyn 2005). Though the exclusion of these groups from the scope of this study could be construed as further silencing these already-silenced voices of subgroups within the queer community, the intent is to avoid generalizing results to groups that may not be accurate. Further study is needed to determine how these other categories of students conceptualize being out on campus.

Interestingly, it was found that men and women both gave answers that similarly contributed to the findings described in this research; there was no noticeable variation
between genders regarding the four primary themes. Of course, this is not to say that men and women experience heterosexism and homophobia in exactly the same manner (Rich 1980). Rather, these findings indicate that, in the context analyzed, men and women may use similar mechanisms to make sense of these hidden injuries. Though this study uncovered no difference with regard to the themes under consideration, future analysis could explore this matter to detect if there is any noticeable difference between how these groups construct meanings of heterosexism, homophobia, and attitude shifts.

Generalizations about race, too, are difficult to make, as there were only two respondents of color. The intersection of race with gender is integral in understanding processes that continue to perpetuate oppressive mechanisms such as heterosexism and homophobia (Glenn 2000, Collins 1990, Poynter & Washington 2005). Care must be taken in securing future respondents to make sure that the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students of color can be included. Also, an investigation of the intersection of racial and sexual identities, as well as their impact on how heterosexism and homophobia are conceptualized, is warranted.

This study limited its respondents to students from public, four-year universities. Other higher education institutions, such as community colleges and private schools, were not included when selecting interview sites. Students at community colleges are typically different demographically than students at traditional institutions (Nomi 2005). Also, students at large, public colleges may be more likely to have very different perceptions of heterosexism and homophobia than someone at a small, rural, private, religiously-affiliated school. Broadening the sample to other campuses could be useful in investigating whether or not these experiences could describe a national phenomenon.
It is also interesting to note that students at both sites were in general agreement regarding the four themes revealed in this study. Again, this is not to say that there were no differences between how these groups of students conceptualized heterosexism and homophobia as compared to each other, but that the findings described were held in common. Interviewing other students at a wider variety of postsecondary institutions could help to parse out specific campus-to-campus differences in how these students experience heterosexism and homophobia.

*Directions for change.* Though there are no easy solutions to the larger social problems presented by heterosexism and homophobia, there are some potential steps that can be taken to promote a more positive campus climate for out LGB students. First, there are many aspects of LGB life, not to mention LGB college student life, that remain to be investigated by empirical research. Studies that continue to highlight the issues on college campuses for queer students are needed to continue to investigate how social context influences structures of privilege and disadvantage. For example, there has been no empirical investigation of the postsecondary attainment and persistence of LGB students to date, a notable shortcoming of the current literature. Given sociology’s interest as a discipline in disparate educational outcomes based on various identities, more work could be done to disentangle the on-campus mechanisms that potentially impact these students in several contexts.

The findings of this study would be hard to broach to the original participants, as many would be hesitant to admit that they engage in these complicated, not particularly flattering interpersonal mechanisms. As the results of this study are disseminated, a dialogue can be started with out LGB students as to why they believe this minimization
occurs, if they do at all. Further qualitative work can investigate the specific process that these students use to make meaning of heterosexism and homophobia in their lives.

Finally, a limited number of students in the sample were able to resist the heterosexism and homophobia they encountered in their lives as students. Many of these students appeared to be further along in their sexual identity development (Cass 1979). Encouraging resistance by promoting a positive progression of sexual identity development could provide students like those in this study a means of enacting meaningful personal and social change. In this respect, the focus group could be a useful illustration of a method that could be used to foster development and promote resistance; students in the focus group who showed more resistance were able to challenge their peers who were more complacent. Consciousness raising, like that advocated by second-wave feminists such as Hanisch (1970), in groups of queer students could be used to encourage awareness of and resistance to heterosexism and homophobia.

The hidden injuries of heterosexism and homophobia are continuing to affect the students in this study. The tendency of the majority of students to downplay the influence of negative, hurtful incidences in their everyday lives could prevent out LGB students from acknowledging the social power of heterosexism in leaving sexual minority persons as “less than.” There is hope, though, for fostering an enhanced consciousness for these students. Heterosexism and homophobia continue to disadvantage these students because they are deemed as inconsequential, both by its targets and its perpetrators. Jared, perhaps, said it best toward the end of his interview:

“Well, it just comes to the point where your bullsh*t level is like, ‘Well, you could lie to yourself. Or... you could not push yourself,
and you could... not... try to help others. Or, you can look at that marginalization and that bias, and say f*ck it.’”

Jared’s comment is a reminder that the hidden injuries of heterosexism are not completely obscured; there is still the potential for revealing its power and influence. By encouraging out LGB college students to explore the nature of their hidden injuries, advocacy and social change can be catalyzed.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

METHODOLOGICAL MATERIALS
Individual Interview Questions

1. What made you interested in participating in this interview?

2. What is your sexual identity? How did you decide (or not decide) on that identity?

3. How “out” are you? How long have you been “out?”

4. What is your relationship like with your family? Are you out to them? If so, how did they react? If not, how do you think they would react? How do you feel about this?

5. Could you describe a typical day as a student here at your campus?

6. What is it like being queer (gay, lesbian, etc.) here at your campus?

7. Are most of your friends queer or heterosexual? Are you out to them? How does that influence your friendships?

8. When was the last time you heard a heterosexist comment? Where were you? Who said it? How did it make you feel?

9. When was the last time you heard a particularly affirming comment? Where were you? Who said it? How did it make you feel?

10. How out are you to faculty? Who is the last faculty member you came out to? Under what circumstances? How did s/he respond? How did you feel about the interaction?

11. Do you think your campus is accepting toward queer persons? Why or why not?

12. How integrated do you feel into the university? Are you in any clubs / organizations? How did you choose what organizations to join? Are you in any queer organizations?
13. (If respondent has been on campus three years or more,) how do you think this campus’s attitudes have changed toward queer persons?

14. How would you characterize American society’s attitudes toward queer persons?

15. When is the last time you saw a media representation of a queer person? What was the representation? What was the form of the media? How did it make you feel?

16. How do you think America’s attitudes have changed in the past five years? Since your lifetime?
Focus Group Questions

1. What interested all of you in coming to this focus group?

2. Could everyone share their sexual identity, if they feel comfortable?

3. When was the last time you heard a heterosexist comment? Where were you?
   Who said it? How did it make you feel?

4. How receptive do you think the faculty are to queer students?

5. Do you think your campus is accepting toward queer persons? Why or why not?

6. How do you think this campus’s attitudes have changed toward queer persons the past few years?

7. How would you characterize American society’s attitudes toward queer persons?

8. How do you think America’s attitudes have changed in the past ten years?
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