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To Be Real: Antecedents and Consequences of Sexual Identity Disclosure by Academic Library Directors

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ABSTRACT

Using ten interviews with openly lesbian and gay academic library leaders from around the United States, this study investigated themes associated with sexual identity disclosure decisions in the workplace. Thematic analysis through grounded theory identified three themes common among all participants: claiming and maintaining identity; road-paving; and a dual theme, being myself/just like anyone else.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant life events for people who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB)¹ is the decision to disclose their sexual identity where they work. Sexual identity disclosure is not a one-time event, but rather takes place as a series of disclosure decisions across life domains and time (Ragins, 2008); yet after the first disclosure in an organizational setting, this genie is no longer easily coaxed back into the bottle. Despite rapidly-changing cultural attitudes, in many settings LGBT status continues to be a stigmatized difference with the potential to compromise a potential leader's ability to lead, the capacity for which relies on the ability to influence others to take action that leads to change (Northouse, 2013; Pfeffer, 1992; Pfeffer, 2010). So it is not

surprising that though an estimated 4% of the population identifies as LGBT, making LGBT status one of the largest non-majority workplace demographics (Gates, 2011), the presence of openly LGBT managerial leaders in the workforce is palpably much smaller.

Academic libraries are typical of LGB underrepresentation among managerial leaders. Only a handful of the 4706 degree-granting postsecondary institutes of higher education in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012), are led by library directors known to be openly lesbian or gay.

This phenomenon of underrepresentation of minority sexual identity repeats itself more broadly across librarianship. Though there is an active association for LGBT librarians and their allies—established in 1970, the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Roundtable (GLBTRT) of the American Library Association (ALA) is one of the oldest associations in the United States for LGBT professionals—there is no affinity group or membership directory in GLBTRT or any other library association for LGBT library directors for any type library. No openly LGB librarian has served as president or executive director of ALA, and only one openly LGB librarian has served as president of any of its divisions.

These gaps and silences are all the more noticeable given evidence suggesting a high incidence of LGB people in librarianship. Carmichael (1992), surveying 482 male librarians, found that 9% of the respondents identified as gay, between two and four times the incidence in the population at large. But even more noticeable is the emerging presence in

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¹ For the purposes of this study, LGB (lesbian, gay, or bisexual) means anyone with a theoretically concealable minority, non-heteronormative sexual identity. When appropriate, this study references LGBT people as inclusive of the broader category of all people whose lived experiences include a minority, non-heteronormative sexual and/or gender identity. While the original call for subjects included transgender people, no transgender subjects were identified for this study. In the end, this led to a better study, as collocating sexual and gender identity questions could have led to confounding conclusions. While respecting the life experiences of transgender people, this study also acknowledges the “particular dimensions of experience that differentiate these four sexual minority groups” (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007, p. 19), including the distinctions among lived experiences of those with minority sexual and gender identities.

the profession of managerial leaders in academic libraries who have chosen to disclose their sexual identity minority status—far fewer than 9% of all leaders, but visible all the same. Like their heteronormative peers, these *rarae aves* manage people and resources, recruit talent, fundraise, and lead change in the context of organizations grounded in a larger culture that continues to wrestle with what has been called “the last socially acceptable prejudice” (Carmichael & Shontz, 1996, p. 26). Fassinger, Shullman, and Stevenson (2010) comment that “It is reasonable to assume that sexual minority status does affect leadership, as the research literature suggests that identity dimensions—particularly those arising from marginalized status—have relevance for understanding leader and follower behavior” (p. 202). Yet leadership and diversity in general continue to receive scant attention from researchers (Eagly & Chin, 2010), and correspondingly, LGBT people are “one of the largest but least studied minority groups in organizations” (Ragins, 2004, p. 35).

It is therefore unsurprising that no study has explored the antecedents and consequences of sexual identity disclosure decisions by LGB academic library managerial leaders: how and why these leaders chose to disclose their status, and the outcomes of these decisions. This research explores why, given the opportunity to conceal sexual identity status, these leaders chose to disclose, in what manner these disclosures were made, and how these decisions affected the ability to lead; and this research also surfaces the challenges, advantages, and opportunities presented by disclosure of LGB status by managerial leaders in academic libraries.

This study is timely, as it takes place during a historical moment when the cultural barometer of acceptance for sexual minorities may fluctuate, but appears to be edging upward. With so few openly LGB library leaders in higher education, this research will help LGB librarians aspiring to leadership roles gain insights into the disclosure decisions and outcomes of these leaders. This research also contributes to the scholarly knowledge about an understudied subculture in higher education and expands what is known about decisions to disclose sexual identity status. The findings from this study will be useful to human resource managers, university administrators, and other stakeholders with an interest in addressing diversity issues in the workplace. Finally, illuminating the antecedents and consequences of disclosure decisions for openly LGBT library directors casts more light on the workplace experiences of all managerial leaders with concealable differences, LGB or otherwise.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For disclosure to be a significant area of study, there must be something significant to disclose. In 1963, Erving Goffman launched a half-century of inquiry into stigma theory through the publication of *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. This small book of great impact—*Stigma* had over 23,000 citations in Google Scholar as of early 2016—articulated the nature of stigma as an undesirable, or “deeply discrediting,” attribute that is “incongruous with our stereotype of what a given type of individual should be” (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). Ragins, Singh, and Cornwell (2007), synthesizing several decades of research on the impact of stigma, conclude that “stigmatized groups are discredited, face negative social identities, and are targeted for discrimination” (p. 1103). Major and O’Brien (2005), in an inaugural chapter on stigma for the *Annual Review of Psychology*, call stigma “a powerful phenomenon with far-ranging effects on its targets” and posit that the evolution of stigma research from a focus on stigma as a static, inalienable fact about a person to “an emphasis on the situational nature of stigma and the role of the self in responses to stigma” was responsible for triggering “an explosion of research” in stigma between 1999 and 2005 (p. 394). Ragins (2008), summarizing conceptualizations of stigma, notes that stigmas are “socially constructed” (p. 196); that is, a stigma only exists if the object and/or the subject perceives the characteristic in question as undesirable—or as Goffman first put it, “society

establishes the means of categorizing persons” (Goffman, 1963, p. 2). Ragins (2008) also observes that stigmas are malleable; “as social constructions, views of stigmas may change over time,” and cites attitudes toward homosexuality and attitudes toward Muslim-Americans as two social constructs of stigmatization that have moved in opposite directions in recent years (p. 196).

The special nature of sexual minority status explains in part the delta between the occurrence of sexual identity in the general population and the very small number of openly LGB leaders in academic libraries. Sexual identity falls within a stigma category variously referred to as concealable stigmas (Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Smart & Wegner, 1999), invisible social identities (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005), concealable differences (Mathes, 2007), and invisible stigmas (Ragins, 2008). For the sake of consistency, to clarify the author’s stance, and to demonstrate respect toward the subjects of this investigation, this paper will use “concealable difference.” The phrase “concealable difference” also conveys that in many though not all cases, LGB people can elect to cloak or disclose their sexual identity through a variety of methods such as constructing fabricated heterosexual partners, relying on heteronormative presumptions to let others assume a heterosexual sexual identity (Woods, 1994), and “self-editing, censoring, and telling half-truths” (Ragins, 2008, p. 196). This intentional nondisclosure may include norming personal presentation such as dress and speech patterns to align with perceived heterosexual behavior, thus denying one’s sexual identity by muting the “prediscursive form of interaction” used to signal identity through these choices (Hutson, 2010, p. 215). These interactions can range from effeminate to ultra-masculine presentation for gay men, to “butch,” or masculinized, appearance for women, and can include coded nuances such as a preference for close-fitting clothing for gay men (p. 219). These expressions of disclosure and their connection to leadership are the foci of this study.

Sexual identity status continues to be stigmatized. Despite recent legal cases, openness and disclosure remain delicate issues for many LGB people in the workplace. In 29 states, it is still legal to discriminate against employees on the basis of sexual orientation (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2009). In terms of recruitment, LGB jobseekers self-report discrimination in the hiring process (Fidas & Cooper, 2014; Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2009), and a study found that LGB jobseekers whose resumes disclose their sexual identity are less likely to be offered job interviews (Pizer, Sears, Mallory, & Hunter, 2011, p. 728). Though workplaces with legal protection and inclusive LGBT-friendly policies are more likely to be perceived as welcoming by LGB employees (Button, 2001), even these organizations are not free of prejudice. In 2009, a workplace climate study found that “significant numbers of employees report negative consequences of an unwelcoming environment for LGBT employees” (Human Rights Campaign, 2009, p. 6), while an earlier study found that the incidence of LGB discrimination at work is related to disclosure of sexual orientation (Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). A 2008 study of LGB employees “using probability samples representative of the U.S. population” found that 42% of these employees “had experienced at least one form of employment discrimination because of their sexual orientation at some point in their lives” and 27% “had experienced such discrimination during the five years prior to the survey” (Pizer et al., 2011, p. 723). Unsurprisingly, over half of LGBT respondents to national surveys report that they continue to conceal their sexual identity in the workplace (Fidas & Cooper, 2014; Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2009), which again points to the distinctive disclosure decisions of openly LGB academic library leaders.

Disclosure itself is a complex behavior. Within the modest body of literature about sexual identity in organizational settings, almost all of which dates from this century, there is general agreement that disclosure in the workplace is more similar to a suite of rheostats than a single switch. LGB people may actively engage in identity management strategies in the workplace that control when, where, how, and to whom they reveal or conceal these differences, and disclosure may even vary within

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