Coming Out: The Experience of Discrimination Upon Disclosing Sexual Orientation to Family and Community

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Abstract

In this anonymous online study 171 members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community were invited to describe their experiences when disclosing their sexual orientation. Participants included 93 women, 59 male, and 19 other. Sixteen participants were transgender. Sexual orientation included 51 gay men, 34 lesbian women, 34 bisexuals, and 36 other. Ages ranged from 18 to 76, with a mean 36. Most participants were from the United States, with smaller groups from Latin American, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

Two questionnaires, the LGBT Discrimination Survey (LDS) and the Coming Out Survey (COS), were revised from measures used in other studies, and provided numerical indices. Discrimination was associated with higher levels of difficulty coming out and lower levels of Satisfaction with Life. A subsample of 163 responded to open-ended questions with narratives. Forty-five percent described facing violence, and 47% reported hostile verbal reactions. Overall the narratives indicated that disclosing sexual orientation was often met with homophobia, illustrating the potential risks of "coming out." Participants from politically conservative families faced greater discrimination and difficulty disclosing sexual orientation.
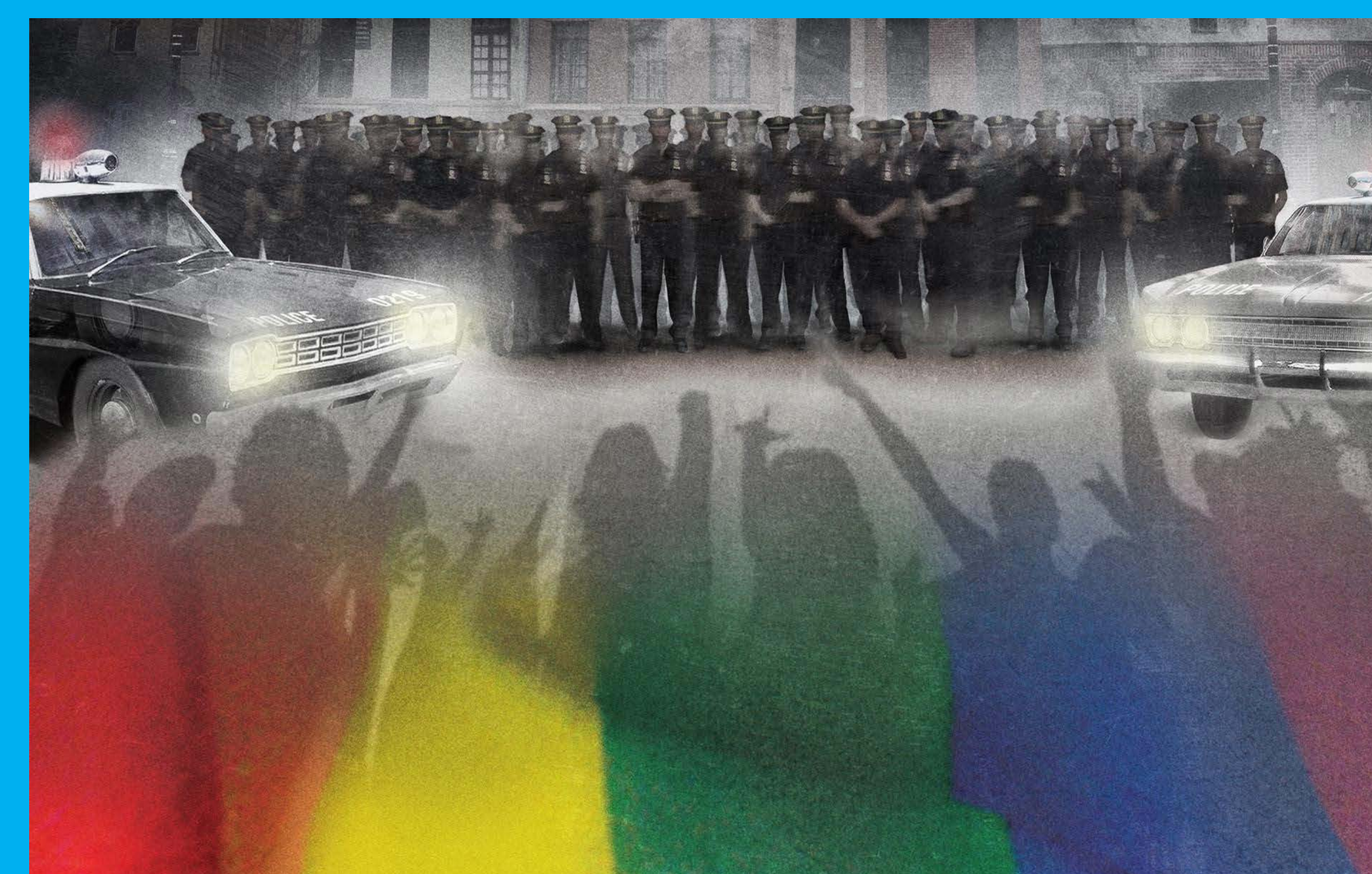
Introduction

It has been suggested that members of the LGBT community avoid self-disclosure because they suffer from self-hate, or "internalized homophobia," defined as a psychological problem indicating negative feelings about homosexuality, turned upon the self. In contrast, this study demonstrated that LGBT community members may avoid self-disclosure because of homophobia coming from others. Historically, homophobia has been linked to violence. Despite the appearance of rapid change in public opinion, this study illustrated the ongoing presence of homophobia.

Figure 1. Gender

Figure 2. Sexual Orientation

Figure 3. Ethnicity

Results

Results found discrimination significantly associated with difficulty coming out. Satisfaction with life was negatively correlated with both difficulty coming out and the experience of discrimination. Difficulty coming out and discrimination were correlated with survivor guilt, associated with excessive worry about the well-being of others. Narratives responding to open-ended questions illustrated the dangers faced when disclosing orientation. The impact of gender was noted, and in narrative responses some participants commented upon the effects of racism. Participants who grew up in more politically conservative families reported facing greater discrimination and difficulty coming out.

Survivor guilt was a significant predictor of discrimination and difficulty coming out. Lower levels of life satisfaction were associated with discrimination. Surprisingly, men had significantly lower life satisfaction than women and transgender participants reported higher levels of survivor guilt.

Discussion

The present study found survivor guilt correlated with both discrimination and difficulty coming out, and life satisfaction correlated with discrimination. Participants presented a vivid illustration of the homophobia LGBT community members face, despite what has appeared to be a recent shift in public acceptance of ordinary variations in sexual orientation. The frequency with which participants personally faced physical and verbal threats along with discrimination make clear why people hesitate to discuss sexual orientation. In many settings --at work, in health and religious facilities and even within extended and nuclear families-- narrative responses indicate that disclosure presents potential danger for LGBT community members.

The suggestion that coming out indicates good mental health and that failure to self-disclose indicates psychopathology represents a denial of the external homophobia still maintained in our culture. According to this study, coming out may carry realistic dangers and maintaining privacy about orientation is unlikely to be related to internalized homophobia. We might assume that personal psychology could plays a role in proneness to take risks; some people are more willing to ignore potential danger than others. The high incidence of threats of violence and violence itself brings home the message that despite what appears as acceptance of love between two same-sex people is hiding the still rampant homophobia in our culture.

Data Analysis

A cross-sectional correlational research design was used to determine whether difficulty coming out as LGBT, and discrimination after coming out, were associated with interpersonal guilt and satisfaction with life in a sample of LGBT adults. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables. Pearson correlations were used to test hypotheses about the relationships between difficulty coming out, discrimination, and the standardized psychological outcome variables (interpersonal guilt and life satisfaction). Pearson correlations were also calculated to test hypotheses concerning the relationships between discrimination, difficulty coming out, and family background variables (i.e., political attitudes of the family of origin, and whether participants had LGBT siblings or other family members who had come out). To analyze the qualitative narrative responses, a thematic analysis, which is a systematic approach to gather and analyze data (Strauss & Corbin 1994) was used. The responses were first read without any type of coding in mind. Next, themes were extracted and consolidated into categories from the text. Responses were codified and counted for each participant's responses.

Table 1. Correlations between Discrimination, Difficulty Coming Out, and Standardized Psychological Outcome Variables

	Discrimination	Difficulty Coming Out
Discrimination	--	.39***
Difficulty Coming Out	.39***	--
Survivor Guilt	.21**	.16*
Separation Guilt	.05	.03
Omnipotence Guilt	.07	.08
Life Satisfaction	-.18*	-.15*

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 2. Correlations between Family Background Variables, Discrimination, and Difficulty Coming Out

	Discrimination	Difficulty Coming Out
Any LGBT siblings out?	.03	-.06
Number of LGBT siblings out	.03	-.07
Number of any LGBT family out	-.03	-.10
Family political liberalism	-.37***	-.41***
Own political liberalism	.02	.07
Community political liberalism	-.10	-.06

*** p< .001

What About Language?

Participants were invited to provide their opinions about currently hotly debated issues with language in the LGBT community. Post the "Gay Rights," and "Gay Liberation" movements, a group of younger activists began to identify themselves as "queer," one of the pejorative nouns used in the past when referring to a gay man or woman, and suggesting "oddity" or "strangeness." Defying the way "queer" was used historically, some activists suggest that making "queer" their own reduces its toxic effect. Homosexuality now ostensibly viewed as an ordinary variation in sexual orientation, was in past eras (and in some parts of the world still today) considered a moral crime, punishable by law.

In the 20th century, with the psychologizing of society, it was defined as a mental illness, identified and codified in the DSM II. Participants' opinions varied, with some strongly endorsing "queer," an appropriate descriptor. Others objected, believing the term continues to reflect hatred towards members of the LGBT community. Others believed it acceptable when speaking to LGBT identified people, but felt uneasy when used by heterosexuals. There may also be divisions in the LGBT community by gender. Some LGBT women have objected to being identified by a single noun, i.e. "lesbian." Mirroring the broader culture's perspective on women, the term suggests that sexual orientation describes a woman, in totality. In contrast, by using the adjective "gay" in identifying a man's sexual orientation, it is accepted that orientation is only one aspect of a man; it is not the only characteristic by which to be identified. There may be a growing recognition by gay women that gay men have exerted excessive influence and leadership in this still-growing movement. We have entered the era of the woman.
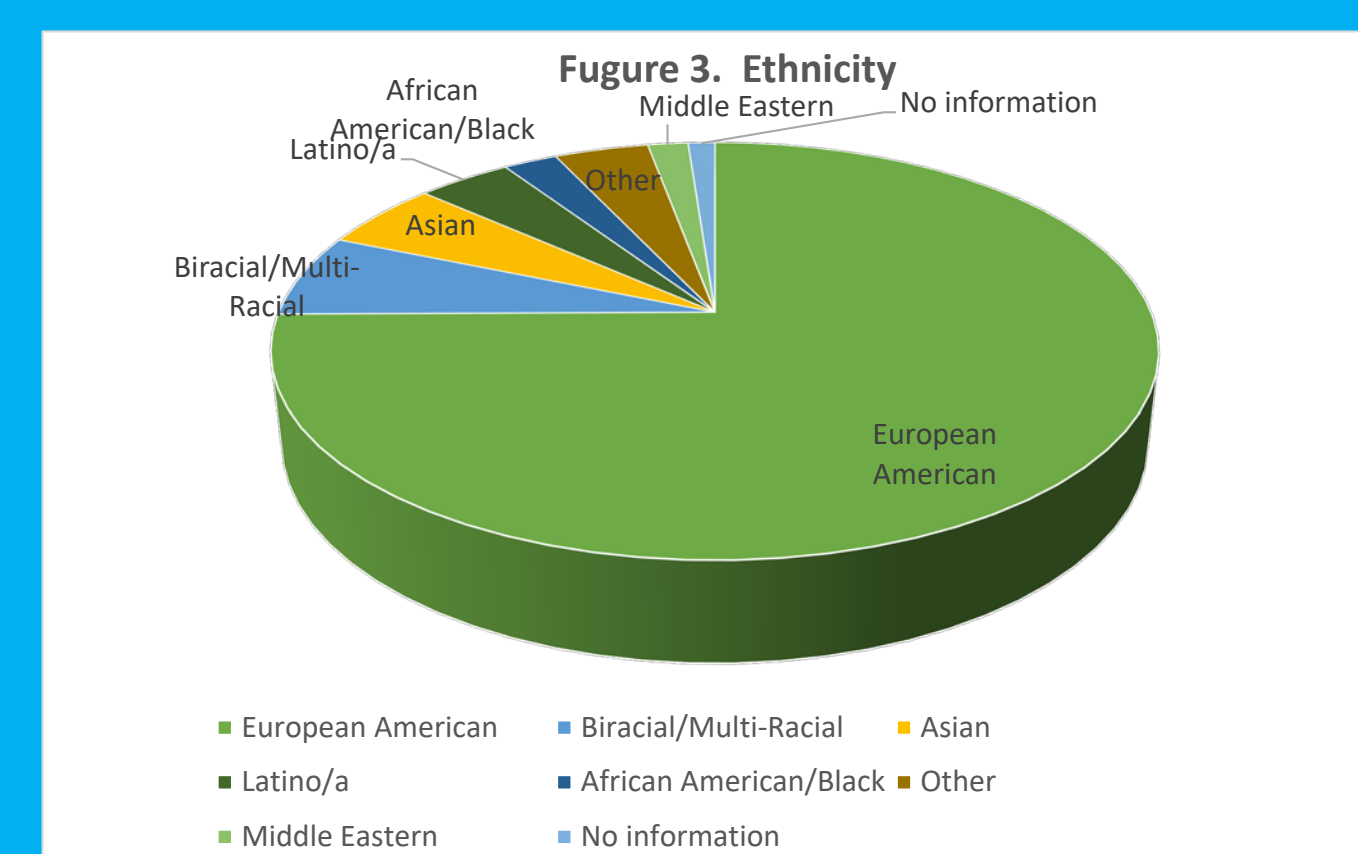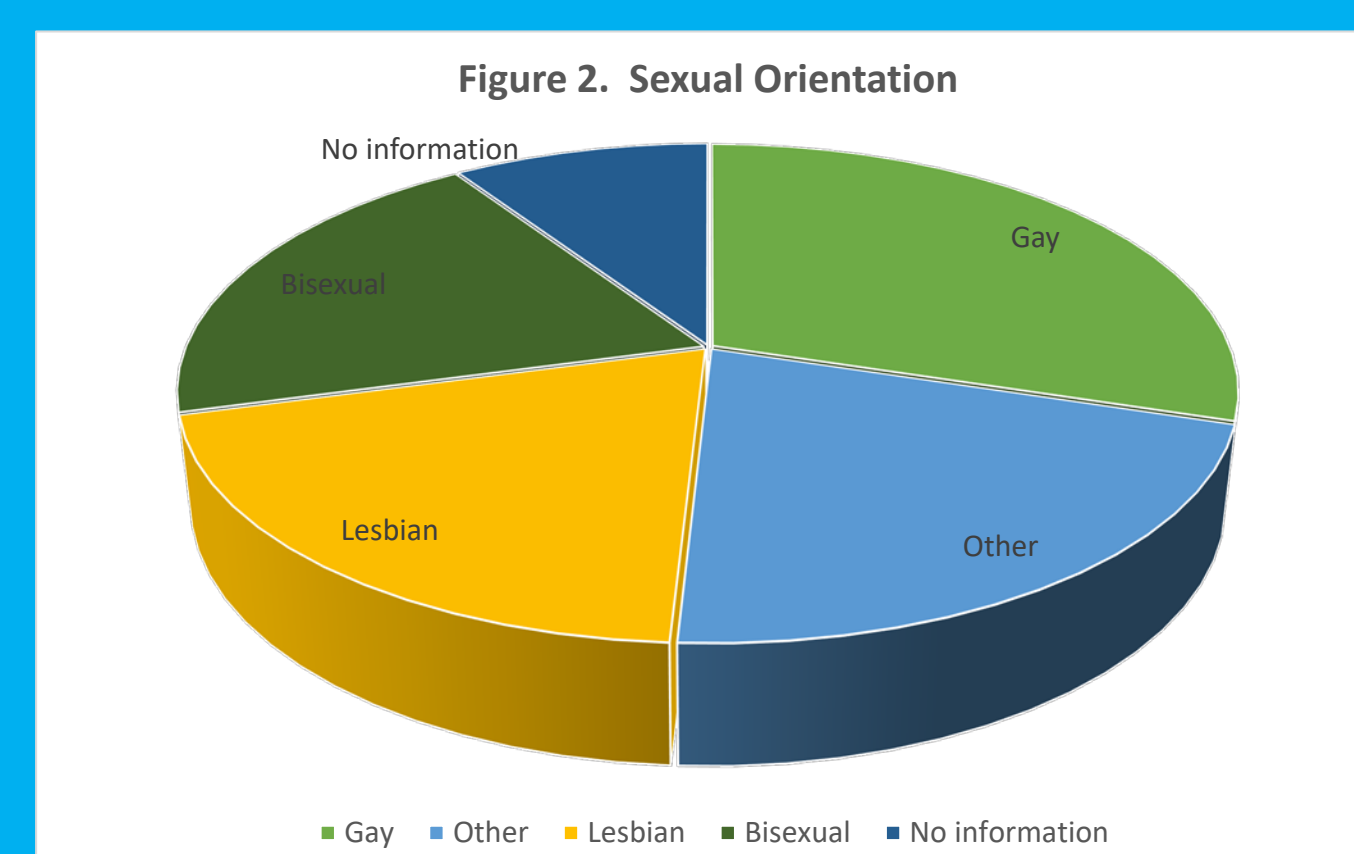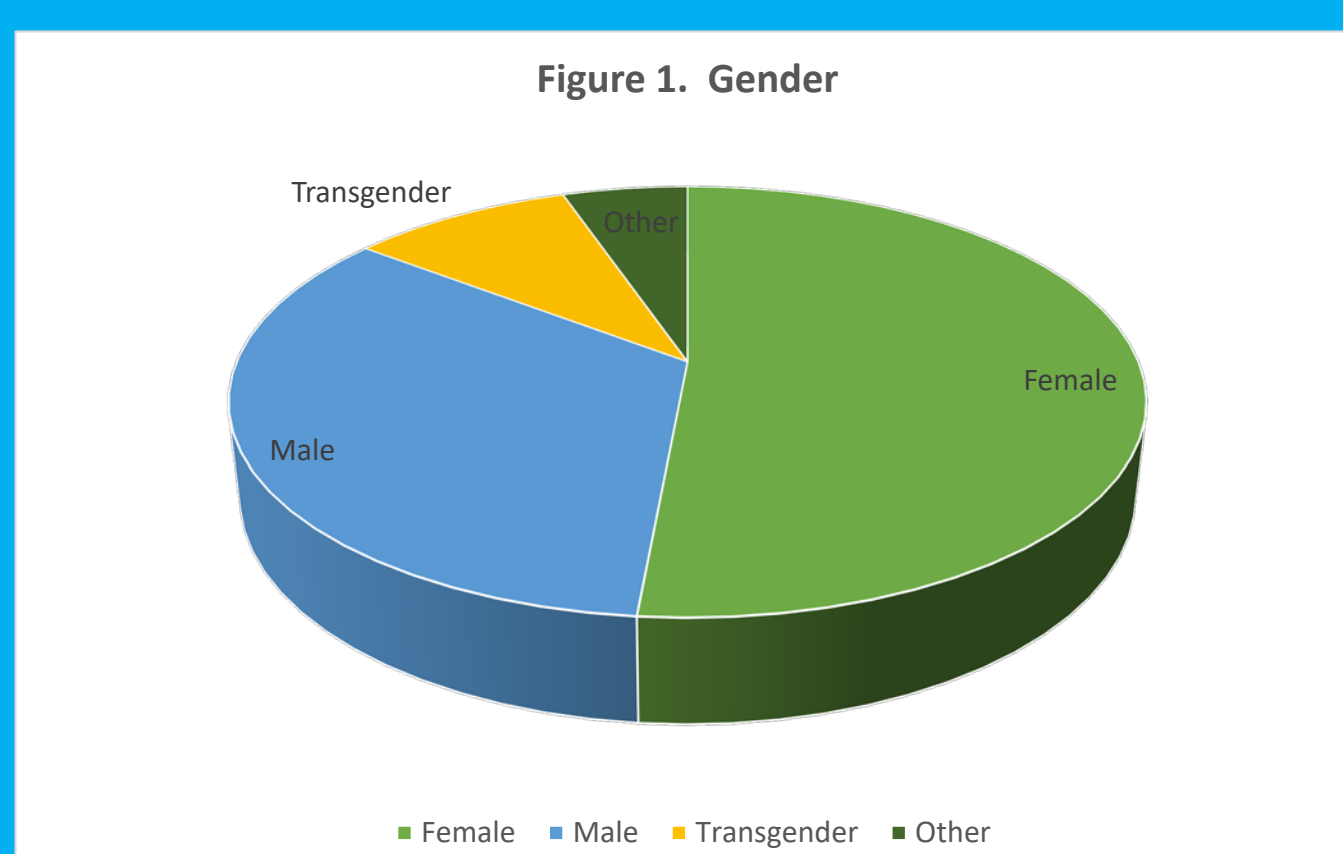
Methods

Participants
Demographics. Participants were adults who identified as LGBT. Participants included 93 women, 59 men, and 19 other. Sixteen participants were transgender. Sexual orientation included 51 gay men, 34 lesbian women, 34 bisexuals, and 36 other. Ages ranged from 18 to 76, with a mean age 36. The sample were highly educated, most holding a B.A. and M.A. Most participants considered themselves to be "middle class." While only 42 participants grew up in cities, 109 were currently urban, 6 rural, and 51 suburban dwellers. (See Figures 1-3 above for ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender.) The participants were from a variety of religious backgrounds including Agnostic, Buddhist, Catholic, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim.

Measures
Coming Out Survey (COS) (Keller, O'Connor, & Berry, 2017) revised from Experience of (Racial) Discrimination Scale, (EOD), (Krieger et al, 2005) is a 17-item scale designed to examine the level of difficulty in coming out for LGBT populations.

LGBT Discrimination Survey (LDS) (Keller, O'Connor, & Berry, 2017), revised from the Outness Inventory (OI) (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000) is a 17-item measure indicating what participants faced when disclosing orientation.

These measures asked participants to rate experience with a variety of people, including family members, friends, teachers, strangers, co-workers, and health professionals.

Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (IGQ) (O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush, & Sampson, 1997) is a 67-item, self-report measure designed to assess categories of guilt, based on empathy and an unrealistic sense of responsibility for others well-being and success (O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush, & Sampson 1997).

Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, 2000) includes five items, measuring feelings of well-being and happiness (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2000).

Narrative responses. Questions calling for narrative responses included experiences when disclosing to family and others, language/terminology, politics, and ethnic/gender/religious identity.

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