Sexual Minority Educators: Life Stories of Career Identity Development

Jack D. Simons and Sarah Hahn

Mercy College

Mark Pope

University of Missouri – St. Louis

Stephen T. Russell

University of Texas - Austin

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jack D. Simons, 555 Broadway, Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522 (email: jsimons1@mercy.edu).

Acknowledgements: The authors thank the interviewers and field research workers and recognize the contribution of Heather Cole, Stephanie Farrell, Jessica Fish, Janae Hubbard, Evan Krueger, Quinlyn Morrow, Jose M. Rodas, James Thing, and Erin Toolis.

Funding: Research reported in this article is part of the *Generations* Study, supported by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) of the National Institutes of Health under award number R01HD078526. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health. The *Generations* investigators are: Ilan H. Meyer, Ph.D., (PI), David M. Frost, Ph.D., Phillip L. Hammack, Ph.D., Marguerita Lightfoot, Ph.D., Stephen T. Russell, Ph.D. and Bianca D.M. Wilson, Ph.D. (Co-Investigators, listed alphabetically).

Abstract

The focus of the phenomenological quality study is on the career development of sexual minority educators. Career decision making among sexual minorities, including those who are educators, is related to personhood. This empirical study explored data from 24 sexual minority educators (teachers, mentors, and coaches) to explore career development and life stories. Data regarding stress, coping, and identity development were gathered, triangulated, and analyzed. Four categorical themes resulted: (a) helping identity (b), effectiveness as educators, (c) levels of support, and (d) levels of outness. Implications for employers, researchers, and helping professionals are provided.

Keywords: career identity, educators, LGBT, phenomenological qualitative research

A paucity of research remains on the topic of career identity development among sexual minority educators; however, scholars have studied their experiences. When exploring literature regarding sexual minority educators, level of outness and impact of climate are particularly focused on (Downs, 2009; Szalacha, 2003). Studies about career identity development among sexual minorities tied to race and ethnicity are absent as well. This is concerning because sexual minority educators are forced to participate in a balancing act between self and career. As a result, we conducted this phenomenological qualitative research study to explore themes in narratives like these, with a robust national sample of sexual minorities, who shared about their career development in the context of their life stories, to discern more about the experiences of sexual minority educators comprising teachers, mentors, and coaches.

There is a dynamic relationship between one's identity and purpose related to work (Bluestein, Kenny, Di Fabio, & Guichard, 2017). When work policies and roles are monolithic, employees' needs are not met and often invalidated (e.g., unequal pay) (Bluestein, et al., 2017). Sexual minority educator identity, like other types of identity, is created through discourse and other forms of communication (semiotics) where the self is located (Lasky, 2005). For sexual minority educators, navigating the complex nature of one's own sexual/gender/ethnic/minority identity and additional work identity leads to attempts to balance personal and professional selves in both congruent and incongruent ways (Jones, Gray, & Harris, 2014). Heterosexist attitudes compound this dynamic; students may judge sexual minority teachers more harshly and even subconsciously (Gates, 2011). "Attitudes [toward sexual minorities] have ranged from tolerance to oppression, with hostility and condemnation being the norm in Western societies" (Downs, 2009, p. 18).

Sexual minority educators also possess multiple identities, so they are susceptible to experiencing the compounding effects of minority stress (Meyer, 2003). Stereotypes often set them apart and they are excluded in education, the LGBTQ community, and their own racial communities (McConnell, Janulis, Phillips, Truong, & Birkett, 2018); Moradi et al., 2010). In this study, 62% of the sample identified as people of color (POC). Research findings have also shown that a significant part of LGBTQ identity involves the negotiation of multiple identities within one's self, leading to stress and conflict (Meyer & Ouellette, 2009). This may lead to the concealment of one's authentic identity, an increase of prejudice and discrimination, and lack of sexual minority role models throughout life (Sutter & Perrin, 2016).

Sexual Minority and Educator Identity

Although some sexual minorities come out about their sexual orientation at school with positive effects (Weston, 2014), others do not. The latter results because of homophobia (King, 2004; Woods, 2012). Whipple (2018) interviewed two gay high school math teachers about math teacher identity, pedagogy, and classroom setup. They reported that a group of students tore down their safe zone poster when they were absent. Additionally, the math teachers shared:

- It's easier for some teachers to be out about their sexual orientation because of the characteristics of their school,
- Some educators may lead with one identity over another depending on where and with whom they are working,
- Disclosure of sexual orientation can make the school more inclusive,
- Math teacher identity was significantly related to developing new curricula,
- Classroom spaces were reflective of the educator's passion, and
- The teachers taught about collaboration for students to get to know each other.

Woods (2012) interviewed 12 physical education teachers who identified as lesbian. The teachers were often harassed, and they struggled with coming out. The latter occurred because they believed that coming out would either result in receiving more support or lead to job loss (Downs, 2009). As a result, all of the teachers kept their personal and professional identities separate. However, this came with a cost. Concealment taxed their psychological resources (Woods, 2012). Similar findings were discovered by Downs (2009) who studied the coming out process of sexual minority school counselors. Eight female and four male school counselors were interviewed about coming out at work. They recommended that administrators and supervisors take more of an active role in supporting sexual minorities in the workplace.

Jackson (2007) reviewed classroom artifacts and interviewed nine gay and lesbian teachers to study how their experiences informed their teaching. Each participant was interviewed three times and may have also participated in an optional focus group. A six-stage theory was identified to explain how the identities of sexual minorities informed their teaching. The theory postulated that sexual minority teachers integrate their sexual and teaching identities with a focus on either using teacher-centered classroom practices or student-centered classroom practices. There was (1) a pre-teaching stage in which participants spoke about life before and after holding a teaching position, (2) a closeted teaching stage during which participants taught but were not out, (3) a super-teacher stage in which teachers did not promote a gay agenda, (4) an on the verge stage during which participants tried to come out but couldn't, (5) a post-coming out stage when participants were no longer in the closet, and (6) an authentic teacher stage when teachers integrated sexual and gender minority topics into the existing curriculum.

Auciello (2018) interviewed eight sexual minority school administrators (five gay men and three lesbian women) to learn about how politics and power in educational settings affected

them. Five themes were identified in the response data. They were (1) being afraid; (2) wanting to help; (3) being sensitive to diversity; (4) being resilient and having integrity; and (5) realizing that administrators, students, and staff members should respect each other. Subthemes derived from the five main themes included (1) having the desire to pursue leadership positions but encountering the same challenges as heterosexuals; setting priorities reflective of the degree to which one was out; and coming out or not coming out based on school politics, races and ethnicities in the school, administrator and staff support, and the degree to which individuals were displayed gender behaviors that deviated from the normal expectations for their gender.

In a dissertation study by Denton (2009), interview data were gathered to study the experiences of sexual minority educational leaders. Most participants shared that they experienced fear from a young age because they were not accepted. They, however, learned to cope by using silence and working harder to overcompensate for flaws. They developed a greater sense of self and compassion for others who were also marginalized. Developing safe spaces for everyone, helping others who were voiceless, and becoming role models for all students became central goals. Some participants reported that they also experienced inferiority. As a result, they cautiously presented themselves to others and sought out ways to have their primary relationships validated. Most importantly, they did not compartmentalize their identities; the participants had integrated identities. Most participants were afraid to lose their jobs. This concern, however, subsided. All participants reported experiencing discrimination in the absence of federal and state protections. Thus, they believed that more policies and laws for sexual minorities were needed. In addition, they believed that educator preparation and staff development should require teaching educators about how to promote inclusion and respect for diversity, including sexual minorities.

Ferfolja (2007) interviewed 17 lesbian teachers about work. Data about power differences were coded in light of feminist post structural theory and four themes were found: (1) teachers protected themselves by keeping some aspects of their lives private; (2) teachers were viewed as heterosexual if they worked in a conservative school and were divorced or separated; (3) teachers were viewed as asexual if they were mothers committed to their children; and (4) teachers' sexual identities and ages were viewed as interrelated. For example, people did not believe that younger teachers were lesbian because they still had time to court an opposite sex partner. All themes contributed to an overarching idea that "the possibility of the teacher being a lesbian was perceived as far removed from the thought of colleagues" (Ferfolja, 2007, p. 582).

Method

This phenomenological qualitative study contributed to an emerging area of study, sexual minorities' life stories and identity development. Research methods were selected based upon an appreciation of which would produce the data that best addressed the research question(s) (Frost, Hammack, Wilson, Russell, Lightfoot, & Meyer, 2019). Authors of this study explored the retrospective career identity development experiences of sexual minority educators to provide in depth understandings of specific phenomena or processes. The overarching research questions were "What does career identity development look like among sexual minority educators? What themes have been attached to the lived experiences of sexual minority educators?" Data were collected from three cohorts of sexual minority educators who were paid 75 dollars to participate in individual interviews. The interview sample was comprised of coaches, mentors, and teachers who were from one of three cohorts; (a) Post Stonewall Pride cohort (ages 57-64 in 2020), (b) an HIV/AIDS epidemic cohort (ages 39-46 in 2020), and (c) a same-sex marriage/gays in the military cohort (ages 23-30 in 2020).

Sampling

Using targeted non-probability sampling (Wolf, Joye, Smith, & Fu, 2016), we collected data from three generations of sexual minority educators in the United States (U.S.) as part of Generations (www.generations-study.com). We recruited 191 sexual minorities within 80 miles of Austin, TX; Tucson, AZ; New York City, NY; and San Francisco, CA. The participants were required to have minimally achieved a sixth-grade education and had to be U.S. residents when they were between six and 13 years old. A diverse sample of participants identified as cisgender or genderqueer; gay, lesbian, or bisexual or another orientation (e.g., non-heterosexual); and African American, Asian American, European American, Latinx, Native American, or Multiracial.

Interview Protocols

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire. The sexual minority educators participated in face-to-face interviews that lasted two to three hours. The interview protocol was developed to focus on lifetime identity stress and was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. After the educator participants signed a consent form, they answered questions about stress, coping, social history, and their career experiences. As a result, the data yielded important insights into this topic because data analyzed were garnered from questions about the career identity development of sexual minority educators. Responses from 24 participants who talked about being educators were compared as part of data analysis procedures which increased the likelihood that findings were objective (Creswell, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Additionally, descriptive and reflective field notes were collected to record (1) conversations before and after audio-recording; (2) actions of the interviewee; and (3) ideas, questions, and concerns of interviewers. Interviewers were required to use the questionnaire to

collect certain information, but they were also allowed to explore other topics that came up during interviews (e.g., a decision to become an educator). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Research Team

Graduate and post-doctoral students interviewed participants along with the lead author who also coded data. He coded and analyzed data along with second and third authors. The lead author for this team was a 42-year-old European American, cisgender, male who identifies as gay. He is interested in counseling youth, LGBTQ school topics, mixed research, and motivational interviewing. His age is representative of the ages of those in the middle cohort in this study. He grew up in the rural Midwest and did not have access to LGBTQ resources. The second author is European American, heterosexual, cisgender female with a PhD in gerontology. She is an Educational Ambassador for SAGE, a national service and advocacy organization for LGBT elders. She views herself as a heterosexual ally and stands up to biphobia, homophobia, and transphobia. As a qualitative researcher whose scholarship has been focused on the experiences of LGBT elders, she coded and analyzed data as part of this project. The first and second authors are assistant professors at a private research college in the Northeast. The third author is Cherokee, gay, cisgender male. He is professor emeritus at a research-intensive university in the Midwest. His age is about the ages of participants in the older cohort. He was raised in poverty in the rural Midwest and served as a consultant and editor regarding participants' voices, including Native American voices, in this paper. The fourth author is a European American, gay, cisgender male. He is a senior faculty member at a research-intensive university in the South. His age is between the ages of participants in the middle and older

cohorts. He was raised in the rural South and experienced silence in relationship to secondary school-level LGBTQ issues.

All members of the research team expected to identify salient themes in the data central to the lived experiences and career identity development of sexual minority educators. We hypothesized that level of outness would vary among participants and that sexual minority educators would have become educators themselves because they lacked role models and support during the school-age years. To monitor the effect of biases on the interpretation of findings, research team members listed the impact of their biases because personal experiences influence the ability of researchers to remain objective when coding and analyzing data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the Constant Comparative method which is associated with grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For this study, data analysis was conducted to identify topics while additional data was gathered. As this occurred important topics were reviewed in comparison to data collected in subsequent interviews. Data were gathered, transcribed, and coded (based on agreement) after receiving data from the first participant to identify topics throughout the interview process. Codes were assigned to new data, which allowed team members to compare data throughout the process of data analysis. As more data were gathered, compared, and coded, themes began to emerge from the codes. New data were differentiated or dedifferentiated from data collected and analyzed earlier. Straightforward codes were grouped into themes that might have explained the experience of being a sexual minority educator. Next, we identified notable patterns in the form of multiple unique views disclosed by participants regarding their experiences (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). When research team members could not agree, transcripts were re-reviewed.

After the team reviewed the original, larger Generations study school data set, including a discussion of the research questions and initial findings, researchers re-read the interviews of the 24 sexual minority educators separately. During this time, phrases, words, patterns, omissions, and commonalities to create larger categories, consistent with standard methods for inductive qualitative analysis, were searched for (Patton, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Variables of interest were race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, school settings, career milestones, level of outness, number of role models, and advocacy training. Auditor feedback was also provided and reviewed by the research team until consensus was met during the process of domaining transcripts, developing main ideas, or cross analysis (Hill, 2017). Additionally, our findings were analyzed to inform policy, practice, and future research.

Domaining transcripts involved coding data related to interview protocol question items. For example, for a question about the impact of being harassed during youth, a domain might be “how one’s age had an impact their decision to become a teacher.”) A domain could have one or more codes. Preliminary domains were the first domains analyzed and identified by research team members reviewing the transcript data. Transcript data were reviewed and placed into domains. Examples of the data were short and long phrases shared by participants. Each member of the research team shared openly and honestly to minimize power differences among team members. Each transcript was coded using the same domains unless the domain list changed stemming from new transcript codes. If this occurred, transcripts coded earlier were re-coded using the list. This approach was applied to domaining all participant data.

After domaining, each transcript was analyzed for main ideas. Transcript data were summarized as succinctly and clearly as possible. The first author identified main ideas in each transcript, which he shared with the other team members. All team members then reviewed and

edited the main ideas until consensus was met. Next, cross analysis was undertaken to improve the phenomenon under study (Hill, 2017). The first author reviewed each domain's main ideas and identified patterns and themes across participant interviews. Categories were created to link similar data because data can exist in more than one categorical theme. Next, the main ideas agreed upon by the team members and results from the cross-analysis were shared with an auditor to ensure that findings were comprehensive and accurate. Any helpful feedback that was provided was incorporated.

Discussion

The experiences of sexual minority educators about career identity development were examined as part of this study. Specifically, the purpose was to develop a better understanding of how their lived experiences affected their career identity development as educators which, as found in earlier studies, was often tied to a willingness to come out or not about their own sexual orientation to others. We hope that our findings will help researchers, employers, and helping professionals better meet the needs of sexual minority educators and students. We will now discuss our findings. First, demographic information about participants is shared. Second, participant desire to help others is addressed followed by a discussion on intersectionality. Third, participants' views about being effective as educators are addressed. Fourth, level of support by parents and friends is reviewed. Fifth, outness is addressed followed by a discussion and theory of sexual minority educator career identity development in relationship to being out. Last, study limitations and research recommendations are provided.

Results and Discussion

Categorical themes and participant narratives follow. Of the 24 sexual minority educators who were interviewed, individuals who identified as gay and lesbian and reached adulthood

during the Stonewall Rebellion shared more about choosing to become educators than individuals who identified as sexual minorities and reached adulthood during the HIV/AIDS Generation and legalization of same-gender marriage in the U.S. Across all cohorts, African American males, commonly bisexual, and Native Americans males and females, commonly Two-Spirit, shared the most about why they became educators. The classes that sexual minority educators most often taught were drama, physical education, and photography. Each sexual minority participant was from one of three cohorts: (a) 7 (29%) grew up during Stonewall, (b) 13 (54%) grew up during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and (c) 4 (17%) grew up during legalization of gays in the military and marriage equality. Of the 24 sexual minority education participants, nine (38%) were European American and 15 (62%) were POC. Two (8%) identified as Asian Pacific Islander, two (8%) as Native American, four (17%) as African American, six (25%) as Latino, and one (4%) as Multiracial.

Age of participants ranged from 21 to 58, with an average of 40. Ten (42%) were female, 11 (46%) were male, and three (12%) were genderqueer. Two (8%) were bisexual, 3 (12%) were lesbian, 10 (42%) were gay, 2 (8%) were pansexual, and 7 (30%) were queer. Two (8%) received high school diplomas, two (8%) received associate degrees, two (8%) received bachelor's degrees, five (22%) received college degrees, and eleven (46%) received graduate education. Two (8%) completed some graduate education. Ten (42%) participants did not have children, but 4 (17%) did. Six (25%) participants were single, and eight (33%) were partnered. Twenty-two (92%) participants lived in a metro area of 1 million people or more. One (4%) participant, a Latin male who identified as gay, lived in a nonmetro area with 20,000 or more people in the vicinity of a metro area. One (4%) participant, a Native American male who identified as gay, lived in a nonmetro area with 2,500 people or less not in the vicinity of a metro area.

Helping Identity

When analyzing the educator data, we found that all participants reached a point where they desired to help others (Simons, 2019). This theme was most pronounced among the 24 sexual minority educators. For Evan, a Black male who identified as gay, this realization was the highest point in his life. He shared, “It’s when I got this job [at] this not for profit organization that teaches arts through education. (...) I’ve finally figured out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. That was teaching.” Others found themselves gravitating toward the teaching profession when they were younger. Jerry, a Native American male, who identified as gay, was a coach, mentor, and community leader during adolescence. When he was a child, he felt alienated because of bullying and prejudice. As a result, he made it clear that helping others made him feel better. A Latino genderqueer participant who identified as pansexual shared:

I really gravitated to the health and professions since I was a child. I remember being in first grade and already tutoring people that were at a lower-level reading or math levels than me. (...) I was already being paid at the same rate as other teacher's assistants that were in college and stuff like that, because I was so good. I was awesome at my teaching. I love teaching. I love teaching.

Jesus, a Latino male, who identified as gay, shared:

I’m now working as a life coach in my life so that’s an aspect that—a new identity that’s coming out of others that I feel like really matches like I can best serve people. I work as a nanny right now for a family on the Upper Eastside so there’s that. Being a caregiver. (...) I’m a big helper in people’s lives and my life.

Vicky, a Latina who identified as bisexual, disclosed:

I can talk to someone who's in junior high and struggling with this. Two of my nephews and my nieces. Talk to them. "Hey. It's okay! It's okay. Let's talk about sex. Let's talk about sexuality. Let's talk about safe sex." That motivates me, and that pushes me. I don't struggle because now I know how I feel, what I feel, what my sexuality looks like, and I'm comfortable. I wish I could say the same for a lot of other people.

Effectiveness as an Educator

Participants spoke about wanting to become effective as educators. This occurred when (1) others were present in their lives who cared about them, (2) they learned to persevere by cognitively coping (i.e., they did not care what others thought about them), (3) they found different ways to teach others, and (4) they decided to become role models themselves. Marco, a Latin male self-identified as gay, shared:

To be a successful educator, I think, requires an openness to people, regardless of ethnicity, regardless of socioeconomic level, regardless of sexual orientation. One of the things that I see myself as, more than anything else, is a helper to others. If I can help you with whatever the situation—clean up your streets, teach you how to compost, teach you how to diagram a sentence, teach you how to landscape, whatever the case—then I'm succeeding. Success, I think, comes from not money, not title, but from how much you have helped others. I think, to be exclusionary would be contrary to that. I really try to stay open to everyone.

Further, Johnny, a Black male who identified as gay, disclosed:

I worked at the Lake University from '91 to '97. [It was] run by congregation of sisters. They always had a (...) healthy percentage of gay students. Now, the funny

thing is that while they never spoke about it, it was always about trying to figure out how we can nurture—I remember having a conversation with the president at the time when the gay students (...) were trying to get recognition. She calls me into her office and goes, “I know you’re advising this group, but you should just know we’re not gonna be able to recognize them, because the church won’t. The archdiocese won’t let us recognize ‘em. I want you to support these young people. (...) Let them know that I support them.” I said, “Well, sister, they’d be much happier to hear that from you. If this is how you want me to move, I’m happy to do that. (...) We would funnel things through our center for women that were programs to support our gay and lesbian students on our camps, because no one would question the director of the center for women. “This is the center for women! This is what we have to do!” The nuns was [*sic*] like, “Oh yes, we have to support the women,” kind of thing. [Chuckles]

Vicky said:

I’m part of an organization that focuses on social and educational events for LGBTQA Latinos, Hispanics, and Mexicans. Being part of that group and doing outreach really helps. Where I work, that helps to educate others about the bigger picture. Now that I see things in the bigger scale, when we’re talking about intersectional biases, and sexism, and racism, it’s all connected.

Dan, a White male who identified as gay, shared, “In teaching, I wanna make sure that the gay students, the queer students, feel the same pride in themselves and feel equally validated in their experience so that they can use that in their art. Additionally, Jenny, a White female, art educator, who identified as lesbian said:

I do a lot of exploring in all kinds of ways that a lot of people might not, that aren't—that don't feel as free to, or liberated to. I've used my art to heal myself. I've used my art to heal others, meaning, creating my own art to put out there for others. I also used art to help others heal by teaching them how to do art, and how to express whatever they need to, to emote, so it becomes a cathartic experience for them. That's the teacher part of me. Those two are intertwined.

Regarding a goal to effectively motivate all students to reach their full potential, Jesus shared:

"Enthusiastic" is probably one of the pinnacle aspects of who I am and how I naturally feel when I meet people. I feel like I meet people in their full potential, and I see their full potential. I think everyone is genuinely unique and special. "Gay," "Puerto Rican," "Successful go-getter" and "a learner." I'm always up for learning.

Jerry added:

I'm vocal. I'm my worst critic. I'm hard-headed. Perfectionist. When it comes to cheerleading, (...) I've coached junior colleges. I've coached high school teams. I coached an all-star team. Then I came to elementary school, [and] they were like, "Can you help?" I'm like "Sure, I'll help you. I'm on it." On them. Making this fourth-grader lift this one girl by himself. "Push up! Push it. You can push it!"

Having high expectations of his students was related to his personhood as a Native American (intersectionality). He felt that because he struggled growing up gay on the reservation, he was better able to connect with students, especially those who were treated differently. Jerry was also very open about his need to effectively provide a safe environment for all students.

Levels of Support

Throughout their lives, participants received varying levels of support from parents and friends. For example, Jerry did not have strong mentors where he grew up, but his mother supported him to develop the skills to mentor others. She looked to him to help others because they naturally sought him out, and she loved him no matter what even though she did not agree with his lifestyle. This latter dynamic was also present among friends who were on one hand supportive but were on the other hand at times hurtful (e.g., name calling). To cope with this Jerry would make up excuses for his friends for why they did not understand what he was going through. During his most difficult times, he sought out drugs, was promiscuous, and had thoughts of suicide.

Unlike Jerry, Evan didn't abuse drugs, but he gave up on himself once he started college because he didn't have anyone to talk to during high school. Thus, he stated, "If I did, maybe I wouldn't have given up so easily when I went off to college." Soon thereafter, while participating in an internship course, he realized that he would become an educator:

It took me sitting in that [internship] class and watching my boss and a teaching artist teaching these kids and be like, "I want to do this." Me sitting with them after all the kids leave, and I'm listening to them talk about their lesson plans for the next day and be like, "I want to do this. I want to—I really want to work with kids. I really want to help them understand the world."

Levels of Outness

All participants talked about managing levels of outness (i.e., knitting identities) and how to describe themselves at school regarding their sexual orientation. For example, identifying as gay was not easy for Jerry even though he wanted to be an out role model. This dissonance

occurred because he knew that some parents would not want to have their children enrolled in his class if he was out. Being out came with a price, but it was an important categorical theme related to the career development of sexual minority educators. As a result, a model of sexual minority educator career identity development is proposed (see Figure 1).

The proposed model has three levels related to one's level of outness as an educator. Levels one and two are dynamic (i.e., they are non-linear). The levels exist within an overarching process in which participants had high expectations of themselves and their students. Most participants wanted to work toward coming out, if they had not, while pursuing education and working to support and challenge students. Janette, a Native American female who identified as pansexual said:

I hope to get my bachelor's degree by the end of next year. Then [I will] start teaching math at a high school, while I pursue grad school. Hopefully by the time I turn 30, I [will] have my PhD in math and can be a college professor.

The participants also had to become more patient, visible, and comfortable with their sexual identities. Coming out has been and still is one of the most challenging tasks for sexual minority educators to undertake and they work toward completing their education and becoming effectively educators. However, once they do come out, they may inspire others to do the same. In a study by Simons and Russell (2020), sexual minority participants in three cohorts (younger, middle, and older) discussed stress, coping, and identity development during K-12 education. At least one participant in each age cohort was implicitly or explicitly out as a role model. One further shared that she eventually came out as a lesbian because she had been taught by a male high school photography teacher who identified as gay.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Level one (no disclosure). At level one, strict division existed between individuals' personal and professional lives regarding being out about their sexual minority status. The participants did not disclose in either sphere; they choose to please others over themselves. They remained in the closet indefinitely about their sexuality. Autonomy and wellness were compromised, and, in addition to not coming out, some did not become educators even though they wanted to. More likely scenarios though were that the participants became educators while remaining in the closet throughout their careers. Matt talked about a Catholic friend who was a principal:

He is still so afraid of someone finding out that he is gay that he goes to just crazy lengths to try to separate and distance himself from those possibilities. It's very sad to see that. He should be able to live his life.

Some participants, however, did not live closeted lives. They were self-determined early on (e.g., before high school) to live as out educators—either disclosing selectively or fully.

Level two (selective disclosure). At level two, the participants selectively shared personal information. The participants were out about their sexual orientation, but they did not always talk about it with everyone (i.e., they only talked about it in some spaces, not all spaces). As a result, they sometimes redirected students back to tasks at hand when they were asked about their personal lives. For Johnny, this action coincided with coming out to others after falling in love. He disclosed, "[A person] had to earn the ability to have that information. (...) I certainly operated under the rule of, "You don't need to know until I tell you." Jenny shared:

Right now I teach at an elementary school and it's not information for the kids or the parents. If my colleagues wanted to know or were curious, I have no problem

with that. (...) I'm part of the Southern Arizona Senior Pride group. I don't have a problem with that [either].

Sometimes participants disclosed when asked about their sexual orientation (e.g., are you gay?), and at other times they disclosed to some people over others (e.g., disclosure to high school students, but not to elementary students). Participants also anticipated that students would challenge them to answer personal questions. Jerry shared:

I knew that questions were going to come up. (...) One of the girls came in and talked to the other coach. She said, "I can't be on the cheerleader squad no [sic] more." They asked, "Why?" "Because [the coach] is gay."

At level two, one's level of outness to others (e.g., colleagues) varied over time and affected intimacy with others. Ian, a White male who identified as gay, disclosed:

Up until last year, I was a classroom teacher, and just didn't talk about [my sexual orientation]. (...) Now, like with people at work that [sic] know, when then it comes up casually, it's not a big deal, but I also feel like, yeah, I couldn't be close to them without them knowing.

Level three (full disclosure). At level three, educators realized the need for and promise of social justice, role models, and visibility among sexual minority educators, youth, and emerging adults in schools. Sherman, a Black male who identified as gay was fully out to his colleagues:

I told all my assistant coaches I'm gay. If you have a problem with that, there's the door. A lot of 'em just didn't know how to deal with that. A lot of 'em after seeing me in action and the way I acted asked, "Are you sure you're gay? You

don't act like a gay man!" It was their idea of what a gay man acted like; you know?

With the mindset that coming out empowers students to be proud of themselves, Dan said:

To me. It's important to be visible as gay. (...) I find it a small part of my teaching (...) to say "I'm gay." (...) I'm not ashamed of my experience, nor should you be. (...) Embrace it. Use it. Learn from it.

Evan said that fully coming out coincided with achieving a goal to become a teacher:

I feel like when I do become a teacher I'm going to be out, and I'm going to talk about it. I'm going to be like, "This is who I am." I'm not going to be afraid to be with kids because I feel more comfortable as an actual teacher instead of a student teacher or an intern working with kids.

Last, a participant shared that as time passed, she ultimately did not care what others thought about her; she was less hesitant about coming out. Simons, Ramdas, & Russell (2020) found that sexual minorities who reached maturity during the legalization of same-gender marriage were like to use cognitive coping skills. Vicky stated:

Anger pushed me to say, "You know what? I don't care what you think. I don't care what anything thinks. This is who I am, and there's a lot more like me. I'm going to speak out against this, and I'm gonna help others.

Johnny used cognitive as well behavioral coping strategies to cope with coming out (Simons et al., 2020). He said:

If I was going to be expected to attend these functions at my employer, with my employer, beyond the normal workday where my colleagues were bringing their spouses, I was gonna bring my partner, whether people liked it or not. (...) My

approach was, it was my job to show even those skeptics potentially in the crowd—there was a priest who was on our staff—is that I could be a professional, a very well-respected professional. (...) For me, it's like, "Okay, you know who you are, where you are. How can you be better?" That's been my thing.

Future Research

Despite more focus on sexual orientation and school policy over the past decade in the U.S. and abroad, the safety and health needs of gender minority teachers and students have been less studied (Roberts, Allan, & Wells, 2007). This recommendation is related to an ongoing struggle in academia and society at large to answer the following questions:

- What is gender?
- What is sex?
- Why do some people want to give up one sex for another?

In 2007, two trans-identified teachers, Gayle and Carol, were interviewed about their experiences transitioning as school employees. Gayle shared:

I tried until I was in my mid-fifties to bury my inner female core identity by taking on many extra-curricular activities within my school and, in my free time, keeping myself constantly occupied with such activities as backpacking, canoeing, and wildlife photography. However, the mounting mental anguish (which I later understood to be gender dysphoria) eventually intensified to the point where I could no longer function—even as a successful and highly respected teacher. I knew that I ultimately had to transition for myself and for my peace of mind (as cited in Roberts, Allan, & Wells, 2007, p. 121).

Carol shared the following:

The students and parents showed no sign of seeing anything unusual about my appearance and mannerisms. Sadly, [however,] my principal continued her attempts to have me removed. My desire to continue teaching, however, was stronger than her ability to dissuade me. I developed a personal mantra to fortify my strength and courage to survive. I repeated the phrase, “I will teach in a deep, dank dungeon, next door to hell,” which helped me to survive through some very adverse conditions. (. . .) Today, I remain teaching as a proud teacher (as cited in Roberts, Allan, & Wells, 2007, p. 124).

The stories of Gayle and Carol illustrate how difficult it is to transition, even with support. Thus, to develop and improve practice recommendations for supporting colleagues who are experiencing distress related to sex and gender, we encourage researchers to study the experiences of gender minority educators either in conjunction with or separately from the experiences of sexual minority educators in the future. Second, more quantitative and mixed research, are needed (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). Replication studies and studies with more males are called for as well. This is because most of the research conducted on the experiences of sexual and gender minority educators has been qualitative and with small sample sizes.

Third, because most sexual minority educator research has been conducted in the U.S. and Great Britain, more research on the topic should be conducted in other parts of the world. For example, sexual minority educators who come out as role models to students and colleagues may go to prison for life in Bangladesh, Barbados, Guyana, Sierra Leone, Qatar, Uganda, and Zambia. They may be put to death in northern Nigeria and southern Somalia, in Syrian and Iraqi ISIS territories, and in the countries of Afghanistan, Brunei, Iran, Iraq, Mauritania, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen (Amnesty International, 2020). Governments in these areas

rarely or never have discussions with Western representatives on these topics. Regarding the latter, these countries include Nigeria, Uganda, and Russia, just to name a few. Further, Jones et al. (2014) have called for more research on developing and enforcing education policies to support both sexual and gender minority educators, including those who are intersex. The experiences of intersex educators have largely been studied in Australia (Jones et al., 2014).

Fourth, given that one's power is displayed through communication processes to normalize and demarcate identities and scholarship (Foucault, 1976), sexual minority educators who are out risk being excluded in their schools. Nonetheless, these educators are also agentic and thus have the potential to challenge all forms of exclusion in their educational settings (Rudoe, 2010). Employers should employ agentic individuals to promote and study advocacy competence and justice, especially in educational settings where historically minoritized educators are employed (Jones et al., 2014). Last, additional research is needed to examine the differences between male, female, intersex, transgender, and gender non-conforming persons' experiences as educators working in different school communities at different stages of gender identity development, with different levels of sexual and gender minority advocacy competence. Examining these areas in relation to educators' levels of sexual and gender minority advocacy competence (i.e., how they advocate for sexual and gender minority students), in particular, will allow us to further refine recommendations on how educators may most effectively advocate for sexual and gender minority students. The following measures could be used: (a) the Measure of Gender Exploration and Commitment (MGEC; Simons, 2019), (b) the School Counselor Sexual Minority Advocacy Competence Scale (SCSMACS; Simons, 2018), (c) the School Counselor Transgender Intersex Advocacy Competence Scale (SCTIACS, Simons, 2019), and (d) the Intersex Counselor Competence Scale (ICCS; Simons, 2019).

Limitations

We conducted life story interviews with a non-probability sample of 24 sexual minority educators (teachers, mentors, and coaches) from three generations of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. As a result, the findings of the study cannot be widely applied to a population of sexual minority educators. Two other limitations were that not all participants were out at school, thus findings cannot be generalized to participants who were out. Next, the study included three cohorts of participants and was not on just one group of educators (i.e., teachers, mentors, and coaches were all lumped together). Because of these limitations, learning about one group of educators over another group regarding retrospective affect and behavior was challenging because sociocultural changes affect groups of people differently over time.

Conclusion

This study has helped us learn more about the lived experiences of sexual minorities, many of whom were people of color (POC) (i.e., 62% of sample was POC), who have dedicated their lives to education with or without the support of others. This is important because sexual minorities have a long history in education—whether they have been visible as sexual minorities to other school stakeholders or not. A non-directive phenomenological qualitative research design was used to study the similarities and differences among three cohorts of sexual minority educators in categories found in the data (having a helping identity, wanting to be effective, having support, and being out or not). Our findings confirmed and extended prior findings.

References

- Amnesty International (2020). *LGBTI rights*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/discrimination/lgbt-rights/>
- Auciello, M. J. (2016). *In their own voices: The lived personal and professional experiences of LGB[BT]I school administrators* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Bluestein, D. L., Kenny, M. E., Di Fabio, A., & Guichard, J. (2017). Expanding the impact of the psychology of working: Engaging psychology in the struggle for decent work and human rights. *Journal of Career Assessment*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072718774002>
- Cech, E. A., & Pham, M. (2017). "Queer in STEM organizations: Workplace disadvantages for LGBT employees in STEM related federal agencies." *Social Sciences*, 6(1), 12. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci6010012>
- Creswell, J. (2002). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Denton, M. J. (2009). *The lived experiences of lesbian/gay/[bisexual/transgender] educational leaders* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Downs, J. L. (2009). *Lesbian, gay, bisexual school counselors: What influences their decision-making regarding coming out at work* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Ferfolja, T. (2007). Teacher negotiations of sexual subjectivities. *Gender and Education*, 19(5), 569-586. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250701535584>
- Foucault, M. (1976). *The history of sexuality*. Éditions Gallimard.
- Frost, D. M., Hammack, P. L., Wilson, B. D. M., Russell, S. T., Lightfoot, M., & Meyer, I. H. (2019). The qualitative interview in psychology and the study of social change: Sexual identity development, minority stress, and health in the Generations Study. *Qualitative Psychology*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/qup0000148>

- Gates, G. (2011). *How many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender?* Los Angeles: Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Hill, C. E. (Ed.) (2012). *Consensual qualitative research: A practical resource for investigating social science phenomena*. Washington, D.C.: APA.
- Jackson, J. M. (2007). *Unmasking identities: An exploration of the lives of gay and lesbian teachers*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Jones, T., Gray, E., and Harris, A. (2014). GLBTIQ teachers in Australian education policy: Protections, suspicions, and restrictions. *Sex Education, 14*(3), 338-353.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2014.901908>
- King, J. R. (2004). The (im) possibility of gay teachers for young children. *Theory into Practice, 43*(2), 122-127.
- Lasky, S. (2005). A sociocultural approach to understanding teacher identity, agency and professional vulnerability in a context of secondary school reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 21*(1), 899-916. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2005.06.003>
- McConnell, E. A., Janulis, P., Phillips, G., Truong, R., & Birkett, M. (2018). Multiple minority stress and LGBT community resilience among sexual minority men. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, 5*(1), 1-12.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000265>
- Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin, 129*, 674-697. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674>

- Meyer, I. H., & Ouellette, S. C. (2009). Unity and purpose at the intersections of racial/ethnic and sexual identities. In P. L. Hammack & B. J. Cohler (Eds.), *The story of sexual identity: Narrative perspectives on the gay and lesbian life course* (p. 79–106). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195326789.003.0004>
- Moradi, B., Wiseman, M. C., DeBlaere, C., Goodman, M. B., Sarkees, A., Brewster, M. E., & Huang, Y.-P. (2010). LGB of color and white individuals' perceptions of heterosexist stigma, internalized homophobia, and outness: Comparisons of levels and links. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 38(3), 397–424. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000009335263>
- Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Johnson, R. B. (2006). The validity issue in mixed research. *Research in the Schools*, 13, 48-63.
- Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Roberts, G., Allan, C., & Wells, K. (2007) Understanding gender identity in K-12 Schools, *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education*, 4(4), 119-129. https://doi.org/10.1300/J367v04n04_08
- Rudoe, N. (2010). Lesbian teachers' identity, power and the public/private boundary. *Sex Education*, 10(1), 23-36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681810903491347>
- Simons, J. D. (2019). Intersex Counselor Competence Scale. [Database record]. Retrieved from PsycTESTS. <https://doi.org/10.1037/t74291-000>
- Simons, J. D. (2019). Measure of Gender Exploration and Commitment. [Database record]. Retrieved from PsycTESTS. <https://doi.org/10.1037/t74290-000>
- Simons, J. D. (2019). School Counselor Transgender Intersex Advocacy Competence Scale. [Database record]. Retrieved from PsycTESTS. <https://doi.org/10.1037/t74021-000>

- Simons, J. D. (2018). School Counselor Sexual Minority Advocacy Competence Scale [Database record]. Retrieved from PsycTESTS. <https://doi.org/10.1037/t69044-000>
- Simons, J. D. (2020). *STEM identity development among LGBT educators*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Simons, J. D., Ramdas, M., & Russell, S. T. (forthcoming). School-age coping: Themes across three generations of sexual minorities. *Journal of School Counseling*. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/txkc3>
- Simons, J. D., & Russell, S. T. (2020). *Educator interaction with sexual minority students*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research*. Sage publications.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Sutter, M., & Perrin, P. B. (2016). Discrimination, mental health, and suicidal ideation among LGBTQ people of color. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 63(1), 98–105. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000126>
- Szalacha, L. (2003). Safer sexual diversity climate: Lessons learnt from an evaluation of Massachusetts safe school programs for gay and lesbian students. *The American Journal of Education*, 110(1), 58-88. <https://doi.org/10.1086/377673>
- Weston, D. (2014, October 17). One simple act can be a global inspiration. *The Times Educational Supplement*, 5117.
- Woods, S. E. (2012). Describing the experience of lesbian physical educators: A phenomenological study. *Research In Physical Educ. & Sp*, 90.
- Wolf, C., Joye, D., Smith, T. W., & Fu, Y. (Eds.) (2016). *The SAGE handbook of survey*

methodology. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd.

Yoder, J. B., & Mattheis, A. (2016) Queer in STEM: Workplace experiences reported in a national survey of LGBTQA individuals in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics careers. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 63(1), 1-27.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2015.1078632>

*Appendix A***Figure 1***Model of Sexual Minority Educator Career Identity Development Related to Level of Outness*