

Gay Men in College: Identity Processes and Adaptations

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Disclosure to families remains a major challenge for young gay men as they consolidate the many components of their personal identity in college.

Men who self-identify as gay typically report knowing about their affectional orientation during early adolescence (Malyon, 1981; Troiden, 1989). This represents the beginning of the process of gay identity exploration, and such personal acknowledgment precedes disclosure to someone else. The process of disclosure of lesbian or gay affectional status to others—"coming out"—proceeds slowly, and may occur over many years following self-awareness. There are multiple overlapping processes involved in this developmental task, such as telling family (parents, siblings, extended family), friends (ranging from casual acquaintances to close friends), and the many important others in one's social network (e.g., coworkers and teachers). These disclosure processes facilitate the shedding of heterosexual identity and its social expectations; this role exit is inevitably stressful both for the person and for the social network members whose presumptions have been violated. In addition to negotiating exits from heterosexual roles, gay and lesbian people must develop an identity within a gay or lesbian context. Revealing lesbian or gay identity to others initiates another set of developmental processes—relating to lesbian and gay people, socializing in lesbian and gay settings, becoming involved in lesbian and gay communities, and integrating lesbian or gay status into all domains of personal life.

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The late adolescent and early adulthood years of college and university life are culturally conceived of as a time for identity exploration, with the result that major career and relationship dilemmas are (at least temporarily) resolved. For lesbian and gay college students, these normative expectations are rendered much more complex because of the additional identity components they must manage (Herd, 1989). Although most lesbian and gay adults acknowledge their affectional orientation to themselves during adolescence, most have not come out by the time they enter a college or a university. Only a small minority of lesbian and gay youth disclose in junior or senior high school, and these youth often suffer serious psychological and family consequences (Gibson, 1989; Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Martin & Hetrick, 1988). For those who go to college, the modal pattern is to disclose during their college years, away from the close scrutiny of family and friends.

Little is known about the identity processes of gay college youth although several studies involve college students in their samples (e.g., Savin-Williams, 1989). No precise estimate of the numbers of such young people is available, and any estimate may underestimate the lesbian/gay/bisexual college population. For instance, a recent study of men seeking routine medical care at a university health service found 11% of the men to identify themselves as bisexual (4%) or gay (7%) (Wiesmeier, Forsythe, Sundstrom, Ullis, & Hertz, 1986). Because this information was nonanonymous, it is reasonable to assume that others in the study were also gay. Overall estimates of 8% to 12% demonstrate the large numbers of young men who identify themselves as gay either in college or at a later time in their lives.

The current study was designed to shed light on identity processes of self-identified gay men

in college. A sample of young gay men was surveyed on how they came to define themselves as gay, how they have discussed this with their families, what kind of social relationships with other gay people they have, and the nature of their involvement in gay social and political activities. Despite a small and self-selected sample, it is hoped that this report will encourage others to study this population and its adaptations.

METHOD

Participants

The study was conducted during the fall of 1989 at a large mid-Atlantic state university located in a rural setting. Several strategies were needed to encourage college men to help with data collection. Participants were obtained by distributing surveys at meetings of the lesbian and gay student organization and at dances and social events, and also by asking students if they had friends who would complete the survey. The men were given the survey to complete at home; they were provided with stamped envelopes to mail back the completed surveys. In addition, an advertisement seeking volunteers was placed in the student newspaper. Men responding to the ad completed the survey in a classroom with the assistance of a project assistant. All replies were anonymous.

A total of 200 surveys were distributed, of which 77 were returned (38% return rate). All men older than 25 years of age were excluded, as were men who were not undergraduate students at the university. The final sample contained 61 gay men, averaging 21 years of age ($M=20.95$, $SD=1.53$; range = 18 to 25 years). Five African American, 1 Asian American, 1 Hispanic, 1 Native American, and 52 White men were in the sample. Family income (both parents' income summed) ranged from \$19,000 to \$163,000 ($M=\$65,730$, $SD=\$38,396$). Parents' education was generally some college or technical education beyond high school. Participants defined their current religious beliefs as somewhere between weak and moderate in strength.

Instrument

The survey instrument, the Penn State Lesbian/Gay Life Course Questionnaire, was based on a detailed 22-page questionnaire developed

by McDonald (1982) to cover all relevant domains of lesbian and gay life. The author modified the original instrument after thorough review by several experts in human sexuality research and after pilot testing with small samples of gay men. In addition, the revised version was used in several other projects (D'Augelli, 1989d; D'Augelli, Collins, & Hart, 1987). The Life Course Questionnaire addresses these primary identity processes: (a) *the development of gay identity status* (age of awareness of gay feelings, first sexual experience, age of self-labeling, first disclosure of sexual orientation to someone, and first relationship); (b) *relationships with family members* (disclosure of sexual orientation to different members of the family and their reactions); (c) *social relationships* (gay and heterosexual friends, knowledge of sexual orientation among social network members); (d) *gay community involvement* (involvement in local groups or organizations that are gay-identified); (e) *management of public identity* (openness about sexual orientation in a variety of public settings; active deception about being gay); and (f) *personal concerns* (e.g., anxiety and depression). Several experts have reviewed the survey, judging it to have content validity in its inclusion of questions relevant to sexual orientation. Because all items are straightforward and call for little interpretation, the survey has face validity as well.

The survey takes 1 1/2 to 2 hours to complete. Participants who have completed the survey have reported it to be a thorough review of their development as lesbians or gay men and find it helpful in examining current challenges in their lives.

Gay Identity Status

Much variability was found on all milestones of gay identity development. Awareness of gay feelings was reported to have occurred from 1 to 20 years of age ($M=10.8$, $SD=3.9$); first sexual experience occurred between ages 5 and 22 ($M=15.6$, $SD=4.2$); self-labeling as gay occurred between 11 and 21 ($M=17.0$, $SD=2.4$); first disclosure happened between 15 and 23 ($M=19.0$, $SD=1.6$); and first relationship was initiated between 12 and 24 ($M=18.8$, $SD=2.2$).

"Labeling oneself as gay" followed "feeling different" by an average of 6 years ($SD=3.8$), with a range of 0 to 14 years in between these two events. "Telling someone else" occurred

on the average of 2 years ($SD=2.4$) after labeling oneself, but this varied from being simultaneous to occurring 9 years later. Most striking is the number of years between “self-knowledge” and “disclosure to someone else.” These men waited an average of 8 years ($SD=4.1$) to tell another person; the range was up to 18 years. “Sexual behavior” followed “knowing one was gay” in 75% of the cases; sexual behavior occurred before self-labeling 11% of the time and simultaneously 8% of the time. Sexual behavior was initiated an average of 5 years after self-knowledge, but the range was considerable, from 15 years after to 4 years before.

These men’s past sexual experience showed much variability as well. On the Kinsey scale, 39% reported an exclusive same-sex history, and only one man (2%) had never had a homosexual experience. Most (85%) endorsed the Kinsey “0” (entirely same-sex history), “1” (largely same-sex, with incidental opposite-sex history), and “2” (largely same-sex, with distinct same-sex history) categories: only 9 men had equal contact with men and women, or more heterosexual than same-sex contact. Number of lifetime sexual partners ranged from 0 to 50. Specifically, 15% reported 1 partner; 25% reported 2–4 partners; 15%, 5–7 partners; 14%, 8–10 partners; 15%, 11–19 partners; 7%, 20–30 partners; 5%, 30–50 partners; and 1 reported more than 50 partners.

About half were partnered and half were single. Most relationships had lasted less than a year. Of the 29 men reporting a current relationship, 3 (10%) had been together for less than a month, 12 (41%) for 1 to 6 months, 8 (27%) for 6 months to 1 year, and 6 (21%) for more than 1 and less than 5 years. Of those with a relationship, 24% were living together and 76% were not. The youth of the sample obviously precludes lengthy relationships, but it is worth noting the efforts made by some young men to build relationships.

Family Relationships

Fewer than half of the men had disclosed that they were gay to their families. Just over one fourth (27%) had told their fathers, and 39% told their mothers; of those with siblings, 42% had told a sister, and only 17% had told a brother. Much suspicion, however, was reported when the men were asked how they routinely dealt with family members who “officially” do

not “know.” The most common strategies used to deal with unaware family members involved saying nothing (used by about half the men) and misrepresenting or lying about gay status (14% lied to mothers, 7% to fathers, 14% to sisters, and 7% to brothers). Although nothing was said directly, 17% of mothers, 24% of fathers, 23% of sisters, and 11% of brothers were suspicious. Hints about being gay were directed toward 17% of unaware mothers, 14% of fathers, 4% of sisters, and 18% of brothers.

Participants evaluated their family members’ reactions to their gay status as tolerant, intolerant, or rejecting. Of mothers, 74% were tolerant, 17% were intolerant, and 9% overtly rejecting. Of fathers, 43% were tolerant, 35% were intolerant, and 22% were rejecting. Fathers were significantly more intolerant or rejecting than were mothers ($\chi^2(df=25)=66.2, df=25=66.21, p<.001$). No significant difference between brothers and sisters was found. Nearly 75% of siblings were tolerant; 12% of brothers and 16% of sisters were rejecting.

Social Relationships

When asked about the most important people in their lives now, only 15% named their families; 54% said gay male friends, 3% said lesbian friends, and 25% said straight friends who are aware of gay status. The centrality of sexual orientation in these men’s social relationships is also shown in friendship networks and social activities. Only 6 men (10%) had no close gay male friends; the remainder reported from 1 to 16 gay men as close friends (average gay male close friends was 3.54; $SD=3.8$). Half (54%) said at least half of their friends were gay men or lesbians. Of heterosexual friends, 39% said many knew the respondent was gay, 26% said some knew, 26% said that very few knew, and 10% said none were aware. On the average, 38% ($SD=.27$; range = 0% to 100%) of the men’s close friends were gay men; 38% ($SD=.29$, range = 0% to 100%) were knowing heterosexual women and men. Of all close friends, on the average 76% ($SD=.27$, range = 0% to 100%) knew. The more open the participant was about being gay, the higher the percentage of the close friendship network who were gay or who were aware heterosexuals ($r=.41, p<.01$).

Gay Community Involvement

Involvement in the local “gay community” was reported by many men. About one fourth (23%)

said their socializing was exclusively with other gay people; another 38% said that half or more of their socializing occurred with gay people. Frequent visits to see other gay people was also common: 52% visited the homes of other gay people weekly or more often; 20% visited two to three times per month. About 50% went to a gay social event at least twice a month or more. Socializing in gay bars (there is only one small bar in this community) is legally limited to those 21 or older. Perhaps because of this, 25% of the men had never been to a gay bar. Of those younger than 21 (27 men), 12 (44%) had never been in a gay bar and only 3 said they had visited bars at least monthly. Of those 21 and older (34 men), only three (9%) had never been in a gay bar.

More than half (54%) reported participation in the university's lesbian and gay student organization. A total of 40% said that most of their gay social activities were related to this organization, and half of the men had close friends who were group members.

Management of Public Identity

Participants were asked to evaluate their personal discomfort in a set of public situations. The situations included such events as being out with a group of gay friends, buying a book about gay people, and going repeatedly to the same restaurant with a partner. These situations did not demand self-identification in any way. Using a 5-point difficulty scale, the men rated buying a book about gay people, going to a straight party with a partner, going to a straight party alone, and going out in public with lesbian and gay friends as the most difficult. Even these situations, however, were not very difficult; they were all rated about "4" on the 5-point scale, with higher scores reflecting lower difficulty. Public situations in which no self-identification as gay is required posed little conflict.

In contrast, many men made conscious efforts to disguise their being gay in situations in which their disclosure of gay identity was threatened. More than half had used opposite-sex pronouns to refer to their male dating partners (57%), pretended to date women (54%), avoided discussing their personal lives (75%), or introduced a partner/lover as a "friend" (69%).

Fewer lied about their living situation (24%), did not introduce a lover/partner to a straight friend (20%), pretended not to see a gay friend

when with a straight friend (18%), or avoided being seen in public with gay friends (15%). Powerful fears thwarted openness about affectional status. When given a list of fears that might influence their openness about themselves, the top fear concerned family rejection. It was closely followed, however, by fear of being harassed or verbally abused and fear of being harmed physically, both of which are possible consequences of being publicly identified as gay.

Personal Concerns and Life Satisfaction

Participants described how troublesome each of 20 mental health concerns currently was, using a 4-point scale. Replies are shown in Table 1. The problems that were very or extremely troubling for at least half of the sample were ending a close relationship (75%), telling parents about being gay (68%), worrying about AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome; 56%), telling coworkers (55%), and telling one's boss (52%). Of these, disclosure to parents and ending a relationship were distinctly more troubling. Many men were concerned about anxiety (only 23% said it was no problem) and depression (37% had no problem with depression). Very few (7%) had no problem with telling parents. The more openness reported about gay status, the more troublesome was discussion with parents ($r = .37, p < .01$). Difficulty with parents was correlated with problems in dealing with others' emotions ($r = .44, p < .01$), suggesting that parents are important "others" whose emotions need to be confronted.

Overall life satisfaction was not related to general openness about being gay. Openness about being gay was related to having more close family members ($r = .44, p < .01$) and more straight friends who know about affectional status ($r = .29, p < .05$). Less openness was associated with greater fear of verbal ($r = .48, p < .01$) and physical harassment ($r = .32, p < .05$). Greater worry about physical harassment was related to lower life satisfaction ($r = .29, p < .05$). Anxiety was related to several coming-out dilemmas, whereas depression was not. The more anxious, the more difficulty in telling coworkers ($r = .35, p < .01$) and straight friends ($r = .30, p < .05$) about being gay. Less openness about being gay was associated with many concerns. Being "hidden" was associated with greater worry about telling parents ($r = .37, p < .01$), coworkers

TABLE 1
Mental Health Concerns of Young Gay Men

Concern	No Problem (%)	Somewhat Troubling (%)	Very Troubling (%)	Extremely Troubling (%)
1. Relating to people in social situations	65	25	7	3
2. Close relationships with other men	55	33	10	2
3. Close relationships with women	63	20	12	5
4. Telling parents about homosexuality	7	25	18	50
5. Dealing with one's emotions	38	45	7	10
6. Dealing with others' emotions	27	40	25	8
7. Relationships with family in general	40	35	13	12
8. Fears	25	38	20	17
9. Telling people at work about ones homosexuality	22	23	28	27
10. Alcohol use	78	15	2	5
11. Sexual functioning	70	28	0	2
12. Job satisfaction	62	28	10	0
13. Termination of a close relationship	7	18	33	42
14. Drug use	82	5	10	3
15. Depression	37	40	15	8
16. Telling straight friends about one's homosexuality	27	28	22	23
17. Anxiety	23	50	20	7
18. Telling boss about one's homosexuality	25	23	25	27
19. Religious beliefs about one's gayness	62	22	7	10
20. Worry about AIDS	8	35	28	28

N=61.

($r=.49$, $p<.01$), and straight friends ($r=.47$, $p<.01$). More fear ($r=.50$, $p<.01$), anxiety ($r=.31$, $p<.05$), and worry about AIDS ($r=.26$, $p<.05$) were also related to being more hidden.

DISCUSSION

In this study I found evidence of considerable variability in how gay men in college handle the many components of their sexual orientation. Nearly all were aware of gay feelings well before entrance into the university; most had labeled themselves "gay" as teenagers. On the average, however, their first disclosure to another person-their coming-out-occurred in college, as did their first relationship. Sexual behavior was variable: First experiences were reported to have occurred between 5 and 22 years; lifetime sexual partners ranged from 0 to more than 50. Therefore, sexual activity may not be the most helpful indicator of gay identity development. Far more psychological tension occurs during the college years in the management of gay status interpersonally and socially-with family, heterosexual friends, and coworkers. After the initial disclosure and with the building of a social network of lesbian and

gay people and supportive heterosexual people who know, increasingly complex issues in identity management must be confronted. The building of a gay social identity progresses simultaneously with increased consolidation of personal confidence about being gay such that these processes become intertwined.

These men reported many challenges to their newly formed identities. The foremost challenge was to tell their families. Fewer than half of these men had told their families; nearly three fourths judged telling family to be very troubling. Indeed, this situation is psychologically demanding given how disclosure issues are handled within the family. For instance, few fathers and brothers knew; mothers and sisters were more often told. This obviously leaves an unstable family process: some know, some do not. Also, many assumed their family members knew even though there was no candid acknowledgement. Some resolved the ambiguity in the situation by misrepresenting or lying. To what degree this represents healthy coping or defensive avoidance is difficult to know from these results. Certainly, family members who had been told were also perceived as the most accepting, although fathers were more unaccepting than mothers. It seems likely that these men gauge

the different responses among family members, divulging to some, evading with others, and lying to yet others. Although this establishes a temporary family equilibrium, many changes can disrupt the balancing act, including changes in the gay man, in family members, or in the way family members relate to each other concerning their offspring's situation.

Among the more powerful destabilizing factors in these fragile equilibria is the gay man's increasing involvement in social situations that are gay-identified. Gay people and supportive heterosexual people were highly important to these young men. Most had developed close friendships with other gay men, and half were in significant partnerships. Extensive social contacts had developed with gay friends, in gay organizations, and, for a few, in the local gay bar. On the other hand, the openness expressed within gay-identified social situations was not reflected in all social circumstances. Many avoided personal discussions, and more than half used opposite-sex pronouns to disguise their identity. Over time (and this process can extend for years), increasing honesty and decreasing distortion may occur. Causality is uncertain here, and it is likely that circular processes exist: the more secure, the more disclosed to more people—the more support provided, the more disclosed—the more stable a gay social network becomes—the less relevant unaccepting others become, even if family members. Only longitudinal developmental research can disentangle these mutually influencing individual, family, and social dimensions (Boxer & Cohler, 1989).

The intent of this study was to illuminate the identity dilemmas faced by self-identified gay men in college. There is no way to know the representativeness of the men sampled, a problem common to research on lesbians and gay men (Harry, 1986). No doubt, the men in this study were more open about themselves than were the many gay men on this campus who were undisclosed or who did not attend gay-identified social events. Identity dilemmas for undisclosed gay men (themselves a highly heterogeneous group) are likely to be more difficult because they have less support from others to validate their identity. A similar conclusion seems reasonable to make about gay men who are open to a very small and select number of friends. Regardless of disclosure level, however, this study has revealed the most difficult dilemmas unique to young gay men. In essence, these

men's gay identity is in transition, although they have long known they were gay. Many other aspects of gay identity—among them the most challenging—are in flux. On the average, these men noted their openness about being gay in the center of a continuum of hidden-disclosed. Not fully hidden nor fully disclosed, these men experienced worries and fears related to the dilemmas they have yet to confront, especially regarding their families.

Increased professional attention must be directed toward helping these young men face the distinct dilemmas of being gay young adults in transition to adulthood in an unsupportive context. Other research conducted on this campus found pervasive harassment of disclosed lesbians and gay men (D'Augelli, 1989a, 1989b) as well as widespread homophobia among students, even those in training to be resident assistants (D'Augelli, 1989c, 1990). The hostility expressed by many of their peers exacerbates the stresses of identity development, preventing young gay men (and lesbians) from seeking the support of others, both gay and heterosexual. Student development professionals must provide leadership in creating a more supportive campus climate so that young lesbians and gay men can meet the routine challenges of college life.

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