Predicting Academic Wellbeing Among Sexual Minority College Students: Discrimination and Perceptions of Campus Climate

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Background

Campus climate studies conducted with sexual minority college students find that they experience discrimination on campus and perceive the climate as chilly, unwelcoming, and sometimes openly hostile (Rankin et al., 2010).

Minority stress theory suggests that exposure to stigma and discrimination can contribute to chronic stress among sexual minorities, which helps to explain their increased risk for poor wellbeing and health (Meyer, 2003). Minority stress researchers have paid little attention to subtle mistreatment and perceptions of the social environment for sexual minorities (Meyer et al., 2011).

Previous research examines the relationship between discrimination and sexual minority students' mental health (Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Waldo et al., 1998; Woodford et al., 2012a); however, few studies consider academic wellbeing (Sanlo, 2004; Silverschanz et al., 2008; Woodford et al., 2012b). None of these studies investigate **both** experiential and perceived campus climate.

Research Question

To inform policies and programs designed to foster students' academic success and development, including that of sexual minority students, and to advance minority stress theory research, this study investigates the relationship between experiential and perceived campus climate and sexual minority students' academic wellbeing. Specifically, we ask:

*What is the relationship between **interpersonal discrimination, perceived campus climate**, and **school avoidance, social acceptance on campus, and satisfaction with the university** among sexual minority college students?*

We seek to interrogate the complexity of these relationships by simultaneously testing the impact of personal and ambient (i.e., witnessed) heterosexist harassment, as well as three dimensions of perceived campus climate for LGB students on these outcomes.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for key study variables

Variable	n	M	SD
Personal heterosexist harassment [a]	345	0.41	0.81
Ambient heterosexist harassment [a]	345	1.34	0.99
Perceptions of LGB acceptance on campus [b]	334	4.42	0.84
Perceptions of LGB safety on campus [c]	345	5.87	0.94
Perceptions of LGB ability to be open on campus [d]	342	5.06	1.27
School avoidance [e]	340	2.08	0.76
Social acceptance on campus [d]	344	5.10	1.20
Satisfaction with the university [d]	343	5.79	1.31

[a] Theoretical range 0 – 4, higher score indicates more discrimination; [b] Theoretical range 1 – 6, higher score indicates more perceived acceptance; [c] Theoretical range 1– 7, higher score indicates more perceived safety; [d] Theoretical range 1 – 7, higher score indicates more affirming response; [e] Theoretical range 1 – 7, higher score indicates more avoidance behaviors. Note. LGB = lesbian, gay, and bisexual.

Methods

Procedure
- Data were taken from a cross-sectional study conducted among undergraduate and graduate students at a large public research university in the Midwest, n = 2568.
- Participants completed an anonymous online survey consisting of 322 items (75 posed to specific groups, e.g., sexual minority students).
- Students reported sexual orientation based on the Kinsey scale: "completely lesbian/gay," "mostly lesbian/gay," "bisexual," "mostly heterosexual," and "completely heterosexual."
- The analytic sample consists of **sexual minority respondents**, including those who selected "mostly heterosexual;" **n = 345**.

Measures
Campus Climate
- **Experiences**: Heterosexist harassment refers to "insensitive verbal and symbolic (but non-assaultive) behaviors that convey animosity toward non-heterosexuality" (Silverschanz et al., 2008, p. 180). Personal heterosexist harassment (2 items, α = .72); ambient heterosexist harassment (5 items, α = .80); response categories 0 = none, 4 = 10 or more times
- **Perceptions**: LGB acceptance on campus refers to perceived attitudes of university members toward openly LGB people (4 items, α = .86); LGB safety on campus refers to feelings of safety for LGB people in various spaces, e.g., restrooms (3 items, α = .80); LGB ability to be open on campus refers to perceived ability to be "out" as a sexual minority (3 items, α = .78)

Academic Wellbeing
- **School Avoidance**: Students' disengagement from academic activities (9 items, α = .74; Ramos, 2000)
- **Social Acceptance**: The feeling of "fitting in" or feeling comfortable among the students, staff, and faculty of the university (3 items, α = .74; Cortina et al., 1998)
- **Satisfaction** with the university (2 items, α = .83; Cortina et al., 1998)

Data Analysis
Following exploratory analyses, multiple linear regressions were conducted to simultaneously examine the relationship of each campus climate indicator with each dependent variable.

Table 2: Multiple linear regressions predicting academic wellbeing among sexual minority college students

	School avoidance (n = 321)	Social acceptance on campus (n = 324)	Satisfaction with the university (n = 321)
Personal heterosexist harassment	0.15*	-0.06	-.05
Ambient heterosexist harassment	-0.07	0.02	.10
Perceptions of LGB acceptance on campus	-0.03	0.02	-.03
Perceptions of LGB safety on campus	-0.05	0.09	.12
Perceptions of LGB ability to be open on campus	-0.03	0.23***	.20**
R^2	.113	.187	.120
F change for R^2	3.265***	5.975***	3.528***

* p < .05,** p ≤ .01,*** p ≤ .001; Notes. LGB = lesbian, gay, and bisexual. Control variables: race, age, sex, mostly heterosexual/LGB, undergraduate/graduate student, LGB friends, LGB outness on campus.

Results

Sample Demographics
The analytic sample consisted primarily of students who identify as: mostly heterosexual (65%); female (67%); undergraduates (55%); and White (77%). The average age was 23 years (SD = 5.21).

Multivariate Results
School Avoidance
- **Significantly associated with personal heterosexist harassment**, β = 0.15, p = .03. This suggests that the more heterosexist harassment students experience, the more likely they are to report missing classes, considering dropping out, and other academic disengagement behaviors. No other indicators of climate were significant.

Social Acceptance
- **Significantly associated with perceived ability for LGB students to be open**, β = 0.23, p < .001. This implies that the more students feel LGB students can be "out" on campus, the more accepted they feel on campus. No other indicators of climate were significant.

Satisfaction with the University
- **Significantly associated with perceived ability for LGB students to be open,** β = 0.20, p = .002. This suggests that the more students feel LGB students can be "out" on campus, the more satisfaction they report. No other indicators of climate were significant.

Discussion

To cope with a possible stress response related to personal heterosexism, sexual minority students might engage in negative coping mechanisms, such as school avoidance. Ambient heterosexist harassment and perceptions of climate might not engender a similar stress reaction, thus not inspiring a behavioral response.

The perceived ability to be open about LGB identity was the only dimension of campus climate—both experiential and perceived—significantly associated with social acceptance and satisfaction. This indicator of perceived climate might have more personal salience for sexual minority students than perceptions of the university community's attitudes toward LGB people or the safety of particular campus spaces in shaping one's relationship to the campus in terms of feelings of overall acceptance and satisfaction.

Implications

Strategies to foster the academic wellbeing of sexual minority students should focus on preventing anti-LGB discrimination and fostering full inclusion for sexual minority students. The results suggest that policies and campus programs addressing subtle forms of targeted heterosexism are needed. The results also highlight the importance of creating institutional and departmental climates in which LGB students feel comfortable to openly express their sexual identities.

Interventions to foster positive coping mechanisms in response to targeted discriminatory events are recommended. These should include culturally competent counseling services and strengthening students' formal and informal support systems. Sexual minority peers and allies need to be prepared to offer appropriate support.

Research examining sexual minority students' experiences and academic wellbeing and other outcomes would benefit from considering the differential roles of experiential and perceived campus climate.