

## Making the Invisible Visible: Fear and Disclosure of Sexual Orientation at Work

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Stigma theory was used to examine the fears underlying the disclosure of a gay identity at work. Using a national sample of 534 gay, lesbian, and bisexual employees, this study examined the antecedents that affect the degree of disclosure of a gay identity at work and, for those who had not disclosed, the factors that influence their fears about full disclosure. Employees reported less fear and more disclosure when they worked in a group that was perceived as supportive and sharing their stigma. Perceptions of past experience with sexual orientation discrimination were related to increased fears but to greater disclosure. For those who had not fully disclosed their stigma, the fears associated with disclosure predicted job attitudes, psychological strain, work environment, and career outcomes. However, actual disclosure was unrelated to these variables. The utility of fear of disclosure for understanding processes underlying the disclosure of gay and other invisible stigmatized identities in the workplace is discussed.

*Keywords:* diversity, sexual orientation, homosexuality, stigma

The topic of invisible stigmas in the workplace has sparked considerable interest among diversity scholars in recent years (Beatty & Kirby, 2006; Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005; Creed & Scully, 2000; Ragins, in press, 2004; Smart & Wegner, 2000). Members of stigmatized groups are discredited, face negative social identities, and are targeted for discrimination (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Goffman, 1963). Some individuals have stigmas that are readily discernible, such as stigmatized racial identities, obesity, and physical disfigurements (Jones et al., 1984). Other individuals, such as gay men and lesbians, individuals with invisible disabilities (e.g., HIV/AIDS, epilepsy, mental illness) (Corrigan & Penn, 1999; Crawford, 1996; McLaughlin, Bell, & Stringer, 2004), and those with stigmatized religious affiliations (cf. Clair et al., 2005), have invisible stigmas. These individuals face unique challenges not faced by those with visible stigmas (Clair et al., 2005; Pachankis, 2007; D. M. Quinn, 2006; Ragins, in press, 2004).

One of the most critical challenges faced by workers with invisible stigmas is whether to disclose their stigmatized identity to others in the workplace. Although this decision can be stressful for

many individuals with invisible stigmas, it has been identified as one of the most difficult career challenges faced by lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) employees (cf. Button, 2001, 2004; Chrobot-Mason, Button, & DiClementi, 2001; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Ragins, 2004). One reason for this is that the risks involved with disclosure are greater for gay men and lesbians because, unlike other groups, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is legal in most workplaces in the United States (Herrschaft & Mills, 2002). Consequentially, discrimination against LGB workers is widespread. In fact, existing research has indicated that between 25% and 66% of LGB employees report experiencing sexual orientation discrimination at work (cf. review by Croteau, 1996).

Given this vulnerability to discrimination, the stakes involved with disclosing a gay identity at work are quite high. Disclosure has been found to result in reports of verbal harassment, job termination, and even physical assault (D'Augelli & Grossman, 2001; Friskopp & Silverstein, 1996). In fact, one study of 416 gay men and lesbians revealed that 75% reported being attacked or physically threatened as a result of disclosing their sexual identity (D'Augelli & Grossman, 2001). Given this situation, it is not surprising that gay and lesbian employees fear negative consequences to disclosure (Friskopp & Silverstein, 1996; Woods, 1994), and up to one third choose not to disclose their identity to anyone at work (Croteau, 1996). In fact, the fear of negative consequences of "being out at work" may have a greater impact on employees than the actual act of disclosure (Ragins, 2004), which has been described as bringing a sense of relief to LGB workers (Griffin, 1992; Woods, 1994).

A number of studies have examined the psychological and work outcomes associated with the disclosure of a gay identity at work (cf. reviews by Ragins, 2004; Ragins & Wiethoff, 2005; Welle & Button, 2004). These studies have tested the prediction that disclosure is associated with positive outcomes, the rationale being that employees who disclose at work should achieve congruence in their public and private identities (Ellis & Riggle, 1995), obtain a

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sense of psychological wholeness and well-being (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000), and be relieved of the debilitating strain of secrecy involved with leading a double life (Fassinger, 1995; Griffin, 1992). Although this view seems reasonable, the research has produced surprisingly inconsistent results. Disclosure has been found to have positive, negative, and nonsignificant effects on work attitudes, psychological strain, and compensation (cf. review by Ragins, 2004).

One reason for these puzzling findings is that researchers know little about the processes underlying the disclosure of a gay identity at work. In part, this is because research on sexual orientation in the workplace is a very new area of scholarship that needs theoretical guidance (cf. critique by Creed, 2006). It is promising that a number of new conceptual models have emerged that use stigma theory as a unifying framework for understanding the disclosure dilemmas faced by employees with invisible stigmas. These models shed important new light on the disclosure process by proposing that fear of negative repercussions affects disclosure and that this fear may lead to psychological distress and decreased job performance even in the absence of actual discrimination (cf. Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Clair et al., 2005; Croteau, 1996; Ragins, in press, 2004). This perspective reconciles the inconsistent research findings on the disclosure of a gay identity at work by offering the idea that work attitudes may be affected not only by the degree to which individuals disclose their sexual orientation but also by the underlying fears that may be associated with disclosure. The role of fear in the disclosure of an invisible stigma has not been empirically assessed but offers significant promise for understanding the experiences of LGB employees, particularly those who have not disclosed, or not fully disclosed, their sexual identity at work.

Accordingly, this study sought to break important new ground by using stigma theory to examine fear and the disclosure of a gay identity at work. Using a large national sample of 534 LGB employees, we offer two valuable insights into the workplace experiences of LGB employees. First, we examined the factors that affect the degree of disclosure of a gay identity at work and, for those who have not disclosed or have not fully disclosed, the underlying fears that may be associated with full disclosure and the factors that influence these fears. Second, our study examined the work and personal consequences associated with these experiences. Specifically, we sought to offer critical insights into the experiences of employees who have not fully disclosed their sexual orientation at work by examining not only their fears about the potential consequences of full disclosure but also the relationship of these fears to work and career attitudes, psychological strain, compensation, and promotion. In so doing, this study addresses two significant gaps in the literature. First, although LGB workers compose 4% to 17% of the workforce (Gonsiorek & Weinrich, 1991),<sup>1</sup> a larger proportion than many other minority groups (Lubensky, Holland, Wiethoff, & Crosby, 2004), scholars know little about their workplace experiences (cf. reviews by Ragins, 2004; Welle & Button, 2004). This study offers needed insights into one of the most difficult challenges faced by LGB workers and provides a foundation for future theory in this emerging and sometimes controversial area of research. Second, this study broadens the general knowledge of invisible stigmas by using stigma theory to assess fear and the degree of disclosure of an invisible stigmatized identity in the workplace.

## Stigma Theory and Fear of Disclosure in the Workplace *Evolution of Stigma Theory*

Stigmas are defined as socially undesirable, deviant, or repulsive characteristics that discredit or spoil an individual's social identity. In his seminal work, Goffman (1963) explained that stigmatization is a pervasive process of devaluation that permeates social interactions involving both targets and perceivers. Subsequent work by Jones et al. (1984) used expectancy theory, attribution theory, social cognition theory, and early theories of prejudice (e.g., Allport, 1954) to flesh out the theoretical domain of stigma. Jones and his colleagues proposed that stigmas launch attributional processes in which the target's actions are interpreted and responded to on the basis of his or her stigma rather than a full range of attributes. Using a symbolic interactionist perspective (e.g., Mead, 1934), Jones et al. hypothesized that stigmas are incorporated into the target's self-concept through environmental interactions and that stigmas influence the target's cognitions, behaviors, and social interactions.

Stigma theory has evolved considerably over the past 30 years, and current perspectives hold that stigmas are social constructions that involve both targets and perceivers.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), Crocker et al. (1998) defined stigmatized individuals as those who "possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute or characteristic that conveys a social identity that is devalued in some particular context" (p. 505). They explained that because stigmas are perceived attributes grounded within the social context, the environment plays a powerful role in determining whether a characteristic is perceived as a stigma.<sup>3</sup>

Psychologists have used stigma theory to study processes underlying stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination for a variety of individuals with stigmatized identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, obesity; cf. Heatherton, Kleck, Hebl, & Hull, 2000; Levin & van Laar, 2006) and, in support of stigma theory, have found that stigmas evoke negative attributions about the target that lead to prejudice and discrimination (cf. review by Crocker et al., 1998). More recently, stigma research has focused on how individuals are affected by their stigmas (cf. Major, 2006) and has found that stigmas shape targets' identity, behaviors, cognition, and affect (Deaux & Ethier, 1998; Levin & van Laar, 2006; Miller & Major, 2000).

Although stigmas have been studied by social psychologists for more than 40 years, management scholars have only recently applied stigma theory to the workplace (cf. Dipboye, Elsbach, & Paetzold, in press). In fact, stigma theory is increasingly being recognized as a useful theoretical anchor for the study of diversity

<sup>1</sup> One reason for this wide range is that estimates of sexual orientation vary depending on the country, the gender, the age group, and whether one is assessing same-sex attraction, same-sex behavior, or sexual identity (cf. Savin-Williams, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Although this study focuses on the target's behavior (i.e., disclosure of sexual orientation) and attitudinal state (i.e., fear of disclosure), it should be noted that these outcomes are affected by perceivers (i.e., coworkers, supervisors).

<sup>3</sup> The social context affects whether characteristics reflecting race, ethnicity, age, gender, weight, and other attributes are viewed as stigmas. An example of the social context effect is the heightened stigmatization of Muslims since the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

and discrimination in organizations (cf. Beatty & Kirby, 2006; Dipboye & Colella, 2005; Stone-Romero, 2005). Although the roots of stigma theory are grounded in broad psychological theories that explain identity, behavior, and social interactions, stigma theory recognizes that these general theories of human behavior often do not fully capture, or even recognize, the effects of diversity in social relationships. As Nkomo (1992) and others (Ely & Padavic, in press; Fletcher, 1998, 1999) observed, while general theories purport to be race and gender “blind,” by not *explicitly* addressing the effects of being in a socially devalued group, they leave open the possibility of assuming parallel processes for dominant and nondominant group members, thus ignoring historical, systemic, and organizational differences in power, status, and privilege that have a profound effect on individuals and their social interactions in organizations (cf. Linnehan & Konrad, 1999; Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989).<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, stigma theory precisely focuses on social identities that are discredited and devalued within a social context and seeks to explain the interpersonal and psychological effects of devaluation, marginalization, and discrimination in social relationships (Crocker et al., 1998). Stigma theory therefore offers a more precise theoretical resource for diversity and LGB research because it tailors general theories of human behavior to incorporate critical aspects of human diversity that permeate social relationships in the workplace. As we see next, stigma theory also offers core insights into the experiences of individuals with invisible stigmas.

### *Understanding Invisible Stigmas in the Workplace*

In their foundational books, both Goffman (1963) and Jones et al. (1984) identified the concealability of the stigma as a core dimension that affects the target, the perceiver, and the social interaction, and offered a rich analysis of the unique experiences of individuals with invisible stigmas. A core challenge faced by these individuals is the decision to disclose their stigma. This decision is an ongoing process that occurs with each social interaction and reflects a judgment that weighs the psychological benefits of establishing an authentic relationship on the one hand with the potential risks and fears of social rejection on the other (Goffman, 1963). Therefore, disclosure is not an all-or-none phenomenon but occurs on a continuum ranging from full disclosure on one end to nondisclosure on the other. To make matters more complex, the decision to disclose may or may not parallel the actual act of disclosure. Individuals may decide to disclose but not follow through, or they may disclose impulsively without engaging in a full decision process.

A number of new conceptual models have recently emerged that examine the processes underlying the disclosure of invisible stigmas in the workplace from the perspective of the target. Bowen and Blackmon (2003) used perspectives on voice and silence (e.g., Creed & Scully, 2000) to develop a model that explains how fear and what they call “spirals of silence” affect the decision to disclose a gay identity at work. Clair and her colleagues used a risk-assessment, cost-benefit framework to develop a model of the disclosure of invisible stigmas in the workplace (Clair et al., 2005). They pointed to the anticipated risks associated with disclosure as a key factor underlying disclosure and proposed that individual differences combine with the interpersonal and environmental

context to affect disclosure decisions. More recently, Ragins (in press) used self-verification, stigma, and identity theories to explain the processes underlying the decision to disclose an invisible stigmatized identity in the workplace. This model holds that disclosure is driven by anticipated consequences that are balanced by the internal psychological processes driving disclosure on the one hand and the environmental factors that support or punish disclosure on the other. Applying self-verification theory, the model proposes that employees are internally driven to disclose invisible stigmas because of a primary psychological need to create social identities that reinforce coherent self-views and bolster feelings of psychological coherence between public and private identities (Swann, 1983, 1987). This self-verification process is amplified when the identity is salient to the individual (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and when the stigmatized identity enters the target’s self-concept as a master status stigma (Goffman, 1963). However, the need for self-verification is tempered and balanced by the fear of negative consequences of full disclosure and the support received from coworkers who share and do not share the stigma.

A common theme underlying these models is that the target’s fear of negative repercussions influences the degree to which he or she may disclose an invisible stigma at work. Goffman (1963) also identified fear as a central experience for individuals who have not fully disclosed their invisible stigmas, and he observed that the concealment of a stigmatized identity may not alleviate an individual’s fear and psychological stress. In fact, he observed that those who attempted to pass themselves off as “normals” encountered an even greater sense of anxiety with “living a life that can be collapsed at any moment” (Goffman, 1974, p. 87). This fear crystallizes in situations with the potential for discrimination. Scambler and Hopkins (1986) proposed that stigmatized individuals face two independent experiences: (a) *enacted* stigmas, or the direct experience of discrimination; and (b) *felt* stigmas, which reflect the *fear* of discrimination. They tested this distinction in a study of epileptics and found that fear of discrimination was more prevalent than actual discrimination. Moreover, fear was rarely triggered by actual experiences, indicating that fears associated with discrimination were independent of actual discrimination. These findings are also aligned with research indicating that individuals are sensitive to the discrimination faced by their groups and are more likely to perceive group discrimination than personal discrimination (e.g., Moghaddam, Stolkin, & Hutchenson, 1997; Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990). This suggests that for those who have not fully disclosed their stigma at work, the fears associated with disclosure may or may not reflect perceived discriminatory events that are witnessed or experienced.

In support of this perspective, interviews of gay and lesbian workers have indicated that they fear a range of negative repercussions to disclosure, from social isolation and ostracism to harassment, job loss, and career derailment (Friskopp & Silverstein, 1996; Griffin, 1992). Woods (1994) reported that virtually

<sup>4</sup> As an example, social identity theory is often challenged to explain why individuals identify with groups that are socially devalued, disadvantaged, and stigmatized (cf. Nkomo, 1992). The social identification processes involved with negotiating a negative social identity in the workplace may be quite different from the processes involved with negotiating a positive identity (Deaux & Ethier, 1998; Ragins, in press).

all of the 70 gay men interviewed in his study had posed as a heterosexual at some point in their careers to avoid discrimination; he concluded that “. . . while actual discrimination is common, the fear of potential discrimination is epidemic. . . it is a perpetual threat, a fact of life for gay professionals who reveal their sexual orientation at work” (p. 202). Let us now examine some of the antecedents and consequences associated with fear and the full disclosure of a gay identity in the workplace.

### Antecedents of Fear and Disclosure in the Workplace

#### *Stigmas and Social Context: The Importance of Work Group*

According to stigma theory, stigmatized individuals turn to other members of their group for social support and to counteract the stress, social rejection, and isolation experienced as a consequence of their stigma (Crocker et al., 1998; Jones et al., 1984; Miller & Major, 2000). Deaux and Ethier (1998, p. 311) pointed out that “with the endorsement of others having the same identity, a person can affirm the value of group membership rather than incorporate the negative views of those who stigmatize.” In support of this idea, Frable, Platt, and Hoey (1998) found that the presence of similar others lifted the self-esteem and mood of students with invisible stigmas involving bulimia, minority sexual orientation, and low socioeconomic status. They concluded that interacting with similar others offers support and prevents individuals with invisible stigmas from internalizing negative views of their group.

Applying these perspectives to the workplace, management scholars agree that the presence of similar others affects the perception of the stigma, offers group affirmation and support, and may also trigger a social identity process (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986) that leads to the disclosure of a stigmatized identity (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Clair et al., 2005; Ragins, in press). As applied to sexual orientation, Ragins (2004) observed that for those who have not disclosed their sexual identity at work, the very presence of a LGB supervisor or coworker may precipitate a social identity process that facilitates disclosure. The presence of similar others may also provide the support necessary to alleviate fears that may be associated with the full disclosure of a stigmatized identity at work. It is therefore reasonable to expect that for those who have not disclosed, fears about the potential consequences of full disclosure will be related to the perceived sexual orientation of supervisors and coworkers. Similarly, the overall degree to which LGB workers disclose their sexual identity at work should also be related to the perceived sexual orientation of supervisors and coworkers.

*Hypothesis 1a:* Among LGB employees who have not disclosed, or not fully disclosed, those with heterosexual supervisors will fear more negative consequences of full disclosure than those with LGB supervisors.

*Hypothesis 1b:* Among LGB employees who have not disclosed, or not fully disclosed, those who work with a greater proportion of heterosexual coworkers will fear more negative consequences of full disclosure than those who work with proportionately more LGB coworkers.

*Hypothesis 1c:* LGB employees with heterosexual supervisors will disclose to a lesser extent than those with LGB supervisors.

*Hypothesis 1d:* LGB employees with a greater proportion of heterosexual coworkers will disclose to a lesser extent than those with proportionately more LGB coworkers.

The disclosure of a stigmatized identity may be influenced not only by the support received from those who share the stigma, but also from coworkers and supervisors who do not have the stigma but support those who do (Ragins, in press, 2004). For example, some college campuses have implemented “safe zone programs” in which heterosexual faculty and staff offer visible support for LGBTQ students by posting safe zone stickers that clarify that discrimination will not be tolerated. Stigma scholars observe that whereas social support is important for those with visible stigmas, it is crucial for those with invisible stigmas since these individuals have less opportunity for social support, validation, and social comparison than those with visible stigmas (Deaux & Ethier, 1998; Major, 2006; Miller & Major, 2000). As applied to the workplace, employees with invisible stigmas face significant social isolation, and supportive work groups may offer a safe place for disclosure (Ragins, in press). Social support from heterosexual colleagues becomes especially important because they represent the powerful majority group in organizations. Based on these ideas, in their model of disclosure and sexual orientation, Bowen and Blackmon (2003) offered the proposition that LGB employees will be more likely to disclose in work groups that are perceived as more supportive than in groups that are perceived as less supportive.

Existing research is congruent with the stigma-based prediction that supportive social relationships facilitate the disclosure of a gay identity. In their study of 499 lesbians, Jordan and Deluty (1998) found that perceived social support was a key predictor of sexual orientation disclosure, and some of the gay men interviewed by Woods (1994) reported that their decisions to disclose were affected not only by the presence of gay coworkers, but also by the presence of supportive heterosexual coworkers and managers. This suggests that supportive work relationships may have a significant impact on both fear of disclosure and the degree of disclosure in the workplace, and that these effects may occur independently of the supervisor’s or coworker’s sexual orientation. It is therefore reasonable to expect that among LGB workers who have not disclosed, fears about negative consequences of full disclosure will be related to the perceived support they receive from their supervisors and coworkers. It is also reasonable to expect that the overall degree to which LGB workers disclose their sexual identity at work should be related to the perceived support received from supervisor and coworker relationships.

Accordingly, we hypothesized that, even after holding the perceived sexual orientation of supervisors and coworkers constant:

*Hypothesis 2a:* Among LGB employees who have not disclosed, or not fully disclosed, those who lack supportive supervisors will fear more negative consequences of full disclosure than those who have supportive supervisors.

*Hypothesis 2b:* Among LGB employees who have not disclosed, or not fully disclosed, those who lack supportive

coworkers will fear more negative consequences of full disclosure than those who have supportive coworkers.

*Hypothesis 2c:* LGB employees who lack supportive supervisors will disclose to a lesser extent than LGB employees who have supportive supervisors.

*Hypothesis 2d:* LGB employees who lack supportive coworkers will disclose to a lesser extent than LGB employees who have supportive coworkers.

### *Perceptions of Past Discrimination: The Cumulative Effects of Context Over Time*

The disclosure process may be affected not only by the current environment, but also by the individual's perceptions of past experiences with discrimination. As discussed earlier, stigma theory and models that extend stigma theory to the workplace hold that employees are unlikely to disclose a stigma if they perceive that disclosure will result in discrimination (Clair et al., 2005; Deaux & Ethier, 1998; Ragins, in press; Scambler & Hopkins, 1986). Ragins (2004) proposed that past experience with discrimination may be a key factor that affects this perception among gay and lesbian employees. The effects of this perceptual experience on disclosure decisions may be explained not only by basic reinforcement theory (Skinner, 1969), but also by more complex models of decision-making processes. Ragins (in press) offered the idea that signal detection theory can be used to understand the cognitive processes involved in appraising the risk of disclosure. Signal detection theory examines the effects of environmental cues on decision-making processes and behaviors (McNicol, 1972) and has been used to explain the processes that underlie perceived discrimination (Feldman Barrett & Swim, 1998). Feldman Barrett and Swim (p. 28) observed that prior discrimination sensitizes individuals to the potential for discrimination and proposed that "anyone who has previous, pervasive experiences with threat will be pre-attentively prepared to see threat in a current situation because they have learned a decision rule through interactions with the environment." In support of this idea, research on groups with visible stigmas has found a "persistent injustice effect" in which an individual's past history affects his or her current perceptions of discrimination (Davidson & Friedman, 1998, p. 154). It is important to recognize that although perceptions of past discrimination may or may not reflect actual discrimination, perceptions represent the reality for employees and therefore play a powerful role in influencing their attitudes and behaviors (cf. Swim, Cohen, & Hyers, 1998).

Existing research on gay and lesbian employees offers some support for the idea that perceptions of past discrimination may influence current fears and disclosure at work. For example, some of the gay men interviewed in Woods's (1994) study reported that past experiences with discrimination had increased their awareness of the potential for discrimination in their current position. In a study of 228 lesbians in New England, Schneider (1987) found that lesbians who reported that they had lost a job due to disclosure were less likely to disclose their sexual orientation in their present position than those who had not had that experience. Although job termination is an extreme case of discrimination, other forms, such

as verbal comments or differential work treatment, may also affect LGB employees' fears and decisions to disclose at work. This research, combined with an extension and integration of stigma theory and signal detection theory, leads to the prediction that perceptions of past discrimination will have a significant relationship with current fears of disclosure as well as the degree of disclosure in the present position. In particular, it is reasonable to expect that for those who have not disclosed, or not fully disclosed, fears about the potential consequences of full disclosure in the present position will be related to perceptions of sexual orientation discrimination in past positions. Similarly, the overall degree to which LGB workers disclose their sexual identity in their present position should be related to perceptions of discrimination in past positions.

*Hypothesis 3a:* Among LGB employees who have not disclosed, or not fully disclosed, those who perceive that they encountered sexual orientation discrimination in past positions will fear more negative consequences of full disclosure than those who do not hold such perceptions.

*Hypothesis 3b:* LGB employees who perceived sexual orientation discrimination in past positions will disclose to a lesser extent in their current position than LGB employees who do not hold such perceptions.

An interesting question that arises concerns the relative effect of these three antecedent variables. Do current perceptual experiences in a supportive work environment override past perceptions of discrimination, or do these past experiences create a resilient fear that overshadows current experiences? Does the perceived support of the work group matter more than its perceived sexual orientation? On the one hand, a group of primarily LGB coworkers offers a relatively safe haven for employees to disclose their sexual orientation. On the other hand, a supportive heterosexual work group may not only support disclosure, but also send the message that other heterosexuals also support disclosure. Moreover, if the organization is not supportive of LGB employees, a supportive heterosexual group could provide more of a buffer to the LGB employee than a primarily gay group. Because there is no research or theory to guide these competing perspectives, we explore this issue as a research question that compares the effects of perceived sexual orientation of the work group, perceived group support, and perceived history of discrimination.

*Research Question 1a:* Among LGB employees who have not disclosed, or not fully disclosed, which antecedent variable has the greatest impact on fear of negative consequences of full disclosure?

*Research Question 1b:* Which antecedent variable has the greatest impact on the degree of disclosure of sexual orientation in the workplace?

We now turn to an examination of work-related attitudes and outcomes associated with fear of disclosure and the disclosure of a gay identity in the workplace.

### Outcomes Associated With Fear and Disclosure in the Workplace

A core objective of this study is to offer insights into the workplace experiences of LGB employees who have not disclosed, or have not fully disclosed, their sexual identity at work. As discussed earlier, these individuals may be deeply afraid of the consequences of fully disclosing their sexual identity. If so, it is critical that researchers understand the work-related consequences of this fear of disclosure as well as the more general consequences associated with disclosing a stigmatized identity at work.

A prevailing view held by stigma theorists is that individuals who conceal a stigmatized identity will experience negative psychological, behavioral, and interpersonal consequences (e.g., Crocker et al., 1998; Goffman, 1963; Jones et al., 1984). Applying stigma theory to invisible stigmas, Lane and Wegner (1995) developed and tested a preoccupation model of concealable stigmas that draws on psychological theories of secrecy, fear, and suppression to examine the psychological stress that may occur as a consequence of concealing invisible stigmas (cf. review by Smart & Wegner, 2000). They proposed that the secrecy involved with concealing a stigma leads to a state of preoccupation, which in turn triggers an insidious cycle of intrusive and suppressed thoughts that they called a "private hell" (Smart & Wegner, 2000, p. 229). They theorized that concealment leads to a condition in which stigma-related thoughts become subconscious even as they negatively affect the individual's psychological state (Wegner & Smart, 1997). There has been some empirical support for this theory among women with eating disorders (Smart & Wegner, 1999) and those who felt stigmatized by their experience of abortion (Major & Gramzow, 1999).

Although it is reasonable to expect that concealment will lead to a state of "private hell," environmental perspectives on gay identity challenge this view by holding that concealment may be a necessary and adaptive strategy for LGB workers in nonsupportive or hostile work environments (Cain, 1991; Fassinger, 1995). According to this view, LGB employees who disclose may not automatically be more satisfied or have less psychological strain than those who conceal their stigma. This perspective helps explain the inconsistent and contradictory research findings on the relationship between the degree of disclosure of sexual orientation at work and work-related attitudes and outcomes (cf. reviews by Ragins, 2004; Welle & Button, 2004). This line of research tests the prediction that employees who disclose more at work will be more satisfied with their jobs, experience less psychological strain, and have more positive work-related outcomes than those who conceal their sexual orientation. The results have been inconsistent and even contradictory; some studies found that LGB employees who disclosed more reported more positive job attitudes (Day & Schoenrade, 1997; Ellis & Riggle, 1995; Griffith & Hebl, 2002), whereas others found no relationship between disclosure and work attitudes (Croteau & Lark, 1995; Driscoll, Kelley, & Fassinger, 1996). In fact, employees who disclosed more reported lower continuance organizational commitment (Day & Schoenrade, 1997); earned less compensation (Ellis & Riggle, 1995; Schneider, 1987); and reported less pay satisfaction (Ellis & Riggle, 1995), more turnover intentions, and fewer opportunities for promotion (Tejeda, 2006) than those who concealed their sexual identity. Degree of disclosure should be strongly related to work-related

stress and psychological strain, but this research has also produced inconsistent findings. Some studies found a significant relationship between disclosure and reports of general anxiety (Jordan & Deluty, 1998), but other studies found no relationship between disclosure and reports of work-related stress (Day & Schoenrade, 1997), psychological strain, or occupational coping (Driscoll et al., 1996).

In short, this perspective suggests that the degree of disclosure, although important, may have less of an impact than the fears associated with disclosure. Individuals may conceal their identity if they believe that disclosure would lead to negative repercussions (cf. Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Clair et al., 2005; Pachankis, 2007; Ragins, in press, 2004), and these fears may have a significant impact on the quality of work life for LGB employees. It is therefore important not to treat disclosure in a vacuum, but to examine the role fear plays in work-related attitudes and outcomes. Related research has indicated that fear of discrimination influences mental health and reports of psychological stress among gay men (Meyer, 2003; Vincke, DeRycke, & Bolton, 1999) and that this effect is independent of reports of discriminatory events (Meyer, 1995). Although this research was not conducted in the workplace, it suggests that irrespective of actual disclosure, the very fear of negative consequences of disclosure may influence the workplace experiences of LGB employees. Accordingly, we expected that the fears experienced by LGB employees who have not disclosed their sexual identity at work would be related to reports of work-related attitudes, psychological strain, and career outcomes.

*Hypothesis 4:* Among LGB employees who have not disclosed, or not fully disclosed, those who fear more negative consequences of full disclosure will report greater psychological strain at work, and less positive work and career attitudes, work environments, and career outcomes, than those who fear fewer negative consequences of disclosure.

Our study also offered the opportunity to explore the relationship between degree of disclosure and a full array of work outcomes. As discussed earlier, research on this topic has yielded inconsistent and contradictory results. One explanation for this is that many of these studies employed small, regional samples composed of either gay men or lesbians, but not both. In addition, many studies used employees of a single organization, which may reflect organizational differences in culture and discrimination that could influence disclosure (cf. Ragins, 2004). The present study sought to extend our knowledge of the relationship between degree of disclosure and work attitudes by examining a full array of 15 outcome variables in one large-scale investigation using a national random sample of LGB employees. Given the inconsistent research findings on this topic, we offered the following research question:

*Research Question 2:* Will LGB employees who disclose to a greater extent at work report less psychological strain at work, and have more positive work and career attitudes, work environments, and career outcomes, than those who disclose to a lesser extent at work?

Method

Procedure and Respondents

*Sampling procedure.* As part of a larger national study on heterosexism and workplace diversity (Ragins & Cornwell, 2001), anonymous surveys were sent to a national random sample of 2,919 members of three national gay rights organizations in the United States. Specifically, we sent surveys to 1,488 members of one of the largest gay civil rights organizations in the nation, 681 surveys to members of a national gay Latino/Latina organization, and 750 surveys to members of a national gay African American organization. Stratified random sampling was used to select equal numbers of men and women by geographic area. Two reminder postcards and a reminder letter were sent to all respondents. A total of 334 surveys were returned unanswered for various reasons, the primary reason being undeliverable mail ( $n = 283$ ); 51 surveys were returned unanswered because respondents were retired, unemployed, self-employed, heterosexual, or deceased. Completed surveys were returned by 768 respondents, yielding a response rate of 30%.

*Respondents.* Because this study investigated fear and the disclosure of a gay identity at work, respondents who indicated they were heterosexual ( $n = 20$ ), unsure of their sexual orientation ( $n = 3$ ), self-employed ( $n = 99$ ), employed by a LGB organization ( $n = 51$ ), or employed as unpaid volunteers ( $n = 61$ ) were excluded from the analyses.

The final sample therefore consisted of 534 respondents, with 168 women and 363 men; 3 did not report their gender. The majority of the respondents considered themselves to be gay or lesbian (92.9%) as compared to bisexual (7.1%). The racial and ethnic background of the respondents was as follows: 67.6% White, 15.2% Black, 12.2% Latino or Hispanic, 0.7% Asian, 1.1% multiracial, and 1.1% other; 2.1% did not report their race. The average age of respondents was 41 years. In terms of education, 38.6% held bachelor's degrees, 28.2% had master's degrees, and 17.9% had doctoral degrees. With regard to income, 41% of the sample earned between \$26,000 and \$50,000 a year, and 24% earned between \$51,000 and \$75,000 a year. The average tenure in their current organization was 9.3 years, and the average current position tenure was 6.1 years. Most respondents held professional or technical jobs (68.5%) and managerial jobs (19.7%); the remainder were employed in clerical or sales positions (4.9%),

service or crafts (6.4%), or agricultural positions (0.4%). Respondents came from a large range of industries, such as education (24.2%), health (17%), government (14.8%), service (12.2%), manufacturing (9.2%), finance/insurance (6.8%), arts/entertainment (4.8%), advertising/publishing (3.1%), travel (2.0%), human services (2.0%), and design/fashion (0.9%). Respondents were also employed in organizations that varied in size: 30.3% worked in organizations with more than 10,000 employees, 26.4% were at organizations with 1,000 to 10,000 employees, 20.7% were at organizations with 100 to 999 employees, and 21.5% worked at organizations with fewer than 100 employees.

Measures

The survey was pretested on a separate pilot group of 28 LGB employees across the nation. The pretest was used to ensure clarity, refine instruments, and select items.

*Perceptions of past discrimination.* Seven items were used to assess perceptions of past discrimination. The items and responses are displayed in Table 1. The options for these items were coded as *yes* (2), *unsure* (1), and *no* (0). The seven items were summed to create an overall scale of perceptions of past discrimination, with values ranging from 0 to 14. Higher values represent greater perceptions of past sexual orientation discrimination.

*Perceived sexual orientation of work group.* Two items were used to measure perceptions of work group orientation. First, respondents were asked about the sexual orientation of their coworkers and given the following options: *most coworkers are heterosexual* (1), *work group about equally balanced* (2), *most coworkers are gay or lesbian* (3), and *do not know* (coded as missing). Next, respondents were asked whether their supervisor was the same sexual orientation as them (*heterosexual supervisors* were coded as 0, *gay supervisors* coded as 1, *unsure of sexual orientation* coded as missing). Higher scores therefore represent perceptions of a greater proportion of gay coworkers and supervisors.

*Perceived social support from supervisors and coworkers.* The Caplan, Cobb, French, Harrison, and Pinneau (1975) instrument was used to measure perceived social support at work. This measure has 4 items for supervisory support and 4 items for coworker support and assesses general forms of social support (i.e., "How much can each of these people be relied on when things

Table 1  
Perceptions of Past Workplace Discrimination

Item	Yes (%)	No (%)	Unsure (%)
In prior positions, have you ever faced discrimination because of your sexual orientation?	33.9	49.1	17.1
In prior positions, have you ever encountered discrimination because others suspected or assumed that you are gay, lesbian or bisexual?	37.2	43.7	19.1
In prior positions, have you ever been <i>physically harassed</i> (touched or threatened) because of your sexual orientation?	10.5	86.2	3.3
In prior positions, have you ever been <i>verbally harassed</i> because of your sexual orientation?	22.4	73.4	4.2
Have you ever <i>resigned from a job</i> in part or because of discrimination based on sexual orientation?	13.3	83.9	2.8
Have you ever been <i>fired</i> from a job in part or because of your sexual orientation?	6.1	87.4	6.5
Did you <i>leave your last job</i> in part or because of discrimination based on sexual orientation?	11.4	84.8	3.5

Note. Items are given verbatim.

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get tough at work?") using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all* to 4 = *very much*). Scores were computed by averaging items. Higher values indicate greater perceived social support.

**Work and career attitudes.** Established instruments were used to measure six attitudes: job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover intentions, satisfaction with opportunities for promotion, career commitment, and organization-based self-esteem. Job satisfaction was measured with the R. P. Quinn and Staines (1979) 5-item Likert scale of job satisfaction (Example item: "All in all, how satisfied are you with your job?") ranging from 1 = *not satisfied at all* to 4 = *very satisfied*. Organizational commitment was measured with Mowday, Steers, and Porter's (1979) 15-item scale, and turnover intentions were measured with a 2-item scale from the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (Nadler, Jenkins, Cammann, & Lawler, 1975). Both scales used a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Satisfaction with opportunities for promotion was appraised with the 9-item promotion subscale of the Job Description Index (P. C. Smith, Kendall, & Hulin, 1969). Career commitment was measured with Blau's (1985) 7-item Career Commitment scale using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*). Organization-based self-esteem was measured using the 10-item Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, and Dunham (1989) scale, which uses a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). For all attitude scales, scores were computed by averaging items. Higher values represent more positive career and job attitudes and stronger turnover intentions.

**Work environment.** Three established measures were used to assess the general work environment. We used Caplan et al.'s (1975) 4-item role ambiguity scale (i.e., "How often are you clear about what others expect of you on the job?"), measured with a Likert scale of 1 = *rarely* to 5 = *very often*; their 3-item role conflict scale ("Persons in equal rank and authority over you ask you to do things which conflict"), measured with a Likert scale of 1 = *rarely or never* to 4 = *very often*; and their 3-item workplace participation scale (i.e., "How much do you participate with others in helping set the way things are done in your job?"), rated from 1 = *very little* to 5 = *a great deal*. Higher values therefore represent more participation and greater role conflict. The role ambiguity measure was recoded so that higher values represent more role ambiguity. For all work environment scales, scores were computed by averaging items.

**Psychological strain at work.** Four established instruments were used to measure psychological strain at work. First, we used Caplan et al.'s (1975) 10-item somatic complaints at work scale. Respondents used a 3-point scale ranging from *never* (1), to *once or twice* (2), to *three or more times* (3) to report stress-related symptoms experienced on the job in the past month, such as dizzy spells, shortness of breath, and insomnia. We also used Caplan et al.'s 6-item work-related depression scale ("I feel sad") and 4-item work-related anxiety scale ("I feel nervous"), and Cobb's (1970) 3-item work-related irritation scale ("I get angry"). These scales ask respondents to report how they feel about themselves and their jobs using a 4-point scale (1 = *never or little of the time* to 4 = *most of the time*). Scores for these psychological strain scales were computed by averaging items, and higher values reflect greater psychological strain at work.

**Career outcomes.** Promotion rate and compensation were used to measure career outcomes. Promotions were defined as involving two or more of the following criteria that may occur within or between organizations: significant increases in salary;

significant increases in scope of responsibility; changes in job level or rank; or becoming eligible for bonuses, incentives, and stock plans. Given this definition, respondents were asked how many promotions they had received over the past 10 years. Respondents also reported their current annual compensation, which included salary, bonuses, commissions, stock options, and profit sharing.

**Degree of disclosure of sexual orientation in the workplace.** We directly assessed the degree of disclosure in the workplace by using the following question: "At work, have you disclosed your sexual orientation to: (Please check one option): (1) no one (2) some people (3) most people (4) everyone." These four options were slightly modified from the "out at work" measure used by Croteau and Lark (1995), Levine and Leonard (1984), and Schneider (1987), and they were very similar to the degree of disclosure item used in other studies (cf. Driscoll et al., 1996; Rostosky & Riggle, 2002; N. G. Smith & Ingram, 2004; Waldo, 1999). Higher values represent a greater degree of disclosure of sexual orientation at work.

**Fear of full disclosure of sexual orientation in the workplace.** A review of the literature revealed no measures of this variable, so we used related research to develop a 12-item measure of fear of full disclosure at work. The measure, displayed in the Appendix, uses a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *completely disagree* to 7 = *completely agree*). Scale scores were computed by averaging items. Higher values indicate greater fears of full disclosure of sexual orientation at work. Individuals who reported that they had disclosed their sexual identity to everyone in their organization ( $n = 125$ ) were instructed to skip this measure. A principal components factor analysis on responses from the 409 respondents who completed this measure yielded a single factor with an eigenvalue of 7.78, accounting for 64.9% of the variance. All items had factor loadings of .49 or higher, and the coefficient alpha for the measure was .95.

**Control variables.** We started with a large list of organizational variables that may be related to disclosure at work and that have been employed as control variables in other studies, such as organizational size, industry, respondent's job, rank in organization, organizational tenure, and position. For demographic covariates, we considered variables that may be related to gay identity formation, such as age, gender, race, and education (Gonsiorek & Weinrich, 1991). In order to preserve power, we selected covariates that had a significant relationship with dependent variables but low intercorrelations. We used independent variable interaction terms to test for homogeneity of the regression assumptions fundamental to covariance analyses. On the basis of these criteria, existing theory, and prior research, we used three single-item control variables in the present study: respondent's age, education, and organization size.

## Results

The correlations, means, standard deviations, and coefficient alphas for all study variables are displayed in Table 2. The coefficient alphas for multiple-item variables ranged from .73 to .95 and are listed on the diagonal of Table 2.

Our respondents reported that they worked primarily with heterosexual coworkers; 89.3% perceived most of their coworkers as heterosexual, 6.6% perceived their work group as equally bal-



Table 2  
Descriptive Statistics, Intercorrelations, and Coefficient Alphas

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
1. Age	41.11	8.68	—																								
2. Education	4.39	1.08	<b>11</b>	—																							
3. Organization size	5.61	2.29	04	-01	—																						
4. Perceived past discrimination	3.13	3.50	<b>11</b>	-08	<b>11</b>	(80)	—																				
5. Supervisor orientation	0.09	0.29	03	04	-15	-01	—																				
6. Coworker orientation	1.13	0.40	-05	<b>13</b>	-22	-03	<b>42</b>	—																			
7. Supportive supervisor	3.02	0.92	-00	06	-13	-11	06	<b>12</b>	(89)	—																	
8. Supportive coworker	3.27	0.63	-07	<b>10</b>	-18	-17	09	<b>20</b>	<b>28</b>	(82)	—																
9. Job satisfaction	2.56	0.56	01	<b>17</b>	-11	-15	-01	<b>16</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>28</b>	(82)	—															
10. Organizational commitment	4.59	1.22	-01	04	-14	-10	03	<b>14</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>70</b>	(90)	—														
11. Turnover intention	3.20	2.10	-14	-06	-03	<b>12</b>	07	01	-42	-24	-62	-67	(77)	—													
12. Opportunities for promotion	1.49	0.99	-22	04	05	-12	05	04	<b>32</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>46</b>	-55	-46	(87)	—												
13. Career commitment	3.38	0.98	05	<b>25</b>	-15	-03	-03	<b>15</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>58</b>	-41	-40	<b>27</b>	(88)	—											
14. Organization-based self-esteem	4.18	0.66	-06	<b>14</b>	-17	-15	01	06	<b>46</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>50</b>	-57	-43	<b>42</b>	<b>37</b>	(91)	—										
15. Role ambiguity	2.01	0.87	-16	-10	05	<b>13</b>	06	04	-37	-26	-34	-36	<b>43</b>	-27	-18	-43	(90)	—									
16. Role conflict	1.62	0.72	-04	-06	07	<b>18</b>	-05	03	-36	-22	-30	-29	<b>37</b>	-26	-13	-26	<b>53</b>	(79)	—								
17. Participation	3.60	1.16	-07	<b>14</b>	-14	-05	03	09	<b>44</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>45</b>	-47	-28	<b>35</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>59</b>	-25	-16	(88)	—							
18. Somatic complaints	1.31	0.33	-02	-13	03	<b>30</b>	02	03	-29	-31	-26	<b>25</b>	<b>26</b>	-27	-08	-31	<b>43</b>	<b>32</b>	-23	(82)	—						
19. Depression	1.81	0.64	06	-08	<b>12</b>	<b>16</b>	-02	-07	-42	-38	-58	<b>54</b>	<b>53</b>	-45	-34	-53	<b>44</b>	<b>35</b>	-41	<b>48</b>	(88)	—					
20. Anxiety	1.65	0.53	-04	-06	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	-03	-09	-29	-30	-33	<b>29</b>	<b>30</b>	-28	-20	-38	<b>47</b>	<b>34</b>	-30	<b>52</b>	<b>63</b>	(73)	—				
21. Irritation	1.95	0.64	-01	06	<b>11</b>	<b>15</b>	-03	-04	-40	-26	-37	<b>41</b>	<b>36</b>	-29	-16	-37	<b>36</b>	<b>39</b>	-26	<b>38</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>51</b>	(84)	—			
22. Compensation	3.56	1.19	<b>14</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>21</b>	-08	00	-08	-00	06	<b>12</b>	-06	-12	<b>14</b>	09	<b>11</b>	-09	-07	<b>23</b>	-06	-08	-05	08	—			
23. Promotion rate	2.43	2.11	-21	-02	-04	-02	-02	05	08	08	<b>22</b>	-24	-12	<b>28</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>18</b>	-01	-02	<b>22</b>	-07	-21	-12	-07	<b>22</b>	—		
24. Degree of disclosure	2.74	0.98	-03	<b>10</b>	-20	09	<b>10</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>18</b>	-15	-05	01	<b>16</b>	08	06	03	<b>22</b>	05	02	03	04	<b>10</b>	—		
25. Fear of disclosure	4.77	2.51	03	-08	<b>16</b>	<b>23</b>	-12	-27	-45	-33	-47	-42	<b>29</b>	-33	-27	-36	<b>26</b>	<b>28</b>	-33	<b>38</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>30</b>	-04	-18	-45	(95)	

Note. Coefficient alphas, in parentheses, are listed on the diagonal. Decimals have been omitted from correlations and alphas. Significant correlations are in bold.  $N = 348$ , except for fear of disclosure ( $N = 273$ ). Two-tailed significance levels are:  $|r| \geq .10 = p < .05$ .  $|r| \geq .14 = p < .01$ .  $|r| \geq .18 = p < .001$ .  $|r| \geq .21 = p < .0001$ .  $|r| \geq .12 = p < .05$ .  $|r| \geq .16 = p < .01$ .  $|r| \geq .20 = p < .001$ .  $|r| \geq .23 = p < .0001$ , for fear of disclosure.

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anced, 2.3% reported that most of their coworkers were gay or lesbian, and 1.9% did not know. Most respondents also reported having heterosexual supervisors (85.8%); 8.9% reported having gay or lesbian supervisors, and 5.3% did not know their supervisors' sexual orientation.

Our sample varied on the degree to which respondents were out at work: 11.7% reported being out to no one at work, 37% reported being out to some people, 24.6% reported being out to most people, and 26.7% reported being out to everyone at work.

*Antecedents of Fear and Disclosure in the Workplace*

Tests of the impact of the antecedent variables on the two dependent variables of fear of full disclosure and the degree of disclosure were made using a series of hierarchical regression analyses in which respondent's age, education, and organizational size were entered as control variables in the first step of the hierarchical analyses. Analyses involving the dependent variable of degree of disclosure utilized the entire sample, whereas analyses involving the fear of full disclosure dependent variable used a subsample that excluded those who had fully disclosed their sexual identity to everyone in their workplace.

As displayed in Table 3, full support was received for Hypotheses 1a and 1b. Among LGB employees who had not disclosed, or had not fully disclosed, their sexual orientation at work, those who perceived that they had heterosexual supervisors feared more negative consequences of full disclosure than those who reported having LGB supervisors. Similarly, those who reported that they

worked with a greater proportion of heterosexual coworkers feared more negative consequences of full disclosure than those who perceived that they worked with primarily LGB coworkers. A similar pattern was found for degree of disclosure. Respondents disclosed their sexual orientation to a lesser extent when they perceived that they worked with primarily heterosexual coworkers. However, the negative relationship between perceived sexual orientation of the supervisor and the degree of disclosure approached, but did not reach, conventional levels of significance ( $p = .059$ ;  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ). Therefore, support was received for Hypothesis 1d but not for Hypothesis 1c.

The next set of hypotheses (Hypotheses 2a–2d) examined the effects of perceived social support while holding the perceived sexual orientation of supervisors and coworkers constant. Full support was received for this set of hypotheses. Among LGB employees who had not disclosed, or had not fully disclosed, those who lacked supportive supervisors or coworkers reported more fears of negative consequences of full disclosure than those who reported having supportive supervisors or coworkers. Similarly, perceived support also predicted the degree of disclosure. LGB employees who reported that they lacked supportive supervisors or coworkers had disclosed to a lesser extent than those who reported having supportive supervisors or coworkers.

More than one third of the sample reported that they had experienced sexual orientation discrimination in past positions (see Table 1). As predicted by Hypothesis 3a, among LGB employees who had not

Table 3  
*Results of Hierarchical Regression Analyses*

Analysis	Fear of full disclosure			Degree of disclosure		
	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$R^2$
Step 1: Control variables						
Age	-.02			-.03		
Education level	-.08			.09*		
Organization size	.21**	.05**	.05**	-.19**	.05**	.05**
Step 2: Supervisor sexual orientation	-.12*	<i>Test of Hypothesis 1a</i> .01*	.06**	.08	<i>Test of Hypothesis 1c</i> .01	.05**
Step 3: Supervisor social support	-.38**	<i>Test of Hypothesis 2a</i> .15**	.21**	.11*	<i>Test of Hypothesis 2c</i> .01*	.06**
Step 2: Coworker sexual orientation	-.19**	<i>Test of Hypothesis 1b</i> .03**	.08**	.22**	<i>Test of Hypothesis 1d</i> .05**	.09**
Step 3: Coworker social support	-.30**	<i>Test of Hypothesis 2b</i> .09**	.17**	.15**	<i>Test of Hypothesis 2d</i> .02**	.11**
Step 2: Perceived past discrimination	.22**	<i>Test of Hypothesis 3a</i> .05**	.10**	.12*	<i>Test of Hypothesis 3b</i> .01*	.06**
Step 2: Research questions		<i>Test of Research Question 1a</i>			<i>Test of Research Question 1b</i>	
Sexual orientation of supervisors	-.05			-.00		
Sexual orientation of coworkers	-.11*			.19**		
Supervisors' social support	-.32**			.05		
Coworkers' social support	-.19**			.15*		
Perceived past discrimination	.19**	.25**	.30**	.14*	.09**	.13**

Note. The  $\Delta R^2$  and  $R^2$  values are based on the entry of all variables listed in that step.  
\*  $p \leq .05$ . \*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

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disclosed, or had not fully disclosed, those who perceived more discrimination in past positions reported greater fears of full disclosure in their current position than employees who did not have these perceptions. However, in contrast to Hypothesis 3b, those who perceived more discrimination in past positions had disclosed their sexual orientation to a greater extent in their current positions than those who did not perceive past discrimination.

Research Questions 1a and 1b explored which of the antecedent variables had the strongest impact on the two dependent variables of fear of full disclosure and the degree of disclosure. Two hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to answer these two questions. Control variables were entered in the first step, followed by the antecedent variables in the second step. Research Question 1a examined the antecedents for fear of full disclosure among LGB employees who had not disclosed, or had not fully disclosed, their gay identity at work. For fear of disclosure, the predictor with the largest weight was the perceived presence of a supportive supervisor, followed by the perceived presence of supportive coworkers and perceptions of past discrimination. Research Question 1b offered a parallel analysis by using the entire sample to examine predictors of the degree of disclosure at work. For degree of disclosure, the predictor with the largest weight was the perceived presence of gay and lesbian coworkers, followed by supportive coworkers and perceptions of past discrimination. Issues of range restriction and multicollinearity effects on the regression coeffi-

cients were investigated. No problems were suggested after we had reviewed the independent variables standard deviations, intercorrelations, and collinearity diagnostics produced by SPSS (Version 11). Coefficient of variations were computed for each of the five predictors and correlated with the size of regression coefficients. The significant negative correlation ( $r = -.53, p < .01$ ) indicated that differences in range and variability of the predictors were not an alternative explanation for the results.

*Outcomes Associated With Fear and Disclosure in the Workplace*

Because we found moderately high intercorrelations among the dependent variables of work and career attitudes, psychological strain, and work environment, we used multivariate analysis of covariance for these variables. Compensation and promotion were not highly intercorrelated, so analysis of covariance was used in analyses involving these variables. Because analysis of variance requires categorical independent variables, we used a mean split to transform the fear of disclosure variable from a continuous to a categorical variable. The adjusted means for the dependent variables are displayed in Table 4.

As displayed in Table 4, Hypothesis 4 was supported; fears experienced by LGB employees who had not disclosed, or had not fully disclosed, their sexual orientation at work were significantly

Table 4  
Adjusted Means for Outcome Variables and Results of Covariance Analyses

Variable	Fear of disclosure		Degree of disclosure				Hypothesis 4 Fear of full disclosure	Research Question 2 Degree of disclosure
	Low	High	No one	Some	Most	All		
Work and career attitudes							Wilks's $\lambda = .85$	Wilks's $\lambda = .97$
<i>n</i>	226	184	57	195	127	138	$F(6, 400) = 11.49, p < .001$	$F(18, 1428.84) = 0.84, p = .657$
Job satisfaction	2.70	2.34**	2.48	2.52	2.61	2.63	$\eta^2 = .112^{**}$	$\eta^2 = .011$
Organizational commitment	4.93	4.15**	4.40	4.54	4.71	4.75	$\eta^2 = .114^{**}$	$\eta^2 = .011$
Turnover intention	2.80	3.63**	3.45	3.16	3.14	3.06	$\eta^2 = .039^{**}$	$\eta^2 = .003$
Opportunities for promotion	1.70	1.19**	1.53	1.46	1.44	1.55	$\eta^2 = .065^{**}$	$\eta^2 = .002$
Career commitment	3.49	3.16**	3.28	3.33	3.35	3.50	$\eta^2 = .028^{**}$	$\eta^2 = .007$
Organization-based self-esteem	4.32	4.00**	4.20	4.17	4.20	4.23	$\eta^2 = .065^{**}$	$\eta^2 = .001$
Work environment							Wilks's $\lambda = .93$	Wilks's $\lambda = .97$
<i>n</i>	228	182	57	194	126	139	$F(3, 403) = 10.39, p < .001$	$F(9, 1234.06) = 2.04, p = .032$
Role ambiguity	1.80	2.12**	1.93	1.88	2.01	2.09	$\eta^2 = .034^{**}$	$\eta^2 = .009$
Role conflict	1.53	1.68*	1.54	1.55	1.66	1.63	$\eta^2 = .012^*$	$\eta^2 = .005$
Participation	3.79	3.24**	3.32 <sup>a</sup>	3.54 <sup>a,b</sup>	3.72 <sup>b</sup>	3.77 <sup>b</sup>	$\eta^2 = .055^{**}$	$\eta^2 = .016^*$
Psychological strain							Wilks's $\lambda = .93$	Wilks's $\lambda = .99$
<i>n</i>	229	182	57	194	127	139	$F(4, 403) = 8.00, p < .001$	$F(12, 1341.69) = .59, p = .86$
Somatic	1.27	1.35*	1.29	1.29	1.29	1.36	$\eta^2 = .016^{**}$	$\eta^2 = .009$
Work-related depression	1.67	1.98**	1.83	1.78	1.82	1.83	$\eta^2 = .060^{**}$	$\eta^2 = .001$
Anxiety	1.62	1.72	1.66	1.62	1.69	1.71	$\eta^2 = .008$	$\eta^2 = .005$
Irritation	1.84	2.08**	1.94	1.92	1.96	1.95	$\eta^2 = .036^{**}$	$\eta^2 = .000$
Career outcomes								
<i>n</i>	230	182	57	195	128	139	$F(1, 407) = 2.90, p = .089$	$F(3, 512) = 1.80, p = .146$
Compensation	3.56	3.38	3.38	3.42	3.65	3.62	$\eta^2 = .007$	$\eta^2 = .010$
<i>n</i>	210	170	51	184	114	129	$F(1, 375) = 10.11, p = .002$	$F(3, 471) = 1.55, p = .201$
Promotion rate	2.54	1.91*	2.15	2.14	2.44	2.62	$\eta^2 = .026^*$	$\eta^2 = .010$

Note. Means are adjusted for covariates. Larger values reflect more positive work and career attitudes, stronger turnover intentions, more role ambiguity, more role conflict, greater participation, more psychological strain, and more positive work outcomes.

<sup>a</sup> Significantly different from other degree of disclosure means at  $p < .05$ .

<sup>b</sup> Significantly different from other degree of disclosure means at  $p < .05$ .

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

related to 13 of the 15 outcome variables. Fear of full disclosure was significantly related to all of the work attitudes studied: Wilks's  $\lambda = .85$ ,  $F(6, 400) = 11.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ; those who feared more negative consequences to disclosure reported less job satisfaction, organizational commitment, satisfaction with opportunities for promotion, career commitment, and organization-based self-esteem and greater turnover intentions than those who feared less negative consequences. Similarly, fear was significantly related to all of the work environment variables: Wilks's  $\lambda = .93$ ,  $F(3, 403) = 10.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ; those who feared more negative consequences reported more role ambiguity, more role conflict, and less workplace participation than those who feared less negative consequences. LGB employees who feared more negative consequences also reported greater psychological strain than those who feared less negative consequences: Wilks's  $\lambda = .93$ ,  $F(4, 403) = 8.00$ ,  $p < .001$ . Follow-up univariate analyses revealed that fear was significantly related to physical somatic stress-related symptoms experienced on the job, work-related depression, and work-related irritation but did not reach conventional levels of significance for work-related anxiety ( $\eta^2 = .008$ ,  $p = .07$ ). Finally, those who feared more negative consequences to disclosure received significantly fewer promotions,  $F(1, 375) = 10.11$ ,  $p = .002$ ;  $\eta^2 = .026$ ,  $p < .05$ , than those who feared less negative consequences to disclosure. However, differences in compensation did not reach conventional levels of significance,  $F(1, 407) = 2.90$ ,  $p = .089$ ;  $\eta^2 = .007$ .

Research Question 2 explored degree of disclosure by examining whether employees who had disclosed to a greater extent at work reported different attitudes and outcomes than those who had disclosed to a lesser extent. As displayed in Table 4, degree of disclosure was not significantly related to 15 of the 16 dependent variables. The only exception was that employees who had disclosed to a greater extent reported more participation in their work environment than those who had disclosed to a lesser extent.

These results offer some interesting preliminary insights into the outcomes associated with fear of full disclosure and the degree of disclosure. As indicated in Table 4, fear of full disclosure was significantly related to 13 of the 15 outcomes, whereas degree of disclosure only predicted 1 of the 15 outcome variables. However, because LGB employees who had fully disclosed to everyone in their workplace were not included in analyses involving fear of full disclosure, but were included in analyses involving degree of disclosure, a true comparison of the outcomes associated with these two variables could not be established. In order to offer a more equivalent basis for comparison, we reran the analyses excluding those who had fully disclosed from the degree of disclosure variable. The results were essentially replicated: Degree of disclosure was not significantly related to any of the dependent variables, and participation was no longer significant in this set of analyses. Specifically, degree of disclosure did not predict reports of work attitudes: Wilks's  $\lambda = .97$ ,  $F(12, 702) = 0.88$ ,  $ns$ ; work environment: Wilks's  $\lambda = .98$ ,  $F(6, 704) = 1.31$ ,  $ns$ ; psychological strain: Wilks's  $\lambda = .99$ ,  $F(8, 706) = 0.194$ ,  $ns$ ; promotion rate,  $F(2, 358) = 1.28$ ,  $ns$ ,  $\eta^2 = .007$ ; or compensation,  $F(2, 330) = 0.40$ ,  $ns$ ,  $\eta^2 = .002$ .

## Discussion

This study sought to expand the understanding of the workplace experiences of gay and lesbian employees by examining the ante-

cedents and consequences of fear and the disclosure of a gay identity at work. In particular, we examined the anticipated fears associated with the full disclosure of a gay identity among LGB employees who had not disclosed, or had not fully disclosed, their sexual identity at work. For these employees, we found that their fears about disclosing a gay identity at work had an overwhelmingly negative relationship with their career and workplace experiences and their psychological well-being. These findings were both striking and disturbing; those who reported more fear of the negative consequences of full disclosure had less positive job and career attitudes, received fewer promotions, and reported more physical stress-related symptoms than those who reported less fear. However, when examining employees representing the full range of disclosure (i.e., disclosure to everyone at work, most, some, and none), we found that range of disclosure predicted only 1 of the 15 outcome variables.

These findings challenge the assumption that disclosure automatically leads to positive outcomes and instead offers a more complex explanation of the processes underlying the disclosure of a gay identity at work. In contrast to the view of disclosure as a uniformly positive behavior that reflects the final stage of gay identity development (cf. review by Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000), this study suggests that concealment may be a necessary and adaptive decision in an unsupportive or hostile environment (e.g., Cain, 1991; Fassinger, 1995), thus underscoring the importance of social context. In line with stigma theory and its application to the workplace (Beatty & Kirby, 2006; Clair et al., 2005; Ragins, in press), disclosure may represent a fine balance between the social support and psychological factors that drive disclosure on the one hand and the fear of negative consequences that inhibit it on the other.

One of the more intriguing findings of our study was that LGB employees who perceived that they had encountered sexual orientation discrimination in past positions reported more fear of disclosure, but also disclosed to a greater extent in their current position, than those who did not perceive past discrimination. Although our cross-sectional data limit our ability to draw causal conclusions, this finding suggests that perceptions of past discrimination may heighten the perceived risk of disclosure but may not automatically suppress the need of LGB employees to obtain a state of psychological coherence between public and private identities (cf. Ragins, in press). This apparent resilience in the face of perceived past discrimination is in line with the idea that disclosure is driven not only by fear, but also by the need to develop an authentic sense of self in the workplace (cf. Griffin, 1992). Future research could assess whether there are individual differences in self and identity (cf. Roberts, 2005) that interact with past experiences to influence disclosure of stigmatized identities in the workplace.

The results of this study also highlight the importance of perceived coworker support. Although LGB employees who reported having gay or lesbian colleagues had less fear and disclosed to a greater extent than those in primarily heterosexual work groups, when holding the perceived sexual orientation of the work group constant, LGB employees with supportive coworkers and supervisors reported less fear and disclosed more than those who lacked a supportive group. This suggests that the presence of supportive heterosexual coworkers may help alleviate fears of disclosure and allow LGB employees to bring their true identity to work.

Although the present study focused on sexual orientation, its findings have a number of implications for understanding the workplace experiences of other groups with invisible stigmas (e.g., HIV/AIDS, epilepsy, mental illness). First, disclosure decisions need to be viewed within the context of perceived consequences. Second, because these perceptions are influenced by the environment, the presence of safe havens and supportive colleagues may reduce the fears associated with disclosure. Finally, it is important to recognize that although an individual's fear may or may not reflect objective reality, the subjective experience of living in fear pierces the quality of work life for many employees with invisible stigmas. Future research could replicate this study by using the fear of disclosure instrument on other groups with invisible stigmas.

### Study Limitations and Future Research

The results of our study may be susceptible to several limitations. First, the cross-sectional research design limits our ability to establish directional relationships. A longitudinal study of the process of disclosure would be useful, although it would be challenging to identify LGB employees before they self-identify as gay. Second, we relied on self-report data, which are subject to misrepresentations. Third, our survey results may be affected by common method variance. In order to reduce this bias, we separated the independent and dependent variable items in our survey with four pages of other questions. Moreover, common method variance is not a pressing concern with many of the key variables in our study, such as work group orientation, perceptions of past discrimination, disclosure of sexual orientation, compensation, and promotion rates. Fourth, our 30% response rate was adequate but not compelling. As a consequence, nonresponse bias should be considered as a possible limitation. We assessed this bias by conducting a wave analysis (Leslie, 1972) in which we compared responses from those who returned their surveys early with responses from those who returned their surveys after receiving multiple reminder letters. We found no significant differences between early and late respondents, which suggests that nonresponse bias may not be a grave concern for this study.

It is important to recognize that our study examined fear of disclosure *only* among LGB employees who had not disclosed, or had not fully disclosed their sexual identity at work. Employees who had fully disclosed their sexual orientation to everyone in their workplace did not complete the fear of disclosure instrument, so the results of this study may not generalize to this population. Future research needs to examine the workplace experiences of those who fully disclose, as this population may face a different set of challenges than those who conceal their identity (cf. Ragins, 2004). For example, those who fully disclose at work still need to disclose to new coworkers, managers, clients, or vendors, and thus these employees continually face the risk of a negative reaction to disclosure (cf. Ragins & Wiethoff, 2005). However, because they have fully disclosed, their identity is public, and, in a sense, they no longer have control over the disclosure process. Qualitative research is needed to uncover the benefits, challenges, and coping mechanisms among those who have fully disclosed their sexual orientation at work.

Our study also faced limitations relating to the sample. Surveying members of gay rights organizations may limit the generalizability of the study in two ways. First, members of these organi-

zations may be more educated and more likely to hold professional positions than the larger population of LGB workers. This limitation is reflected in our sample, which consisted of highly educated, professional employees; 17.9% of the sample, for example, had doctoral degrees. The results of this study may not generalize to workers of lower socioeconomic or educational levels or to those who hold blue-collar positions. Second, members of gay rights groups may be more likely to disclose at work than other employees. However, the alternative practice of surveying an organization also creates a bias; workers may be more likely to return surveys if they disclose at work, and those who have not disclosed may be less likely to respond or may report that they are heterosexual. In addition, filling out a survey inquiring about an employee's sexual orientation that is administered at the workplace may be stressful for many LGB employees. Another problem with using organizational surveys is that it would have been nearly impossible to obtain a sample that represented gay people of color. In short, the use of members of gay rights groups as a sample has important limitations but was effective for obtaining a diverse sample of this population. Finally, our cross-sectional study did not offer longitudinal information about those who had disclosed and subsequently left their positions because of negative consequences of disclosure. This may have created a sampling artifact in which those who were studied had more positive outcomes to disclosure than those who had already left the organization because of negative consequences to disclosure. It is also interesting to note that our sample, like others (cf. Button, 2001; Chrobot-Mason et al., 2001; Griffith & Hebl, 2002), was characterized by relatively high organizational tenure (9.3 years). This may reflect the "safe haven hypothesis" (Ragins, 2004), which holds that LGB workers may be reluctant to leave organizations that offer some degree of safety from discrimination, even for alternatives that offer more opportunities, greater compensation, or a better fit with career aptitudes and interests.

There are also limitations associated with some of the measures used in the study. Respondents were asked about the sexual orientation of their work group, but we were unable to assess the accuracy of these perceptions. In addition, we did not ask how they had ascertained this information, or whether the coworker or supervisor disclosed only to the respondent or to others in the group. Our study examined whether social support received from work relationships predicted disclosure but did not assess whether respondents were satisfied with these relationships. Future research could investigate whether satisfaction with coworkers predicts or is predicted by disclosure. We used an established, but relatively dated, measure of job satisfaction. In addition, our study examined anticipated *negative* consequences, and only among those who had not disclosed to everyone in their workplace. Future research could examine anticipated *positive* consequences of disclosure among those who have not fully disclosed, as well as *actual* consequences among those who have fully disclosed in their workplace. Last, we used a global item to assess disclosure. Because one goal of our study was to replicate and extend prior research, we needed to use essentially the same measure of disclosure as used in other studies. Our concerns about using a single-item were somewhat allayed by the significant correlation between this item and a parallel item that measured respondents' disclosure of their sexual orientation outside the work setting ( $r = .59, p < .0001$ ). We also asked respondents to whom they had

disclosed their sexual identity at work and gave them eight target options: no one at work, other LGB workers, close friends, co-workers, supervisors, workers they supervise, everyone in their department, and everyone in their organization. The significant correlation between the target of disclosure and the global measure of disclosure ( $r = .85, p < .0001$ ) offers some insight into the validity of the global measure.

In conclusion, many employees with invisible stigmas leave part of their identity at home when they come to work each day, and they then live in fear that their true identity will be discovered. The cost of this fear on the quality of work life can never be fully assessed, but organizations can lessen this fear by providing supportive environments that allow employees to bring their full identities to work.

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## Appendix

### Fear of Disclosure Scale

Items are given verbatim. The 12-item scale used a 7-point response format ranging from *completely disagree* (1) to *completely agree* (7).

If I disclosed my sexual orientation to everyone at work:

I would lose my job.

I would be excluded from informal networks.

I would not be promoted.

My prospects for advancement would be stifled.

My mobility would be restricted.

I would not get a raise.

I would be ostracized.

My career would be ruined.

People would avoid me.

I would be harassed.

I would lose the opportunity to be mentored.

Coworkers would feel uncomfortable around me.

*Note.* Prior to completing this scale, respondents were asked if they had disclosed their sexual orientation to everyone in their organization. Those who had were instructed to skip this scale.

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