

## **Perceived Discrimination and Social Support: The Influences on Career Development and College Adjustment of LGBT College Students**

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lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender college students, vocational indecision, college adjustment

The adjustment period that follows college entrance can include difficult transitions for all students. Academic and social adjustment to this unique environment also dovetails with a heightened awareness of one's own career development process. For students who may be negotiating a marginalized identity, these transitions may pose further challenges. Recent literature on college adjustment and career development suggests that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) college students may be a group that experiences these transitions in a different way, which would relate to their college adjustment and career development.

Recent attention has been paid to the unique ways in which LGBT college students experience and adjust to college. For example, Longerbeam, Inkelas, Johnson, and Lee (2007) examined differences in the college experiences of LGBT and heterosexual students and found that the two groups engaged in different types of activities and spent their time in different ways. Additionally, research has shown that LGBT college students may experience the campus climate differently than students without a sexual minority identity. A study by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (Rankin, 2003) found that over one third of LGBT college students reported experiencing harassment on campus. Additionally, 20% of LGBT students reported fearing for their safety on campus because of their sexual orientation or gender identity and over 50% reported hiding their sexual orientation or gender identity to avoid feeling intimidated on campus (Rankin, 2003). As such, LGBT students may be experiencing a qualitatively different adjustment to college due to issues related to discrimination and a marginalized sexual identity.

Recent literature supports the assertion that the unique experiences of LGBT individuals also play a crucial role in their career development. Mobley and Slaney (1996) suggested that LGB individuals experience greater career indecision

Some authors suggest that LGBT individuals, by nature of their being a minority population, have fewer role models in the work force (Hetherington, Hillerbrand, & Etringer, 1989). Others, however, have found that LGB individuals actually reported having more career role models and equivalent career aspirations to heterosexual students but that they perceived less support and guidance in their academic and career decision making (Nauta, Saucier, & Woodard, 2001). Taken together, these findings suggest that the experience of having a marginalized sexual identity might indeed influence career development.

Consistent with the literature on the unique challenges LGBT individuals face in their career development, vocational psychology has begun to incorporate “the importance of sociopolitical forces” (Blustein, McWhirter, & Perry, 2005, p. 142) on the career development of underserved populations, including LGBT individuals. For example, Schultheiss (2003) suggested a relational approach that highlights the importance of social support and sociocultural background in one’s vocational development. From this perspective, the relational context of LGBT individuals (e.g., whether an individuals’ relationships are supportive vs. hostile toward her or his sexual orientation) may have important implications for their career development. Super’s (1990) “life span, life-space” approach to career development and Savickas’ (2005) theory of career construction, both attend to the social and cultural context that surround individuals’ career development and seem particularly relevant to socially marginalized groups. Specifically, in his developmental career theory, Super postulated that individuals’ “life-space,” comprised of various social roles, both influences their career trajectory and are influenced by social context. Expanding on this notion, Savickas takes a social constructivist perspective, noting that social context is not only an influence but that adaptation to one’s environment is what drives career development. Accordingly, LGBT individuals may experience a social context that includes discrimination and other forms of bias, which potentially influences, or even determines, how career development unfolds. Finally, Blustein et al. (2005) have proposed applying an emancipatory communitarian approach to existing career theories, which aims to reduce oppression and injustice, including homophobia, on a systemic level. This type of approach is “emancipatory” in that it strives for the liberation of subordinated groups; and it is “communitarian” in that it emphasizes compassion in social relationships on individual and societal levels (Blustein et al., 2005). When applied to vocational psychology, Blustein et al. suggest that such an approach would broaden the focus of career development to include both the individual and the social environment, rather than limiting attention to one or the other. Each of these perspectives highlights how an LGBT individual’s experience in social and cultural context may affect that individual’s trajectory of

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The experience of discrimination has been shown to have multiple adverse outcomes across a range of minority populations (e.g., Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002; Mays & Cochran, 2001; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Discrimination based on sexual orientation represents a social reality for most LGBT individuals and it is likely to affect their development. Literature on perceptions of discrimination among LGBT individuals specifically has shown them to be associated with outcomes such as depressive symptoms (Huebner, Nemeroff, & Davis, 2005), psychological distress (Diaz, Ayala, & Bein, 2004), and participation in risky sexual behaviors (Diaz et al., 2004). Research has also shown that LGBT individuals may be more likely than heterosexual individuals to report that discrimination was an obstacle to leading a fulfilling and productive life (Mays & Cochran, 2001).

One important context in which LGBT individuals experience discrimination is on college and university campuses. In a recent survey of heterosexual college students (Massey, 2009), it was found that discrimination based on sexual orientation remains a socially sanctioned form of prejudice and includes traditional heterosexism, devaluing the gay and lesbian equality movement, aversion to lesbians and gay men, among other overt and covert hostilities. This is notable because Tomlinson and Fassinger (2003) found that campus climate was the strongest predictor of both vocational purpose (i.e., vocational competence, commitment, and organization) and psychological vocational development (i.e., career indecision, decision-making self-efficacy, and vocational identity), over and above the influence of sexual identity. Because discrimination can have a profound impact on LGBT individuals' lived experiences, understanding how perceived discrimination affects LGBT students' college adjustment and career development seems particularly important.

Not all individuals experience discrimination in the same way, in part due to the social factors at play in one's life. For example, Meyer (2003) hypothesized that social support was one protective factor against the negative mental health outcomes related to minority stress (e.g., discrimination and violence) faced by LGBT individuals. Similarly, research has shown that social support may have a moderating effect on the psychological impact of many negative experiences, haBj376.7(discriminate)TJT.2((e.g.

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development, and college adjustment, it seems important to include an examination of the potential role of social support.

As the literature reviewed above has demonstrated, LGBT college students have unique experiences in both career development and college adjustment. Among these challenges may be negative attitudes of fellow students and the experience of discrimination. Understanding how the perception of discrimination relates to the important developmental tasks of adjustment to college and career development in LGBT individuals is particularly important as perceived discrimination has been found to be related to a variety of adverse outcomes for LGBT individuals. Additionally, the role of social support is an important consideration as it has been found to serve a buffering role against the negative impacts of perceived discrimination and has been postulated to have significance with regard to career development and college adjustment. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the roles of perceived discrimination and social support in predicting vocational indecision and college adjustment in an LGBT college student sample.

## **M d** **P**

Participants consisted of 189 LGBT undergraduate college students. All students were currently enrolled university students (27.5% first year, 25.4% second year, 21.2% third year, and 25.9% fourth year or more). The mean age was 20 years ( $SD = 1.85$ ). Females accounted for 59.8%, while 35.4% were male, 1.6% identified as transgender (male to female), and 3.2% were transgender (female to male). Only participants who stated their sexual orientation to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual on the demographic survey were included in the analysis. Thus, the students who identified as transgender also endorsed a lesbian, gay, or bisexual sexual identity. Finally, 79.9% of the students were White/Caucasian, 3.7% African American/Black, 5.3% Hispanic/Latino, 4.8% Asian American, 0.5% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders, and 5.8% labeled their race as "Other." Data on socioeconomic status were not obtained.

## **P**

Announcements about the survey were made through an e-mail listserv that went to LGBT campus groups across the country. Potential participants were given a contact name and e-mail address of one of the researchers, who then directed interested individuals to the online survey. The online survey included demographic questions, experimenter-designed measures of college adjustment and perceived discrimination, the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet,

Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988), and the Career Decision Scale (CDS; Osipow, Carney, & Barak, 1976). After completing the assessment, participants received further information about the study and resources should they have more questions or wish to seek counseling.

## M

*P*. Perceived discrimination for sexual orientation was measured by an experimenter-designed instrument. This measure consisted of 8 items answered on a five-point Likert-type scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very frequently). All items were developed by the researchers based on a review of relevant literature on perceptions of discrimination. As most of the literature in this area has been focused on racial discrimination, the items were adapted from measures assessing perceptions of racial discrimination among adolescent populations (Cassidy, O'Connor, Howe, & Warden, 2005; Phinney, Madden, & Santos, 1998; Verkuyten, 1998) with significant modifications reflecting the unique experiences of LGBT college students. The items therefore reflected statements regarding the perception of being discriminated against based on one's sexual orientation in general (e.g., "I felt un

females (Beaber, 2008), though it has not been validated on a sample of lesbian or gay individuals. Higher scores indicated higher perceptions of social support. In the



troubling me”), and personal (e.g., “I feel content with my choice of university”). In a pilot study of this measure, validity was evidenced by moderate-to-strong positive correlations between college adjustment and life satisfaction, happiness, and positive affect, and a negative correlation with negative affect (Schmidt & Welsh, 2010). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was reported as .87, evidencing solid reliability (Schmidt & Welsh, 2010).

As this was a newly developed measure, a principle components factor analysis was run with this sample and two factors were extracted with Eigenvalues greater than 1. Specifically, 6 items loaded onto the same factor accounting for 42.55%, whereas the items addressing academic adjustment loaded on a second factor accounting for 19.14% of the variance. In considering whether to retain the academic items of the college adjustment scale for our analysis, we considered the link between career development and academic adjustment to college and how indicators of academic adjustment (such as grade point average) are often linked to career development variables (e.g., Healy, O’Shea, & Crook, 1985). This appeared to be the case here as well, seeing as the academic adjustment items correlated with the CDS ( $r = -.25, p < .05$ ). However, as the academic adjustment items appeared to measure a somewhat different construct than the items indicating social and personal adjustment to college, we decided to remove the academic items from the college adjustment scale and look only at the relationships of the independent variables with personal/social adjustment to college. Additionally, taking out the academic adjustment items reduced the correlation between college adjustment and the CDS, making the dependent variables more discreet constructs

Gender did not correlate with either dependent variable and thus was not included in the regression analyses. Hence, year in school was entered at the first step of the regression equation with vocational indecision, while no covariates were entered at this step with college adjustment. Next, the predictor variable (perceived discrimination) and the moderator (social support) were entered in each regression equation. The final step of each analysis examined the interaction between perceived discrimination and social support to determine whether social support had a moderating role between perceived discrimination and the dependent variables (career indecision and college adjustment). Standardized scores were created for social support and perceived discrimination, and the interaction term was calculated by taking the product of the independent variable (perceived discrimination) and the moderator (social support). One regression was calculated for each of the dependent variables. Unstandardized scores (B) were examined in the output as an interaction term was present, making standardized scores not interpretable (Frazier et al., 2004). For means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations, see Table 1.

With regard to vocational indecision, all steps of the regression equation were statistically significant (see Table 2) and the full model accounted for 9% of the variance, which is consistent with a small-to-medium effect size (Cohen, 1992). The



when individuals with high standardized scores on social support (i.e., greater than 0) were examined alone, perceived discrimination contributed to vocational indecision reaching statistical significance ( $B = -.13, p < .01$ ). However, conducting the same analysis on individuals with low social support (i.e., standard scores less than 0) showed that perceived discrimination did not contribute to vocational indecision ( $B = .03, p > .05$ ).

College adjustment yielded slightly different results than career indecision. Again, the regression was statistically significant at both steps (no covariates were entered, yielding two steps instead of three) and the model accounted for a significant portion of variance ( $R^2 = .20$ ; see Table 2), representing a medium effect size (Cohen, 1992). Perceived discrimination and social support were identified as statistically significant predictors at each step; however, the interaction term was not statistically significant. Thus, for college adjustment, it appeared that though perceived discrimination and social support contributed unique variance, social support did not moderate the relationship between discrimination and adjustment.

## **D c**

The results of this study contribute to the growing body of literature that demonstrates the complexity of career development among LGBT individuals. We attempted to examine the relationships between perceived discrimination and social support in career development and college adjustment variables among LGBT college students. Foundational and recent career theories have addressed the impor

own social support networks and weathering difficulties, which helps them to adjust to other developmental challenges such as career development. This notion provides support for the resilience and strength of a community who, from a young age, may have faced potentially greater obstacles than their heterosexual counterparts.

The regression model examining how perceived discrimination and social support related to college adjustment yielded somewhat different results. Although no moderating effect was found, both perceived discrimination and social support contributed to the variance in college adjustment. However, though perceived discrimination was statistically significant at each step, the overall variance accounted for jumped significantly when social support entered the equation. The finding that perceptions of discrimination contributed to variance in college adjustment is consistent with LGBT students' feelings of marginalization on campus (Waldo, 1998), but social support may play a larger role in managing LGBT students' adjustment to college.

The regressions clearly demonstrated that social support plays a critical role in career indecision and college adjustment for LGBT undergraduates. As social support has been found to have a buffering effect of stress in numerous situations (DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2006), it is not surprising that it would play such a role here. Still, the importance of LGBT individuals having a solid support network cannot be overstated. Although general social support was the only type of support examined in the current study, other research has pointed to the importance of both general and sexuality-specific support in predicting psychological health (Sheets & Mohr, 2009). As Super (1990) and Savickas (2005) acknowledge, the role of social support in helping individuals navigate career development is similar to the way in which support protects and encourages development in most other areas.

## I C

Professionals working with LGBT college students, whether in a career counseling context or other related discipline, need to consider the role that support, both general and sexuality-specific, plays when assessing clients' needs and concerns. Schultheiss (2003) discusses how multidimensional social support has an important influence on career exploration and decision-making processes and went on to outline the tenets of a relational approach to career counseling. She stated that an individual's connection to others should be embraced as a central component of healthy developmental progress and not merely considered as peripheral to other elements of career counseling that focus on autonomy and independence. The results of this study point to additional gain from a relational approach to career counseling when clients are able to discuss their experiences of discrimination as they relate to their career experiences. Specifically, the benefits of support can override the difficulties presented by discrimination for LGBT undergraduates. Similarly, adjustment to college appears to be strongly related to college students' perceptions of social support,

above the negative influence of being discriminated against. Thus, when conducting career counseling with college students, a client's support network should not be peripheral, but rather a central consideration.

Additionally, counselors need to consider the experiences of discrimination for LGBT students and how these experiences interact with social support when working with this group. Although it might be assumed that the negative impact of discrimination can override all else in having a detrimental role on an LGBT student's career development or college adjustment, the reverse may be true for

support, and career development variables, but we did not test for this possibility. Future research may examine how these variables work together in the same model. Finally, the perception of discrimination is not unique to LGBT individuals. Future research would benefit from examining the way in which multiple aspects of identity (e.g., sexual orientation, gender, race, etc.) intersect when considering how discrimination may influence adjustment and development.

## C

The perception of discrimination and social support appear to have a significant relationship to vocational indecision and college adjustment among LGBT students. The unique findings of this research, in particular the interaction of discrimination with social support on vocational indecision, have interesting implications for working with this student population. Career counselors and others working with this group should attend to both the difficulties (e.g., discrimination) and resilience factors (e.g., social support) when assessing the vocational needs and adjustment factors of their clients.

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## B

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