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"Lez be honest": Gender expression impacts workplace disclosure decisions

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ABSTRACT

We introduce a theoretical framework of lesbian disclosure of sexual orientation in workplace contexts. Existing empirical research suggests (1) that disclosing one's sexual orientation results in positive, negative, and neutral workplace outcomes; and (2) that scholarship focused specifically on lesbian disclosure in workplace contexts is relatively limited. We extend this literature by introducing new theory that suggests that reactions to disclosure of lesbian identities will vary as a function of self-presentation. Specifically, we suggest that the extent of stereotypical gender expression (embodying stereotypically masculine vs. feminine traits or behaviors) will impact both the decision to disclose and the outcomes of disclosure in workplace contexts. We describe a conceptual model that includes intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, and societal considerations related to lesbian disclosure and present eight specific research propositions to advance this literature.

KEYWORDS

Lesbians; stereotypes; metastereotypes; disclosure; workplace; identity management

> Whenever I am in a new … setting, I am assumed to be straight. I find myself having to come out over and over again when I meet new gay people and it's exhausting! As if I need to prove just how gay I am!
>
> –feminine participant, Blair and Hoskin (2014)

> As a big ol' butch, I usually don't have to come out. When I walk into a room, people know I'm a dyke—unless they mistake me for a dude. Whatev.
>
> –masculine blogger, Higgins (2013)

The decision to disclose one's sexual orientation in workplace or other contexts represents a significant milestone in many lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals' lives. Despite the fact that the number of LGBT-based workplace sex discrimination charges has steadily increased since 2013 (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2017), there are no federal laws that protect employees from workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation. Because of the current U.S. presidential administration's neglect of issues related to sexual orientation equality or representation, greater scientific understanding of these issues is crucial. Disclosure

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of sexual orientation in workplace contexts is also theoretically interesting because this act bridges the almost institutionalized gap between the areas of one's life that are traditionally considered to be public (one's professional identity) and private (one's sexual and romantic preferences; Schneider, 1986). Accordingly, the scholarly literature focused on disclosure of sexual orientation at work has expanded rapidly, continues to grow steadily, and will continue to be vital for organizational, queer, and lesbian studies scholars.

Although the importance of the work that has been published to date cannot be overstated, what is noticeably absent is scholarship that focuses explicitly on disclosure of lesbian identities in workplace contexts. As a whole, women have historically been relatively underrepresented in the study of sexual identity (Diamond, 2006), and most of the existing scholarship incorporates lesbians, gay men, and bisexual individuals into one monolithic group, which is unfavorable for two particular reasons. First, this practice obfuscates very real differences in the ways that men and women experience their social worlds—and workplaces in particular—due to stereotypes, social roles, and other influences that contribute to gendered experiences (Eagly, 1987; Einarsdóttir, Hoel, & Lewis, 2016; Heilman, 1983; Schein, 1973). Second, this ignores the unique experiences that are related to the intersection of gender and sexual orientation. Investigating the intersection of multiple identities (e.g., those of individuals who identify as both women and lesbians) will provide researchers with a more holistic perspective on the impact of these identities on work-related issues (Sawyer, Salter, & Thoroughgood, 2013). Ignoring these intersectional identities and treating gay men and lesbians as one group are particularly problematic given general group-level differences between lesbians and gay men. For instance, lesbian and bisexual women go through different processes of self-identification and self-labeling than do gay men (Bart, 1993; Brown, 1995; Diamond, 1998; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Rust, 1993), and gay men are perceived by others as being similar to heterosexual women and lesbians are perceived by others as being similar to heterosexual men (Kite & Deaux, 1987; Taylor, 1983). In organizational settings in particular, Gedro (2006) posits that lesbians are challenged by "double discrimination" due to (1) heterosexism stemming from their sexual orientation identities; and (2) sexism due to their gender identities, an issue not faced by cisgender gay men. As such, in this article we provide an integrative review (Torraco, 2005, 2016) of the existing literature focused on lesbian identity, experience, and disclosure specifically and workplace disclosure of sexual orientation more generally. We also draw from theories in social cognition (e.g., metaperceptions and metastereotypes) to emphasize the influence of cognitive mechanisms in this process. In so doing, we provide a critical analysis and

synthesis of these literatures and discuss new and unique perspectives related to lesbian disclosure in workplace contexts that will contribute to the organizational science, queer studies, and lesbian studies disciplines of scholarship. Specifically, we develop a conceptual framework of lesbian disclosure in the workplace (see Figure 1) that highlights the unique and important influence of gender role expression in the disclosure experience and outline propositions based on our analysis for future researchers in these and other disciplines to consider. Additionally, by drawing attention to the unique experiences lesbians face at work as a function of their genders, sexualities, and gender expressions, this research benefits lesbians, researchers, and organizational practitioners by understanding the differences and nuances of workplace disclosures.

An integrative literature review is the most appropriate form of research to address this gap for two reasons. First, such a review does not currently exist and is sorely needed to advance theory and bridge gaps between as of yet disparate streams of research and discourse (Torraco, 2016). More than 20 years ago, Fassinger (1995) provided a review of lesbian and women's identity development alongside a discussion of lesbian vocational issues, primarily career progression. Given changes in social norms and a greater acceptance of sexual minorities (and, in some states, the passing of anti-discrimination laws protecting LGBT individuals), lesbians now face different challenges in the workplace, and this research may not capture the full scope of issues that lesbians face in the workplace today. Research has developed rapidly over the last 15 years in the areas of workplace discrimination and disclosure and the experiences of employees holding invisible stigmatized identities, including those with diverse sexual orientations,

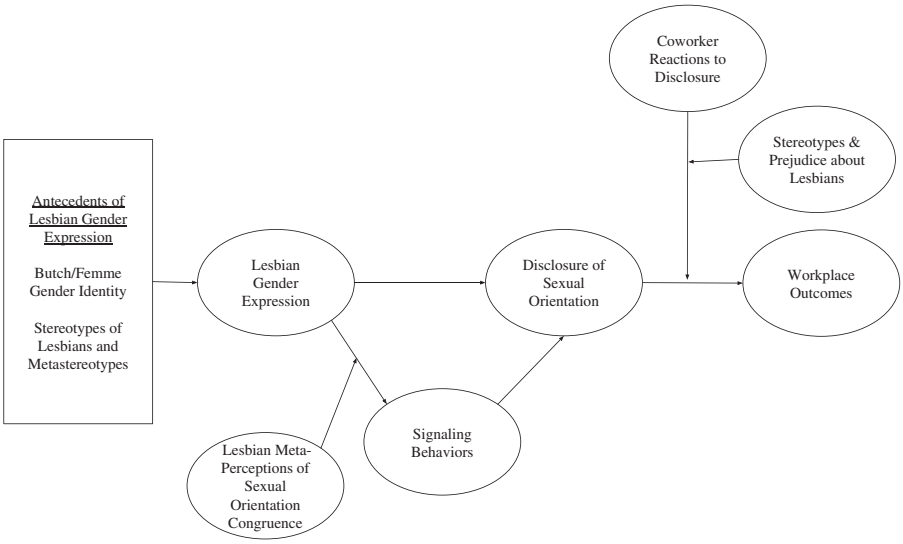


Figure 1. Gender expression impacts workplace disclosure decisions.

gender identities, and gender expressions. It is important to incorporate this knowledge into the body of research on lesbian workplace experiences to bring this literature up to date. Second, literature reviews can make significant contributions to theory building, as they offer new perspectives on the topic through careful synthesis of knowledge from the literature with new ideas and provide a conceptual framework, both of which can guide and serve as catalysts for future research (Torraco, 2016; Baumeister & Leary, 1997).

Review domain and selection criteria

To conduct this integrative literature review, we first identified the major concepts/constructs related to (1) workplace disclosure; (2) lesbian identity experiences and expression; and (3) the experiences of lesbians at work. Specifically, we examine the developing knowledge of primary factors influencing disclosure in the workplace and predominant outcomes associated with disclosure of sexual orientation at work based upon influential conceptual models in the field of organizational psychology. We based our review on frameworks that have been highly influential in the organizational sciences and queer studies literatures to maximize impact and parsimony. As such, this article represents a comprehensive synthesis of the more rigorous disclosure research available and provides guidance for future research aimed at developing theories and knowledge surrounding lesbian disclosure at work.

Disclosure generally refers to the identity management process whereby someone who holds one or more marginalized identities that are not readily apparent to others reveals these identities explicitly. We focus our review on workplace disclosure empirical findings that were analyzed using sufficient methodologies and published in peer-reviewed journals. Because workplace disclosure is a more recently developed and rapidly evolving body of research, we prioritized empirical investigations published in the last five years and also drew upon now classic models of workplace disclosure (Clair, Beatty, & Maclean, 2005; Griffith & Hebl, 2002). On the contrary, because the literature on lesbian identity development, lesbian gender expression (specifically butch/femme), and discrimination against lesbians has been in development for some time, we prioritized more recent studies focused on lesbian identity and the experiences of lesbians in relation to their physical appearances. Because the lesbian workplace experiences literature is relatively limited, we included a broader range of studies (some older than 15 years) and included both qualitative studies and rigorous quantitative studies from many disciplines, such as psychology,

management, sociology, and queer/lesbian studies. In all reviews, we prioritized studies guided by theory.

We systematically searched online databases such as PsycINFO, Elsevier ScienceDirect Journals Complete, EBSCOHost, Taylor & Francis eJournals, and Google Scholar. We used relevant keywords including: lesbian, sexual orientation, LGBT, workplace, organizational, disclosure, coming out, gender identity, and gender expression. We skimmed thousands of results and included for further examination articles that explicitly or tangentially focused on the experiences of lesbians at work, the disclosure experiences of lesbians, the experiences of butch and/or femme lesbians, or the workplace disclosure experiences of gay men and lesbians. In all, we identified 120 articles that were relevant for our study. Some articles were relevant for multiple concepts in our review, and some informed our thinking or perspective but did not contribute directly to our discussion. After several discussions amongst the author team (and several iterative revisions as our thinking developed), we organized the dominant constructs into a path model (Figure 1). Each is discussed in the sections that follow, with particular emphasis placed on the relations between constructs.

Synthesis and examination of existing literature

Disclosure

Past research has established that disclosure of relatively invisible characteristics, such as sexual orientation and religion, occurs with consideration of several factors including when to disclose, how to disclose, and to whom to disclose (Clair et al., 2005). Indeed, disclosure is a multifaceted process that can lead to both positive and negative outcomes (Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001; Riggle, Mohr, Rostosky, Fingerhut, & Balsam, 2014). Although concealment, or staying "closeted," is associated with a number of negative mental health (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009; Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Meyer, 2008), physical health (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, & Visscher, 1996; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009), and interpersonal (Clausell & Roisman, 2009) consequences, concealment may also protect one's public image (DeJordy, 2008) and reduce potential discriminatory actions (Sears & Mallory, 2011). Conversely, disclosure has been linked to stronger interpersonal relationships (Beals & Peplau, 2006) and an increased sense of authenticity and self-congruence (Goffman, 1963), but disclosure also inherently puts individuals at risk of prejudice and discrimination, which are associated with poor health outcomes (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2009; Rothman, Sullivan, Keyes, & Boehmer, 2012; Steele, Ross, Epstein, Strike, & Goldfinger, 2008). The existing literature neglects three important concepts that have yet to be

addressed: it doesn't acknowledge the influence of the cognitions of the discloser, it demonstrates inconsistency among reported experiences of lesbian disclosure; and it ignores influences related to gender. In this section, we address each of these concerns.

First, past research has focused on the stereotypical perceptions people have of lesbians, but has largely ignored how lesbians perceive the beliefs that non-lesbians hold about their group. This is problematic because cognitions are critically important in the disclosure process and ignoring the impact of the discloser's cognitions (and focusing on the perceptions of others) does not adequately characterize this phenomenon. This consideration of how one perceives others view one's group is the basis of metastereotype theory, which we include in our conceptual framework. Second, past theory and research are at odds when predicting the outcomes of lesbians' disclosures. Goffman's stigma theory (1963) and past empirical research (Day & Schoenrade, 1997, 2000; Galvin-White & O'Neal, 2016; Gedro, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Griffith & Hebl, 2002) have demonstrated that disclosing one's sexual orientation at work has positive outcomes in terms of job attitudes and intrapersonal experiences. However, disclosure of one's sexual orientation has also resulted in negative reactions in the workplace (Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002) and overt discrimination (Ragins & Cornwell, 2001), which are in turn related to negative outcomes including job attitudes (Griffith & Hebl, 2002) and mental and physical health detriments (Frost, Lehavot, & Myer 2015). Research that focuses specifically on lesbian workplace disclosure has generated inconsistent results. Some researchers have found that disclosure at work predicted psychological well-being, job satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction (Luhtanen, 2008). Gedro et al. (2004) found that lesbians reported "happy" coming-out experiences, with no lesbians reporting traumatic or disastrous stories; at worst, they were neutral. Existing research that documents the negative aspects of lesbian identity disclosure in the workplace is quite limited. Recent research found that lesbians who disclosed their sexual orientation in job applications were discriminated against in traditionally female-dominated occupations (Ahmed, Andersson, & Hammarstedt, 2013). Lesbians also reported fear related to disclosure (Levine & Leonard, 1984) and actual instances of formal or informal harassment, including not being hired, being forced to resign, being fired, or being verbally harassed (Levine & Leonard, 1984). In addition, lesbians reported feeling that their career trajectory was derailed after disclosing their sexual orientations at work (Boatwright, Gilbert, Forrest, & Ketzenberger, 1996). Other work has found that disclosure did not demonstrate a significant influence on occupational stress, coping, or work satisfaction (Driscoll, Kelley, & Fassinger, 1996). When considered as a whole, it is clear that there is a lack of

consensus in the current literature related to lesbians' disclosure experiences. This indicates the potential for interactive effects that have not previously been considered.

Third and finally, one potential interactive effect that has been ignored in the literature is how the disclosure process is impacted by one's gender expression. We conceptualize gender expression as one's place on the stereotypical "butch" or "femme" continua, put forth by Levitt and Hiestand (2004). Incorporating gender expression as a critical component to the disclosure process could provide greater conceptual clarity to this phenomenon, which is a focus of this article. Specifically, we outline a new theoretical model of lesbian disclosure that describes how innate characteristics and societal-level stereotypes contribute to lesbians' gender expressions as relatively butch or femme, how this gender expression is critical in informing one's sexual identity disclosure at work, and how individual-level cognitions differentially impact these experiences (see Figure 1).

Defining and differentiating gender expression, gender identity, and sexual orientation

We begin by introducing gender expression as a critical new component to the sexual orientation disclosure paradigm. In particular, we assert that one's gender expression is jointly informed by both innate individual characteristics and societal-level stereotypes about lesbians.

Gender identity refers to one's internal sense of one's own gender along two spectra related to feeling male or female. *Gender expression* is one's outward expression of gender along two spectra related to expressing masculine or feminine characteristics. As such, both gender identity and gender expression can be expressed in many combinations, including high in masculinity/low in femininity, high in both masculinity and femininity, or low in both masculinity and femininity. Importantly, one's gender identity may differ from one's gender expression. Both of these components of one's identity are distinct from *sexual orientation,* which refers to a person's sexual identity in relation to the gender to which they are attracted. An individual may therefore (for example) concurrently identify as female (gender identity), express themselves in a relatively masculine way (gender expression), and identify as a lesbian (sexual orientation). Importantly, in the context of lesbian sexual identity, gender expression has been traditionally dichotomized into either masculine-presenting ("butch") or feminine-presenting ("femme") styles. Because butch and femme similarly exist along two spectra, lesbians could incorporate some of both of these styles, presentations, and behaviors (Levitt, Gerrish, & Hiestand, 2003).

Proposition 1: Gender expression, gender identity, and sexual orientation are distinct but related constructs that exist along separate continuua and combine to form individual identity profiles.

Butch/femme gender expression as a product of identity and metastereotypes

Expressing one's group membership as a butch or femme lesbian allows lesbians to gain associated benefits, such as attracting romantic partners or feeling more authentic in professional relationships (Krakauer, 2004; Krakauer & Rose, 2002). As depicted on the left side of the model in Figure 1, lesbian gender expression (as more butch or femme) is likely due to an interplay between one's innate sense of masculinity or femininity and the adoption of group expectations stemming from societal stereotypes. Self-identified femme lesbians have reported feeling that their femmeness is an innate or essential quality, with one's location on the continuum being a consequence of early development or genetic influences (Levitt & Horne, 2002). We found no similar research focused on butch lesbians, but it is likely to be the case for them also. It follows that those who feel innately more masculine are likely to present or express themselves as butch and those who feel innately more feminine are likely to express themselves as femme. Therefore, a lesbian's gender expression, which serves to communicate sexual orientation to others, is at least partially a manifestation of an innate sense of masculinity or femininity.

Some research found no differences between butch and femme lesbians with respect to identity formation, but did find differences between butch and femme lesbians in identity integration (e.g., being a part of the LGBT community; Rosario et al., 2009). Levitt and Horne (2002) reported several differences between the experiences of butch and femme lesbians. For instance, femme lesbians reported realizing their sexual identity at a later age than butch women (age 22 versus age 15, respectively) and being more likely to have relationships with men prior to coming out (Levitt & Horne, 2002).

Proposition 2: Innate characteristics related to gender identity impact gender expression such that lesbians with a more masculine gender identity will be more likely to express themselves in masculine ways and lesbians with a more feminine identity will be more likely to express themselves in more feminine ways.

In addition to innate characteristics, we also expect that gender expression is influenced by stereotypes. The bifurcation of butch and femme lesbian gender-role presentations became visible in the United States in the late 1940s, when bars first allowed women to congregate without male escorts (Faderman, 1991). Some lesbians adopted butch identities and

expressed their sexualities through masculine clothing and short hair, which conflicted with feminine norms at the time, and femme lesbians complied with and even exaggerated those norms by wearing bright lipstick and particularly feminine dresses. Butch-femme couples challenged existing notions of femininity and female sexuality, and raised public awareness of lesbianism. By the 1950s, it was imperative for a lesbian to identify as either butch or femme if she wanted to gain membership into lesbian culture. This gendering offered a needed sense of belonging in a society that was hostile to non-heterosexual identities. Although the rigidity of the butch/femme dichotomy has been challenged and changed over time by feminists and queer theorists, predominant cultural norms that perpetuate this dichotomy among heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals alike persist to this day (Einarsdóttir et al., 2016; Krakauer & Rose, 2002; Levitt & Horne, 2002). These scripts result in very different experiences for butch and femme lesbians in society.

Stereotypes are beliefs about categories of individuals into which people classify others on the basis of some defining characteristic, such as national origin, religion, political affiliation, or sexual orientation (Allport, 1954; Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994). These stereotypes allow people to filter information about others and react accordingly. Stereotypes also serve a cognitive function by allowing for quick and generally accurate person perception (Macrae et al., 1994). In complex environments like the workplace, where demands and time pressures are high, it is likely these cognitive "shortcuts" are particularly prevalent in day-to-day interactions, where coworkers need to maximize their efficiency and reduce cognitive load.

Despite the existence of the relatively distinct butch and femme subcategories within lesbian culture, all lesbians tend to be stereotyped as masculine/butch by others. "Stereotypical" lesbians are perceived to be aggressive and physically and emotionally tough (Gedro, 2006). Both gay men and lesbians described lesbians as "not feminine, quite plain and not beautiful" (Einarsdóttir et al., 2016; Krakauer & Rose, 2002; Levitt & Horne, 2002). Additionally, lesbians who challenge the masculine stereotype (e.g., femme lesbians) are more likely to be mistaken for heterosexual women (Loulan & Thomas, 1990) and may be told they are "not really a lesbian" (Einarsdóttir et al., 2016). Newly identified lesbians have felt the need to modify their physical appearance, including cutting their hair short, wearing masculine or androgynous clothing, getting a tattoo or body piercing, and gaining weight in order to appear "more like a lesbian" (i.e., more masculine) as a way to make group membership salient to other lesbians (Krakauer & Rose, 2002). Indeed, lesbians who rated their appearance as more masculine or androgynous noted being visibly recognizable to other lesbians (Krakauer, 2004). Femme women have even reported feeling marginalized

by other lesbians who criticized them for not being "lesbian enough" because they were not masculine or androgynous (Levitt et al., 2003). For women who feel innately "femme," it is likely that they would physically express themselves more in line with traditionally feminine gender norms, whereas women who feel innately more "butch" would not express themselves along feminine gender norms (and may instead express themselves in line with masculine gender norms as a function of their knowledge about the expectations others have due to stereotypes).

Proposition 3: Societal-level stereotypes about lesbians impact gender expression such that some lesbians will alter their gender expression as more masculine or more feminine in line with prescriptive stereotypes about lesbian identity expression.

Factors that influence the decision to disclose in workplace contexts

The decision to disclose one's sexual orientation in workplace contexts is influenced by several individual- and organizational-level factors. Specifically, these decisions are often made with a careful consideration of positive (feelings of authenticity, reductions in ambiguity; Swann, Polzer, Seyle, & Ko, 2004; Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2002) and negative (potential for stigmatization or discrimination; Ragins, 2008; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001) consequences associated with disclosure. This literature also shows that societal (Connell, 2012; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001), organizational (Huffman, Watrous-Rodriguez, & King, 2008; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001), interpersonal (Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007; Sabat, Trump, & King, 2014), and individual (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; Ragins et al., 2007) factors impact the initial decision to disclose.

As previously discussed, the choice to disclose sexual orientation is one of the most challenging career choices LGB employees make (Button, 2001), and is often met with high levels of fear and anxiety surrounding anticipated negative consequences (Devine, Evett, & Vasquez-Suson, 1996; Ragins et al., 2007). Research has established that fear of disclosure is closely related to negative work or career experiences, including workplace discrimination (Madera, 2010; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001), job anxiety (Griffith & Hebl, 2002), and reduced psychological well-being (Ragins et al., 2007). This fear of potential negative consequences may reduce the likelihood of, or delay, one's disclosure (Ragins et al., 2007).

In their comprehensive review of the literature focused on stigmatized identity management in organizational contexts, Jones and King (2014) point out that, although the majority of this work focuses on the distinction between *revealing* behaviors (e.g., disclosing their stigmatized identity) and *concealing* behaviors (fabricating a false non-stigmatized identity, avoiding questions about their stigmatized identity), many individuals

actually employ *signaling* tactics (Clair et al., 2005). Signaling "straddles the line between going public and remaining private" about one's stigmatized identity (Clair et al., 2005, p. 2005). Common signaling strategies involve using ambiguous language (e.g., avoiding using gendered pronouns when discussing romantic partners), discussing topics related to sexual orientation in an abstract way (e.g., opinions about same-sex marriage laws), or mentioning other gay and lesbian people (Clair et al., 2005; Jones & King, 2014; Woods, 1994). In all of these examples, employees can use the signaling strategy to gauge others' reactions to these seemingly innocuous topics to provide information about how their own disclosure of sexual orientation might be received. For instance, Einarsdóttir and colleagues (2016) proposed that stigmatized individuals' signaling behaviors are continuously updated in response to the reactions they receive from relevant others. As such, these signaling behaviors allow lesbian employees to proverbially "test the waters" prior to disclosure. For instance, a lesbian employee may mention in passing a family member who is gay and monitor the reactions of others. Positive responses would indicate that coworkers would be receptive and supportive of a disclosure of lesbian identity and negative responses would indicate that disclosure may elicit prejudice or discrimination. The lesbian employee would then be more or less likely to subsequently disclose (Jones & King, 2014).

Although we believe that signaling may be used by anyone, we assert that the perceived need for signaling and disclosure is at least partially determined by one's gender expression and one's metaperceptions about the extent to which their gender expression matches commonly held stereotypes of lesbians. According to Vorauer, Main, and O'Connell (1998), a *metastereotype* is a "person's beliefs regarding the stereotype that out-group members hold about his or her own group." Because stereotypes are generalized beliefs one has about other groups, metastereotypes, then, reflect beliefs an individual has about *the stereotypes others hold about one's group*. Metastereotypes include group members' perceptions about the societal-level stereotypes that others likely hold about their group (Vorauer et al., 1998). In the context of lesbian stereotypes, the belief by lesbians that others hold particular stereotypes about lesbians in general (e.g., that lesbians are relatively masculine and not feminine; Ahmed et al., 2013; Bailey, Kim, Hills, & Linsenmeier, 1997) reflects a meta-stereotype (e.g., "I believe that others think lesbians are masculine"). We propose that all lesbians will share this metastereotype because masculinity is a pervasive societal-level stereotype about lesbians. However, individual lesbians will have different *metaperceptions* about the extent to which they believe that their own gender expression aligns with the prototypical lesbian stereotype (e.g., "I think others perceive me as a lesbian"). Metaperceptions are the assessment of

how individuals believe others view *them* (Frey & Tropp, 2006; Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995). Specifically, lesbians who present as more butch will feel greater congruence with the lesbian stereotype and lesbians who present as more femme will experience more dissonance with the lesbian stereotype. This dissonance will elicit greater signaling behaviors among more femme lesbians because they will be less likely to assume that others perceive their sexual orientations accurately. More butch lesbians, however, will be less likely to engage in signaling behaviors (and disclosure more generally) because they will perceive themselves to be aligned with the lesbian stereotype and thus obviously lesbian to others. Thus, butch and femme lesbians should enact different disclosure and signaling behaviors.

Proposition 4: Lesbians' metaperceptions about their alignment with societal stereotypes about lesbian identities will impact lesbians' identity management decisions such that butch lesbians will be less likely to engage in signaling or disclosure behaviors than femme lesbians.

Outcomes of disclosure at work

There are several positive aspects related to disclosure. Stigma theory (Goffman, 1963) suggests that disclosing one's stigmatized identity can lead to positive global outcomes for an individual, including feelings of authenticity, self-congruence, and integrity. Individuals with invisible stigmatized identities like minority sexual orientation may experience psychological strain, emotional stress, and stress-related illnesses due to concealing their identities (Smart & Wegner, 1999, 2000). Day and Schoenrade (1997, 2000) found that, when compared with closeted workers, those who had disclosed their sexual orientations at work felt more affective organizational commitment and job satisfaction, had stronger support from top management, and experienced less role ambiguity, role conflict, and conflict between work and home responsibilities. Griffith and Hebl (2002) complemented these results, finding that disclosing one's sexual orientation at work was related to higher job satisfaction and lower job anxiety. In terms of interpersonal relationships, past research has demonstrated that coming out at work results in stronger bonds among coworkers and stronger feelings of integration into one's work community (Day & Schoenrade, 2000; Galvin-White & O'Neal, 2016). Thus, in general, disclosure should result in positive outcomes.

Proposition 5: Disclosure of sexual orientation in the workplace should, in general, result in positive intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes.

Impact of coworker reactions

Past research has shown that the relationship between disclosure and job outcomes is highly dependent on the reactions of relevant others. For

instance, Griffith and Hebl (2002) demonstrated that job satisfaction and anxiety following disclosure were strongly mediated by coworker reactions, such that negative coworker reactions to one's sexual orientation disclosure significantly decreased job satisfaction and increased anxiety when compared to positive coworker reactions. This pattern of results has been replicated among other stigmatized populations as well, including transgender employees (Law, Martinez, Ruggs, Hebl, & Akers, 2011) and employees who previously had cancer (Martinez, White, Shapiro, & Hebl, 2016). Similarly, Ruggs, Martinez, Hebl, and Law (2015) found that coworkers' reactions to transgender identity disclosures at work were the most influential factor in predicting discrimination at work. Recently, Martinez, Sawyer, Thoroughgood, Ruggs, and Smith (2017) found that the extent to which coworkers affirmed and validated one's transgender identity at work (relational authenticity) was more influential in predicting positive employee attitudes than the extent to which the employees felt they were portraying themselves in a way that aligns with their new gender expression (action authenticity). These coworker reactions can be characterized as direct indicators of discrimination at work (Ruggs et al., 2015), which can have pernicious effects. For instance, in a survey of 534 lesbian, gay, and bisexual employees, Ragins and Cornwell (2001) found that employees who perceived more workplace discrimination held more negative job and career attitudes in terms of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intentions to leave the organization, organization-based self-esteem, satisfaction with promotion opportunities, and career commitment than those who perceived less workplace discrimination. Researchers have also demonstrated that, for LGB individuals, experiencing discrimination in the form of either concrete events (e.g., fired from a job) or interpersonal interactions with others (e.g., called names or insulted) has a significant impact on an individual's mental health and psychological distress (Mays & Cochran, 2001). Additionally, discrimination can negatively impact physical health. In a longitudinal study by Frost et al. (2015), lesbian, gay, and bisexual participants who experienced a prejudicial event between baseline and follow-up were more likely to experience a physical health problem at follow-up than participants who did not experience prejudice and participants who experienced a stressful, but not prejudice-related, event. As such, positive coworker reactions are key in improving the workplace outcomes of gay and lesbian employees and reducing perceptions of discrimination.

Proposition 6: The relation between disclosure and positive job outcomes is moderated by coworker reactions such that disclosure results in positive outcomes when coworkers react positively, but not when they react negatively.

Societal stereotypes and prejudice impact coworker reactions

A coworker's reactions to lesbian identity disclosure will be influenced by individual and societal stereotypes and prejudices about lesbians. For instance, at the most basic level, lesbians who disclose in geographic areas in which stereotypes about lesbians are quite negative and prejudice is relatively high will be more prone to receive negative reactions from coworkers than lesbians who disclose in areas that have more positive attitudes in general. Indeed, multiple studies have reported that lesbians living in rural environments experience more discrimination than their urban counterparts (Swank, Fahs, & Frost, 2014; Leedy & Connolly, 2007). For example, a 2007 survey-based study found that lesbians (but not gay men), in smaller towns faced greater levels of discrimination than lesbians in larger cities (Leedy & Connolly, 2007), and another study found that rural lesbian mothers experienced more public harassment than urban lesbian mothers (Puckett, Horne, Levitt, & Reeves, 2011). Other research has found that gay men, lesbians, and bisexual individuals who live in more rural areas of the United States experienced more enacted discrimination—including homophobic statements, property damage, employment discrimination, housing discrimination, and being chased by strangers—than their urban counterparts (Swank et al., 2013). Additionally, qualitative research has found that religious-based homophobia is more prevalent in the "Bible Belt," a geographic area that includes all the Southern states, Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri, and West Virginia (Barton, 2010).

Heilman's lack of fit model (Heilman, 1983; Lyness & Heilman, 2006) similarly highlights how the industry and type of job in which an individual works may impact how their coworkers react to their disclosure. For example, in Galvin-White and O'Neal's (2016) qualitative study of lesbian police officers, participants reported less discrimination and higher levels of acceptance from their heterosexual peers than gay male police officers. This difference may be due to the fact that certain stereotypes of lesbians—emotional and physical "toughness" in particular—align with traits of successful police officers. It is then reasonable to posit that, conversely, these stereotypes may negatively impact lesbian employees in professions that are incongruent with societal-level stereotypes about lesbians. For example, incorrectly held assumptions that all lesbians are "tough" and "masculine" may influence a lesbian worker's experience in fields that are stereotypically "tender" and "feminine," such as nursing and early childhood education.

Proposition 7: Societal-level attitudes toward lesbians in general will impact coworker reactions to disclosure of a lesbian identity such that more positive general attitudes will be related to more positive reactions to disclosure.

Stereotypes regarding the physical appearance of a prototypical lesbian will also influence one's coworkers' reactions to disclosure; more specifically, the extent to which one adheres to a stereotypical butch or femme identity. A worker's perceived position on this butch-femme continuum may impact the reactions others have to their disclosure. Though minority sexual orientation identities are typically considered "invisible" or unobservable by others, research has demonstrated that sexual orientation is not inherently invisible—people often consciously or unconsciously provide cues of one's sexual orientation that allow perceivers (e.g., coworkers) to intuit another's sexual orientation prior to disclosure (Ambady, Hallahan, & Conner, 1999; Linville, 1998; Rule, Ambady, Adams, & Macrae, 2007; Sabat et al., 2017). Presenting as butch may force one's lesbian identity into visibility due to an adherence to stereotypical lesbian appearance. Indeed, individuals who present as more butch than femme are commonly identified as having a lesbian appearance (Levitt & Hiestand, 2004). This initial work clearly indicates that gender expression should be taken into account in models of sexual orientation disclosure. A survey of queer-identifying women by Levitt and Horne (2002) found that butch-presenting women reported facing the most discrimination when compared with femme-presenting, androgynous, and unclassified queer women, and queer women felt that presenting as more femme had more positive effects than presenting as more butch. Additionally, Levitt and Hiestand (2004) found that femme-presenting women reported experiencing less harassment than butch-presenting women. As such, societal stereotypes about lesbians may force into visibility the sexual orientation of butch-presenting workers, and the reactions to their disclosure may be more harassing and negative. These reactions would lead to negative impacts on job attitudes, physical health, and mental health.

Lesbians who present as more femme than butch, by contrast, are often assumed to be heterosexual, and these individuals see coming out as a continuous process (McDermott, 2006). In fact, because lesbians are often stereotyped as portraying more butch characteristics, lesbians who challenge this stereotype are often told that they are "not really a lesbian" (Einarsdóttir et al., 2016). In the aforementioned study by Levitt and Horne (2002), femme-presenting lesbians reported facing the least discrimination. Thus, it may be the case that, although more femme-presenting lesbians do not experience harassment or discrimination to the same extent as their more butch-presenting counterparts, negative reactions to their sexual orientation disclosure more commonly take the form of disbelief and denial of one's identity. According to past research, this identity denial may cause femme-presenting lesbian workers to engage in higher levels of sexual orientation signaling and experience identity conflict, a lower sense

of belonging, and poorer psychological well-being (Huynh, 2013). This nuanced situation warrants further investigation into the experience of butch-presenting lesbians and the contextual factors that influence which outcome of their disclosure is more likely.

Proposition 8: The interaction between the reactions of coworkers and societal-level stereotypes will be further impacted by lesbians' gender expression such that butch lesbians will receive more interpersonal negativity but will be more readily believed and femme lesbians will receive less interpersonal negativity but will be met with disbelief following disclosure.

Implications for research and practice

The concepts outlined in this integrative literature review illustrate the complexity surrounding lesbian disclosure in the workplace, and our model has several implications for both research and practice. From a theoretical standpoint, we have provided a comprehensive review of the workplace-related lesbian literature and synthesized results and theory from multiple disciplines to propose new relations that have previously been disregarded. In particular, we believe that including gender expression in research focused on disclosure of lesbian identities will provide clarity to previous research that has ignored this factor and demonstrated inconsistent results. First, Driscoll et al. (1995) found no relation between disclosure of a lesbian identity at work and organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction, stress, or coping. Our framework would suggest that this lack of significance may be due to relatively butch lesbians receiving negative treatment (but more credibility) and relatively femme lesbians receiving positive treatment (but less credibility); when taken together, these opposite results within the same sample (assuming a relatively even distribution across gender expression spectra) would obfuscate the different experiences. Second, past research suggests that fear of disclosure is closely related to negative work experiences (Madera, 2010; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001), job anxiety (Griffith & Hebl, 2002), and reduced psychological well-being (Ragins et al., 2007). However, as one's gender expression may impact one's attitudes regarding disclosure and actual disclosure behaviors, these outcomes may also differ based on one's gender expression. Moreover, past research has found that individuals who disclosed their sexual orientations at work experienced higher levels of job satisfaction due to more positive interpersonal relationships (Day & Schoenrade, 2000; Galvin-White & O'Neal, 2016), but, again, the dynamic of gender expression was not taken into consideration. If one's gender expression was examined within this context, the results would potentially show differences for butch- and femme-presenting lesbians, such that lesbians who present themselves in more

stereotypically lesbian (masculine) ways and thus feel less of a need to signal their sexual orientation to coworkers prior to disclosure may experience less of an increase in job satisfaction following disclosure than lesbians whose relationships with coworkers may have been strained due to a delayed disclosure process. The hypothetical impact of gender expression within these research studies demonstrates a need for research programs and interventions that highlight the complexities of gender expression within the lesbian community.

This article can also represent a first step toward theory building and empirical inquiry focused on lesbian disclosure. By reviewing the relevant literature and describing our propositions, we hope to give other scholars a convenient means of acquainting themselves with the state of the field and serve as a catalyst for future theoretical and empirical research studies. Our conceptual framework integrates existing knowledge on workplace disclosure, outcomes of disclosure, lesbian identity, and gender expression to offer new perspectives on how lesbians manage their identities at work. This synthesis should provide researchers in various disciplines (e.g., lesbian studies, organizational psychology, vocational psychology, sociology) with a framework and complementary research propositions to guide future research endeavors focused on the nuanced, underexplored challenges lesbians face in the modern workplace.

From a practical standpoint, by recognizing that their lesbian employees may face very different challenges to disclosing their sexual orientations at work as a function of their gender expressions (as more feminine or more masculine), practitioners and organizations can work to reduce both overt and more subtle forms of discrimination. An initial step organizations can take to show their support of lesbian employees is to adopt formal anti-discrimination policies that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender expression. Organizations that do so have higher chances of attracting and retaining diverse employees and have been shown to be effective (for a review, see King and Cortina, 2010). It is equally paramount for human resources practitioners and managers to understand the stress associated with disclosing a stigmatized identity and be available to offer support and resources to lesbian employees (e.g., an employee assistance program). As a result, lesbian employees will likely display higher organizational commitment, experience better mental and physical health outcomes, and report higher job and life satisfaction (Button, 2001).

Organizations need to not only educate their employees about the issues associated with lesbian disclosure and sexual orientation discrimination, but also about the non-stereotypical conformity of lesbian individuals. It is pivotal for organizations to understand and communicate to their employees that sexual orientation disclosure is not a "one-time occurrence," but a

process (King et al., 2017; Ragins, 2004) and organizations need to develop an environment where a lesbian employee can disclose her sexual orientation without the fear of being undermined or having their disclosure ignored. Brambilla, Carnaghi, and Ravenna (2011) indicated that interventions that aim to reduce homophobia should address the structural relationship between heterosexuals and lesbians on perceived status and interdependence, specifically as it relates to the different subgroups of LGB members. This demonstrates the need for directed workshop/trainings to be provided to both management and general employees. Although some trainings and workshops have been shown to be effective (Lindsey, King, Hebl, & Levine, 2015), it is pivotal to implement an environment that reinforces positive attitudes toward all employees.

Conclusion

In this article, we presented a theoretical process-based model of lesbians' workplace disclosure of sexual orientation. As opposed to treating sexual orientation minorities as a homogenous monolith, as is current practice in some organizational literature, the proposed conceptual framework focuses explicitly on lesbian experiences. Drawing from theories of social cognition, stigma, and organizational behavior, we proposed that the antecedents to disclosure will differ based on a lesbian worker's gender expression, meta-stereotypes of sexual orientation congruence, and anticipated coworker reactions. Additionally, outcomes of disclosure will differ based on the reactions of one's coworkers and the extent to which one's coworkers hold stereotypical or prejudicial beliefs about lesbians. Future research should examine these relationships empirically and focus on how a lesbian worker's gender expression will influence their workplace disclosure process.

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