

Disclosure Patterns Within Social Networks of Gay Men and Lesbians

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ABSTRACT. Gay men and lesbians must make decisions about disclosure of their sexual orientation. Past research has focused on an individual's overall level of disclosure or on disclosure to a specific subset of individuals. This study used a new measure, the Disclosure Grid, to assess the disclosure patterns of 89 gay men and 55 lesbians across their entire social network. In addition to assessing disclosure to each network member, the Grid also assessed perceived relationship quality prior to disclosure and currently. Finally, the Grid assessed perceptions of each network member's initial and current acceptance of the gay or lesbian person's sexual orientation. Data provide a rich portrait of disclosure patterns among a heterogeneous, urban sample of lesbians and gay men. Analyses also found support for three hypotheses about disclosure, relationship quality, and acceptance. For example, it was found that participants have better relationships with individuals they

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have directly told about their sexual orientation than with people who found out in an indirect manner. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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Gay men and lesbians make difficult decisions about people in their social networks. These decisions often require decisions about disclosing and concealing their stigmatized identity to a balancing of the potential costs and benefits of disclosure and concealment. Disclosure can have positive benefits for the individual, such as enhancing self-esteem (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). Disclosure can also be advantageous by deepening relationships and friendships. The sharing of personal information is often a way to build a new relationship or to promote greater intimacy in established relationships (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Further, disclosure can advance the cause of gay civil rights by increasing public awareness (Herek, 1986). At the same time, the disclosure of a gay or lesbian identity can entail potential risks including social rejection, prejudice, or even acts of violence (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; Rubenstein, 1996).

Not surprisingly, lesbians and gay men, like members of other potentially hidden and devalued groups, are often selective in when they reveal their sexual orientation and to whom. For example, a lesbian student beginning her first year at college may hesitate to tell her new roommate about her sexual orientation, fearing possible rejection or the spreading of rumors among dorm residents. A gay man may be open about his sexual orientation with family and close friends, but conceal his identity from co-workers. Very little empirical work has closely examined the social networks of gay men and lesbians in order to understand the pattern of disclosure and the relational consequences of disclosure decisions.

The primary goal of this study was to describe the disclosure patterns of gay men and lesbians to all of the important members of the individual's social network. Each individual is part of a network that may include family members, a romantic partner, friends, neighbors, co-workers, supervisors, members of religious or social organizations, and others.

A comprehensive understanding of disclosure requires identifying the important members of an individual's social network and assessing the extent of disclosure to each person. This information would permit analyses of individuals who have come out to a small versus large part of their social world. In addition, a person's social network typically includes people from different life domains: work or school, church, the neighborhood, one's family of origin, etc. An individual might be out in some contexts but not in others. Further, when members of the social network know each other, they may share information about a gay or lesbian individual's sexual orientation. Thus a young woman may reveal being lesbian to her mother, who may in turn tell her father and older sister.

Previous research on the disclosure of sexual orientation has not typically taken a detailed social network approach. Rather researchers have asked very broad questions that require the participant to summarize across members in their network and to describe their "average" amount of disclosure. For example, Franke and Leary (1991) asked gay men a single question: "How open are you about your sexual orientation?" Participants were given 4 response options ranging from "I don't want people to know" to "I never hesitate to tell people." In a more recent study of gay men, Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, and Visscher (1996) assessed disclosure with this single item, "How out are you compared to most gay men?" These studies have been valuable in demonstrating that greater self-reported disclosure is linked to greater self-esteem (Franke & Leary, 1991) and to slower progression to an AIDS diagnosis among gay men with HIV (Cole et al.). However, these studies tell us little about the actual processes involved.

A few studies have gone beyond single-item disclosure measures to ask about a limited number of specific people. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) asked lesbians and gay men about disclosure to their mother, father, best male friend, best female friend, and supervisor. This measure has the benefit of identifying specific network members, but assumes a priori that these five specific people are the important members of the social networks of most individuals. Other researchers (e.g., Anderson & Mavis, 1996; Kahn, 1991) have asked about disclosure in different social domains. For example, Miranda and Storms (1989) asked gay men and lesbians how "out" they were ("not out," "partly out," or "completely out") in 38 different life domains such as employment, family, education, and religion. This measure allowed an examination of different social settings, but still required participants to average across people within each domain.

Single items and other summary measures of self-disclosure have the advantages of brevity and ease of administration. They have proved useful in studies attempting to link general levels of disclosure to such outcomes as health (e.g., Cole et al., 1996) and psychological adjustment (e.g., D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pinkington, 1998; Miranda & Storms, 1989). However, for those seeking to understand disclosure processes in any detail, a new measure is needed that enables individuals to identify the important members of their personal social network and to describe their disclosure to each person.

Disclosure of a stigmatized status can have both immediate and long-term consequences for the individual's social relationships. To capture some of these complexities, it is also valuable to assess several characteristics of each disclosure. For example, how long ago did the disclosure occur? Did the individual tell another person directly about his/her sexual orientation or was the disclosure indirect (e.g., the network member was told by a third person, overheard a private conversation, or guessed). Further, a picture of disclosure cannot be complete without knowing how each person reacted to the disclosure (with acceptance or rejection) and if this reaction changed over time. The quality of the gay or lesbian individual's relationship with each network member is also important, both before the disclosure and at present.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The current study was designed to provide a detailed description of the social networks and disclosure patterns of gay men and lesbians using a new measure, the Disclosure Grid. In addition, this study tested several key hypotheses regarding the disclosure of sexual orientation.

First, we tested the hypothesis that gay men and lesbians will report better relationship quality with network members who know their sexual orientation compared with those who do not. Two studies, both of relationships with parents, have provided evidence that disclosure can improve social relationships. In a small study, Ben Ari (1995) studied 32 gay men and lesbians and reported that their relationships with their parents improved following disclosure in 56% of the cases. Cramer and Roach (1988) examined how disclosure to mother and father impacted the parent-child relationship for gay men. Participants rated their perceived relationship quality before disclosure, immediately following disclosure, and currently. Results indicated that disclosure to parents often resulted in an initial strain on the relationships, but that with time

relationships healed and sometimes grew stronger than pre-disclosure relationships. The contribution of the current paper is to expand on the two previous papers by testing whether relationship quality prior to disclosure was associated with disclosure in a much larger sample and across the entire social network.

Second, we predicted that the impact of disclosure on the quality of a relationship would be affected by whether the network member is told directly about the individual's sexual orientation or learns about it in an indirect manner (e.g., from a third party). It is reasonable to expect that people are more likely to disclose directly to people with whom they have a better relationship and also that direct disclosure may improve relationships through the building of intimacy. Consequently, we hypothesized that direct disclosure will be associated with better current relationship quality.

Finally, very little empirical work has examined whether direct and indirect disclosures have differing consequences for network members' acceptance of the individual's gay or lesbian identity. In a small study of 22 gay men, Rotheram-Borus, Rosario, and Koopman (1991) examined direct and indirect disclosure. They found that having one's sexual orientation discovered was more stressful and negative than directly disclosing to a friend. We hypothesized that participants will report greater acceptance currently from network members who received direct disclosure (i.e., were specifically told by the individual) compared to network members who learned about the individual's sexual orientation indirectly.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were self-identified gay men ($n = 89$) and lesbians ($n = 55$) recruited at a large urban university in Southern California via flyers, the Psychology Department participant pool, and the campus Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered listserv. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 68. The mean age was 28.7 ($SD = 11.1$) years and the median was 25 years. Most participants (70%) were enrolled in either undergraduate or graduate programs: 43% of participants were employed part-time and 32% were employed full-time. Some participants had self-identified many years ago as gay or lesbian, but many participants had just recently identified as gay or lesbian. On average, participants had iden-

tified as gay or lesbian for 9.3 years ($Mdn = 6$, mode = 1, $SD = 9.50$). Further, 43% of participants were currently in a romantic relationship. The sample was ethnically diverse: 54% Caucasian, 19% Latino/Latina, 10% Asian American, 5% African American, and 9% another ethnicity or mixed ethnicity.

Procedure

As part of a larger study, participants came to a research office located in the Psychology Department. In order to protect anonymity, only one gay man or lesbian participated at a time. After the informed consent procedure, the participant was given a packet of questionnaires. These included measures of psychological and physical well-being and demographic information.

The Disclosure Grid was the last questionnaire to be completed. Detailed verbal instructions were provided, and participants were encouraged to ask questions if any of the materials were unclear. Participants were then shown into a private room off the main laboratory. The entire session typically lasted 70 minutes. Participants spent from 5 to 20 minutes completing the Disclosure Grid, depending on the size of their social network.

The Disclosure Grid

A new measure of the disclosure of sexual orientation was developed for this study. The Disclosure Grid comprised an instruction page and a 2-page form for recording responses. A copy of the Grid is presented in Appendix.

The Grid form has eight response columns labeled across the top. Down the first column, participants listed the members of their social network. Subsequent columns asked questions about each network member. The researcher coached participants individually about how to use the Grid form. To encourage participants to follow instructions, response columns were numbered sequentially as "Step 1" (to be done first), "Step 2," and so on. Participants began in Step 1 by listing all network members and their initials down the rows of the Grid. Participants were instructed to include individuals with whom they have an on-going social relationship. Next, participants went through the list of members one at a time, answering several questions (Steps 2-8) about each individual in turn.

Listing network members. The form lists 18 possible categories of people, such as mother, father, sisters, other close relatives, best straight friend, gay or lesbian friends, co-workers, neighbors, and mentors. Participants were asked to add other people in their social network who did not fall under these categories. For example, one participant listed his talent agent.

In the second column, participants listed the initials of each network member and left blank lines for any categories that are not applicable. The listing of initials was done to facilitate keeping track of which line represented each network member and to ensure that participants were thinking about specific individuals.

Current relationship quality. In the third column, participants rated the “quality” of their current relationship with each person listed, using a 7-point response scale, from “Very poor” to “Very good.”

Network member’s knowledge. In the next column, participants indicated whether each network member knew the participant’s sexual orientation. Response choices were: “No,” “Not Sure,” and “Yes.” The remaining questions were answered only for network members who knew about the participant’s sexual orientation. Therefore, only if “Yes” was chosen for a specific individual were any of the remaining questions answered for that person.

Direct or indirect disclosure. In the next column, participants answered the question, “Did you personally tell or write this person that you are gay or lesbian?” The response choices were “Yes” or “No.” This provides information about whether the participant controlled the information about their stigmatized status, or if the information was given in an indirect manner (e.g., the network member was told by someone else, guessed, or figured it out).

Time since disclosure. Participants indicated how long (years and months) each network member had known about their sexual orientation.

Initial reaction to identity. Participants reported how each person “initially reacted” to learning about the participant’s gay or lesbian identity. A 7-point response scale was used, ranging from “Extremely rejecting” to “Extremely accepting.”

Prior relationship quality. This question assessed the quality of the relationship with each network member prior to disclosure. The 7-point response scale for this question ranged from “Very poor” to “Very good.”

Current identity acceptance. The final column asked participants to indicate the extent to which each network member currently accepts or rejects the participant as a lesbian or gay man. A 7-point response scale

was provided ranging from “Extremely rejecting” to “Extremely accepting.”

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following sections begin by describing and discussing characteristics of the social networks, disclosure patterns, and relational quality of lesbians and gay men in this sample. Next, results from tests of three specific hypotheses will be presented and discussed. All analyses are presented for men and women combined, and significant gender differences are noted as relevant. A general discussion will follow.

Using the Grid to Describe Disclosure Patterns Within Social Networks

Network size. On average, participants listed 18.4 people in their personal social network. As expected, the size of individuals' networks varied considerably, with some participants listing as few as 3 network members and others as many as 34. Some individuals came from large extended families; other individuals had small families. The number of family members listed ranged from 1 to 12. Further, some individuals had many casual and close heterosexual friends and other participants had only a few very close friends. The range of friends was from 1 to 8 ($M = 5.12$). The Disclosure Grid only provided spaces 1 to 8 heterosexual friends. In total, 17% of participants used all 8 spaces.

Disclosure recipients. Participants had disclosed to an average of 11.0 people with a range from only one person to 28 people. On average, participants had disclosed to 60% of the members of their social network. Of those network members who knew the participant's sexual orientation, 78% had been told directly by the participant. Nonetheless, a substantial minority (22%) of network members learned indirectly about the individual's sexual orientation.

Heterosexual friends (85%) were more likely to be told directly than family members (71%) and co-workers (81%). A closer examination of disclosure to family members found that 20% of the sample had not disclosed to even one family member, and another 17% of participants had disclosed to only one family member. Mothers (58%) were more often aware of their child's minority sexual orientation than fathers (39%). Further, of the parents who were aware of their child's sexual orientation, 85% of mothers were told directly compared to only 77% of

fathers. Since these data are from the perspective of the participant, they may actually underestimate the number of network members who learned indirectly about their sexual orientation from another person or who figured it out before explicit disclosure occurred.

These findings are consistent with past research suggesting that gay men and lesbians are more likely to disclose to friends than to family members (Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1996). Individuals can choose their friends and develop relationships with people who are likely to respond positively to their sexual orientation. In contrast, individuals do not select their family of origin and may have relatives with negative attitudes toward homosexuality.

Disclosure patterns. Participants indicated how long each network member had known about their sexual orientation, in terms of months and years ago. Consequently, the Grid provides information about the sequencing of disclosure among network members by identifying who were the first people to learn about a participant's minority sexual orientation and who learned later on. Based on time since disclosure, network members were ranked from 1 (first person told) to 5 (fifth person told). However, since two or more people might have been told during the same month, more than one person could be ranked as first, second, and so on. As a result, the reports of who was told first can total to more than 100%. Importantly, two network members of the same rank were told in the same month and were not necessarily told at the exact same moment.

In this sample, 72% of participants first disclosed to a heterosexual friend. Parents were rarely the first to know. For example, only 17% of the participants disclosed to their mother first, and even fewer to their father (11%). Many sisters and brother were the first told. Specifically, 20% and 17% of participants respectively told either a sister or a brother first about their sexual orientation.

In addition to examining the first person told of a participant's sexual orientation, we can also examine patterns of early disclosure (defined as being among the first 5 people told) versus late disclosure. Heterosexual friends (most often a female friend) were among the first five people told by 80% of the gay men and lesbians in this sample. A gay or lesbian friend was among the first five told by 42% of participants. Mother (40%), sister (31%), brother (24%), and father (23%) were the next most likely individuals to be told. Mentors or teachers were rarely among the first five people to be told. Only 13% of the participants disclosed to a teacher or mentor as one of the first five people. And only 2 participants (1.4%) told a religious advisor as one of the first five people. In fact, the 2 participants who disclosed to their religious leader did so as the fourth

or fifth person. As expected, there was a lot of variation in the early versus late recipients of disclosure. Many participants initially disclosed only to friends (either heterosexual or gay and lesbian). Other participants disclosed to family and friends early in the disclosure process. It is important to note that disclosure patterns may vary with the characteristics of the sample. For example, a group of older lesbians and gay men may have disclosed to former spouses, grown children, or even grandchildren. Future research will need to address these questions with individuals in different life stages.

These findings expand our understanding about the sequencing of disclosure among gay men and lesbians. Although other researchers have reported that friends are the first to receive disclosure (Herdt & Boxer, 1991; Savin-Williams, 1996), this study directly assessed the sequencing of disclosure to all individuals in the participant's social network. Further, it is of value to note that female heterosexual best friends, mothers, and sisters were more frequently told than the corresponding male heterosexual best friends, fathers, and brothers. This gendered pattern was true for both lesbian and gay participants.

Relationship quality and identity acceptance. The Grid provides information about the quality of each participant's social relationships and about others' acceptance of the participant's sexual orientation. Participants indicated the current quality of each relationship and, for those who knew their sexual orientation, the quality of that relationship prior to disclosure. In addition, for each network member who knew of their sexual orientation, participants rated the member's acceptance of their identity both immediately following disclosure and currently. Descriptive statistics for relationship quality and identity acceptance ratings are summarized in Table 1.

Lesbians and gay men did not differ in their ratings of current relationship quality, current acceptance, and initial acceptance from their network members. The only gender difference was that lesbians reported significantly better relationships prior to disclosure than did gay men ($B = -.36, p < .05$). In other words, of those network members who know the participant's sexual orientation, women had on average a .36 point (on a 7-point scale) better relationship prior to disclosure with network members than men.

Several other patterns emerged. First, both initial and current acceptance of one's sexual orientation were significantly lower for family members than for other network members. Second, despite the stress that may have been created when the gay or lesbian participant revealed his or her sexual orientation to family members, the mean rating of the current

TABLE 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Relationship Quality and Identity Acceptance by Network Category (1-7 Scale)

Category	Relationship Quality		Identity Acceptance	
	Prior	Current	Initial	Current
Family members	5.4 (1.2) ^a	5.5 (1.2) ^a	4.8 (1.5) ^a	5.5 (1.3) ^a
Heterosexual friends	6.0 (0.9) ^b	5.8 (1.0) ^b	6.2 (0.9) ^b	6.6 (0.7) ^b
Gay/lesbian friends	5.8 (1.3) ^{ab}	5.8 (1.1) ^b	6.7 (0.7) ^c	6.8 (0.6) ^b
Others ¹	5.7 (1.1) ^a	5.3 (1.0) ^a	6.4 (.9) ^b	6.6 (0.7) ^b
Total network	5.7 (1.0)	5.5 (0.8)	6.1 (0.7)	6.5 (0.6)

Notes: Superscripts indicate means within a column that are significantly different ($p < .05$) from one another. A Bonferroni Adjustment for multiple comparisons was made.

¹Others represents the mean scores for all network members listed except family and friends (e.g., supervisor/boss, neighbors).

quality of relations with family members was virtually identical to the mean before disclosure. However, a closer look at the family data revealed that in 25.1% of the cases, relationship quality improved following disclosure, in 25.4% of the cases, relationship quality declined, and in 49.5% of cases, relationship quality was reported as exactly the same. Third, results highlight the usefulness of distinguishing between relationship quality and identity acceptance. Although ratings of current quality and acceptance were correlated ($r = .46, p < .01$ across all participants ratings of all network members), they were not the same construct. To illustrate this point, only 39.3% of network members were rated identically on quality and acceptance; for 54% of the network members, acceptance was rated as higher than relationship quality; and for 6.6% of network members acceptance was rated lower than quality. The numbers also suggest that it may be difficult for participants to perceive high quality relationships with individuals who do not accept their sexual orientation. However, it takes more than acceptance to guarantee good relationship quality.

To examine levels of acceptance in more detail, Table 2 shows the percentage of various types of network members who were given the highest ratings for acceptance (i.e., who received a rating of 7 on a 1-7 point scale). This table is limited to network members who currently know about the participant's sexual orientation. As in previous analyses, these data show that a large majority of gay men and lesbians have experienced very high levels of acceptance from their siblings, friends, co-workers, mentors, and religious leaders. In contrast, only about a

TABLE 2. Percentage of Social Network Members Who Know the Participants' Sexual Orientation and the Percentages of Who Are Rated as 7 (on 1-7 Scale) for Acceptance of Gay or Lesbian Identity

Category	% Who Know	% Rated as 7 for Acceptance ¹
Mother	58	36.0
Father	39	30.5
Siblings	62.7	60
Other family ²	53.1	59.4
Heterosexual friends	84.3	75.0
Gay/lesbian friends	98.0	93.1
Boss/co-workers	61.9	72.6
Mentors	55.3	90.0
Religious leaders	90.9	77.8
Total network	73.6	74.3

¹Percentages in right hand column are based only on social network members who know of the participant's sexual orientation.

²Other family includes step-parents and network members list under other close relatives.

third report the highest level of acceptance from their mother and father, although another 33 percent rated their parents as 5-6 on 7-point scale.

An important finding to highlight from these descriptive analyses is that the gay men and lesbians in this sample, by and large, had very good relationships with individuals in their social networks and perceived high levels of acceptance. These lesbians and gay men have for the most part successfully surrounded themselves with positive relationships and accepting individuals.

Testing Predictions Using Disclosure Grid Network Data

The second goal of this paper was to test three predictions derived from previous research and theory. The first hypothesis concerned whether current relationship quality was greater with network members who know the participant's sexual orientation compared to network members who do not know. The second and third hypotheses concerned the effect of direct disclosure versus indirect disclosure on current

relationship quality and current acceptance. Finally, analyses were conducted to examine whether the participant's gender moderated any of the findings. All hypotheses were tested with multi-level modeling using the computer program Hierarchical Linear Modeling (Bryk, Raudenbush, & Congdon, 1996). Multi-level modeling was used because it takes into account the nested nature of the data and the dependency within the data. Specifically, network members are nested within participant. Each participant has a different number and pattern of social network members, which is why multi-level modeling is the appropriate tool for analyses. The coefficients can be interpreted as analogous to unstandardized regression coefficients.

Relationship quality with those who know compared to those who don't know the participant's sexual orientation. We predicted that gay and lesbian individuals would report greater current relationship quality with network members who know about their sexual orientation than with people who do not know. As expected, relationship quality was rated as significantly higher with people who know the participant's sexual orientation ($M = 6.19$) compared to network members who do not know the participant's sexual orientation ($M = 5.56$) ($B = .63$, $SE = .10$; $p < .001$). There are two possible explanations for this finding. First, disclosure to an individual may result in greater comfort and openness with a relationship that allows closeness to flourish. In other words, disclosure may enhance relationship quality. Second, individuals may selectively disclose to people they like and feel close to. That is, relationship quality may affect decisions about revealing one's sexual orientation. Both these processes probably contribute to the large association between knowing about sexual orientation and relationship quality with network members.

Interestingly, lesbians had a stronger association between disclosure and relationship quality than did gay men. The B coefficient which assesses strength of association between disclosure and relationship quality was .90 for lesbians and .49 for gay men. This gender difference was statistically significant ($B = -.40$, $p < .05$). Thus, gender moderates the association between disclosure and relationship quality.

Relationship quality with those who were directly disclosed to compared to those who found out. A second prediction was that participants would report higher quality relationships currently with network members who they directly disclosed to compared to network members who discovered their sexual orientation in an indirect way. This hypothesis was confirmed. As expected, participants rated relationship quality higher for those network members who they told directly compared to

network members who found out in an indirect manner ($B = .40, SE = .10, p < .001$). Gender of the participant did not affect this finding.

Direct disclosure may be associated with higher relationship quality for two reasons. First, being told directly may enhance existing intimacy by communicating trust and respect. Second, direct disclosure may be associated with better relationship quality because people tend to disclose directly to people with whom they have a positive existing relationship. In other words, direct disclosure may improve existing relationships by increasing intimacy and openness, and individuals are more likely to disclose directly to people when they already have a high level of intimacy with another person.

Acceptance of gay or lesbian identity by those who were directly disclosed to compared to those who found out. A third prediction was that individuals would be more accepting currently of the gay or lesbian identity if they were directly disclosed to as opposed to found out about the participant's sexual orientation in an indirect manner. The findings supported this hypothesis. Participant's perceived network members who they told about their sexual orientation to be more accepting than members who learned indirectly ($B = .25, SE = .13, p < .05$). The gender of the participant did not affect this finding.

Direct disclosure may be associated with greater acceptance for two reasons. First, individuals are likely to disclose to people from whom they expect positive and supportive reactions. Second, work by Herek and Capitanio (1996) showed that heterosexuals who received direct disclosure from a gay or lesbian individual had more positive attitude change than individuals who learned about gay or lesbian individuals but never received direct disclosure. Similarly, it is likely that in the current study, network member's may have become more accepting as a result of open and direct disclosure.

DISCUSSION

This project adds to the small but growing body of empirical research on the disclosure of homosexuality by introducing an assessment tool that encompasses an individual's network of social relations. Several empirical findings are noteworthy. Although this sample is not representative of gay men and lesbians in the United States, it demonstrated the potential diversity of patterns of disclosure among members of individuals' social networks. For example, a small percentage of participants had not disclosed to any family members, but other individuals had

disclosed to all family members. At the same time, certain general patterns were also found. The people in this sample were more likely to have revealed their sexual orientation to heterosexual friends than to family members. Gay and lesbian friends were frequently some of the first people to be told. Gender mattered. Participants were more likely to disclose to female friends, mothers, and sisters than to male friends, fathers or brothers. In general, gay men and lesbians reported having better relationships with people who knew about their sexual orientation than with those who did not know. It seems likely that two causal processes were at work: gay men and lesbians selectively disclose to those they like and, at the same time, the sharing of important identity information can enhance a relationship. Further, direct disclosure was associated with greater quality of current relationships and more acceptance than indirect disclosure. Despite the challenges of possessing a socially stigmatized sexual identity, most gay men and lesbians were successful in building accepting and supportive social networks. Future research will have to examine the processes by which social networks are created by gay men and lesbians.

A limitation of this research is that this sample is not representative of all gay men and lesbians. Participants were recruited through organizations, university classes, and other participants and lived in a large, ethnically diverse city with a visible gay and lesbian community. Nonetheless, this sample has several strengths including the variation among participants in age, ethnicity, degree of outness, and years identified as gay or lesbian. A further limitation of this study is that all information was collected at a single point in time, and so reports of some key variables (e.g., relationship quality prior to disclosure) were retrospective. To overcome the problems of retrospective reports, future researchers could ask participants to complete the Grid at several time points, perhaps in relation to a relevant social transition such as moving to a new city, starting a new job, or entering college.

An important contribution of the study is to provide a new approach to measuring the disclosure of sexual orientation. The Disclosure Grid permits the efficient collection of fairly rich and detailed information. Importantly, the Grid is meant to be an adaptable template that researchers can modify to use with other socially stigmatized populations and to suit their own research goals. Further, other features of each social relationship could be measured including the duration of the relationship, frequency of contact, frequency of discussing the participant's stigmatized attribute, or importance of the relationship. To assess the possible loss of network members as a result of disclosure, questions could be

asked about former friends. It is hoped that the GRID will enable researchers to provide more fine-grained analyses of patterns of disclosure and their consequences for individuals and the members of their social network.

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APPENDIX
My Social Network: Instructions

We are interested in learning about your relationships with members of your current social network. This includes your family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and others.

Please follow these directions carefully. As you read the directions below, look at the forms you will use to record your information. If you have any questions, please ask the researcher immediately.

STEP 1. The first column lists some kinds of people who may be in your social network. If you have the type of relationship listed, write the person's initials in the second column, under step 1. For instance, if you have a sister, write her initials next to "sister." Do this for each category listed. Please list each person **ONLY** once under the category that best describes your relationship.

If a category does not apply to you, leave that line blank. At the end, under "other," please list the initials of any additional people in your social network not already listed and indicate their relationship to you (examples: my yoga instructor, my accountant).

When you finish listing initials for all network members, go back to the first person you listed at the top of the form. Answer all questions for this person by completing Steps 2-8. Then go on to the second person listed and complete Steps 2-8. Continue to the end of your list of people.

STEP 2. Rate the quality of your CURRENT relationship with this person.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very POOR						Very GOOD

STEP 3. Does this person know your sexual orientation?

1 NO	2 Not Sure	3 YES
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If NO or NOT SURE, skip to the next person. **If YES**, complete Steps 4-8 for this person.

STEP 4. Did you **PERSONALLY** tell or write this person that you are a gay male or lesbian?

1 NO 2 YES

STEP 5. How many years/months has this person known that you are gay or lesbian?

STEP 6. How did this person INITIALLY react to learning that you are gay or lesbian?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Extremely						Extremely
REJECTING						ACCEPTING

STEP 7. Rate the quality of your relationship BEFORE this person learned that you are gay or lesbian.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
POOR						Very GOOD

STEP 8. How does this person CURRENTLY accept/reject you as a gay or lesbian person?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Extremely						Extremely
Rejecting						Accepting

Disclosure Grid-Answer Sheet

Person	Step 1 Initials?	Step 2 Current?	Step 3 Know?	Step 4 Tell?	Step 5 How Long? 2 yrs. 3 mos.	Step 6 Initially?	Step 7 Before?	Step 8 Accept?
Example	M.C.	6	3	2	2 yrs. 3 mos.	4	7	5
Mother								
Father								
Step-Mother								
Step-Father								
Brothers (3 lines)								
Sisters (3 lines)								
Other Relatives (3 lines)								
Current Partner								
Best Straight Female Friend								
Best Straight Male Friend								
Other Straight Friends (6 lines)								
Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Friends (6 lines)								
Supervisor/Boss								
Co-Workers (3 lines)								
Neighbors (3 lines)								
Roommates (3 lines)								
Mentors/Professors (2 lines)								
Dorm Resident Advisor								
Religious Leader								
Others (4 lines)								

**The parentheses indicate the number of lines that would be inserted in the answer sheet for that category.