

## Sexual Disclosure among College Students in the American Deep South: Toward a “Sexuality as Structure” Approach

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### Abstract

We investigate sexual disclosure among college students in the American Deep South. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual students were more likely to disclose their sexuality to friends than family. Sexual disclosure was reduced for younger students, international students, and students with more anti-gay prejudices, who live in less populous areas, and who were raised in the South. The results indicate sex and race privileges; men disclosed their sexuality more than women, and Whites disclosed more than Blacks. We conclude with a discussion of the importance of recognizing the diversity of GLB experiences and the utility of the “sexuality as structure” perspective.

**Keywords:** Bisexual; College students; Closet; Gay; Lesbian; Sexual disclosure; South

### Introduction

Despite recent advances in gay rights, such as the expansion of marriage equality, there remain important inequalities based on sexual identity. For example, identifying as a member of a sexual minority group can be problematic and risky in some communities; indeed, previous research has shown that sexual identification is different in the Deep South than elsewhere in the United States<sup>1,2</sup>. Additionally, many gay and lesbian youth and young adults in the South report heinous acts of bullying and frequent tormenting by other youth and by adults. A general sense of disapproval permeates the region; Barton [1] refers to this as “the Bible Belt panopticon, an important element of Bible Belt Christianity manifests through tight social networks of family, neighbours, church, and community members, and a plethora of Christian signs and symbols sprinkled throughout the region”. Thus, for these and other reasons, gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals – especially those living in the Deep South – may hide their sexuality from others, surviving by living “in the closet”.

On the other hand, post-closet scholars claim that American homosexuality has become a component of mainstream culture, that gays and lesbians live at a time in American history when gay life is perceived as more accessible and being gay is more common and typical [2-5]. While attitudes and experiences have changed over the past 25 years, this shift has not been uniform across all groups and regions. The emphasis of post-closet scholarship reflects a homonormative position that often minimalizes or ignores differences of race, sex, religion, and region. This hegemonic gay identity presumes a white and middle class position, often from urban male spaces. Thus, many gay and lesbian stories—often due to age, racial, sex, religious, and geographic differences—have been excluded by the assumptions of post-closet theory [6-9]. The recognition of these varied and often marginalized GLB experiences is necessary in order to better understand and

theorize sexualities, sexual disclosure, and the closet, as well as make policy recommendations.

In this article we seek a better understanding of sexual disclosure among college students in the American Deep South. The Deep South represents a space of patriarchal traditions, conservative practices, and Judeo-Christian values [1,10-12]. Coming out of the closet in the Deep South presents a myriad of challenges and exposes various inequalities [1,10,11]. We explore these challenges and inequalities through analysis of survey data from a convenience sample of 62 college students (23 gays/lesbians and 39 bisexuals) attending a large public university in the Deep South. (These data represent a subset of a larger sample of 955 college students, where 885 students identified as heterosexual or straight and 62 identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.) We also elucidate and advocate a “sexuality as structure” approach to the understanding of sexual disclosure and the closet.

### Sexuality as structure

Building on her 1998 work *Gender Vertigo*, Barbara Risman published her theoretical statement on “gender as social structure” in a 2004 issue of *Gender & Society*. Risman [13] argues that “to conceptualize gender as a social structure ... we can better analyze the ways in which gender is embedded in the individual, interactional, and institutional dimensions of our society.” Risman’s [14] gender as structure approach demonstrates how social “constraints and opportunities” are predicated on gender, resulting in oppression for some and privilege for others. We extend Risman’s formulation to sexuality; that is, we briefly lay out a way to conceptualize sexuality as a social structure by describing its individual, interactional, and institutional dimensions. In doing so we argue that sexuality structures our daily lives –proffering social advantages and disadvantages – and

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<sup>1</sup> Baunach, DM, & Burgess, EO. 2013. Sexual identity in the American Deep South: The concordance and discordance of sexual activity, relationships, and identities. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 60, 1335-1355.

<sup>2</sup> The Deep South represents a historic, geographic, and cultural designation. Sixteen states and the District of Columbia comprise the greater southern region of the United States, but the six states of the Deep South – Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina – share a history of slavery and cotton and tobacco production, setting them culturally and politically apart from the rest of the region [48].

plays out on these three dimensions.

To say that sexuality operates as social structure is to assert that opportunities and constraints are based on sexuality categories. Just as societal rewards and punishments are delineated by gender and racial/ethnic categories [13-15], rewards and punishments are also delineated on the grounds of sexual categories. A prime example can be found in the controversy over same-sex marriage, where access to a state-sanctioned institution and state and federal benefits is predicated on one's sexuality. Additionally, many states do not protect gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, and members of other sexual minority groups from employment or housing discrimination. Thus, in the contemporary United States, social opportunities and constraints are indeed based on sexual categories.

Moreover, the consequences of these sexuality-based opportunities and constraints can be seen at the three dimensions identified by Risman—individual, interactional, and institutional. With the current project in mind, at the individual level a "sexuality as structure" approach allows us to investigate the ways that people form identities as gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight, etc. At the interactional level this approach allows us to focus on the exchanges between people that result in someone disclosing or not disclosing a sexual identity. And at the institutional level we can examine how law, ideologies, and organizational practices affix rewards and punishments to those sexual categories. Indeed, the closet is itself a social institution that impacts individual identifications and cultural interactions.

In other words, by formulating our project on these dimensions with an eye toward their structure, we seek to illuminate the inter-workings of this complex system of sexual inequalities. To do this we must be mindful of social context and how context shapes sexual disclosure. We must ask what social contexts constrain disclosure, and what contexts privilege it. Further, we must discern the social forces contributing to and structuring in their own right, these constraints and opportunities, risks and rewards, oppressions and privileges. Finally, by conceptualizing sexuality as structure and identifying how it operates across the three dimensions, we can use this information to locate points at which interventions can take place to lessen or eradicate inequalities [14].

## Sexual disclosure

For many GLB individuals, sexual disclosure or "coming out of the closet" remains central to developing a positive sexual identity [16,17]. However, disclosure also affirms heterosexuality, because when someone claims a GLB identity in a heteronormative society, heterosexuality is being acknowledged as the expected and dominant sexuality [16,18]. Even so, by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals are out the closet than ever before. Given this, post-closet scholars argue that the salience of gay identity had diminished [5] and with it, the closet has transformed. The closet has become "a strategy of accommodation and resistance which both reproduces and contests aspects of society organized around normative heterosexuality" [5]. Thus, the closet can be used as a safety measure for hiding from public and private prejudice, discrimination, and violence, but it also silences gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals [4,16,19]. So while the closet is a heteronormative tool used to control sexual minority group members [16], it is also a tool used by those same people to resist this control. The closet is multifaceted, representing both protection and oppression, both opportunity and constraint. Just how the closet is used and experienced depends on social context, in that certain locations and social institutions can make coming out perilous (but also empowering). College is one such location. College is a time in many young adults'

lives when adult sexual identities are formed, and colleges are common spaces in which GLB students disclose their sexuality to others [20-22]. Because of this, college campuses have become more aware and knowledgeable of GLB students. Some colleges have liberal reputations and accepting climates that attract and support GLB students, while other colleges are conservative and unwelcoming [20,23,24]. Across different kinds of colleges, GLB student organizations, support/activist groups, and scholarly courses exist and are spreading. But at the same time, GLB students continue to report perceived and experienced hostility, discrimination, and harassment on college campuses [20-22,25]. Upon disclosure, many GLB students encounter a "chilly" climate, often facing prejudice, ridicule, and discomfort [20-22]. While coming out in college is complicated, staying in the closet supports internalized prejudices, maintains a heterosexual identity, and can lead to feelings of anxiety and loneliness [3,4].

Disclosure is rarely easy. While it is eased in a supportive context [17], intersections of sex, race/ethnicity, age, religion, and geography complicate disclosure [8,26]. For example, sex-based differences in resources have historically privileged men's abilities to live outside of heterosexuality while limiting women's opportunities to do the same, so much so that "gayness" has usually been defined by white, middle class men [16,27-29]. In addition, ethnic minority men have described discriminatory experiences in identifying as gay and participating in the gay community and from their community of origin as well [7-9,16,30-32]. And while GLB people from older generations faced more challenging social circumstances and negative reactions than current generations, among today's college students, disclosure may come easier with the maturity that accompanies age and experience [4,8,33-36].

Beyond the complications of sex, race/ethnicity, and age, religion and geography interact in the Deep South. The Deep South is a region dominated by a particularly conservative form of evangelical Protestantism. The conservative, evangelical religious climate of the Deep South is notoriously unwelcoming and unsupportive of GLB people and their disclosure.<sup>3</sup> The confluence of political and religious conservatism in the region shapes views toward homosexuality, sending a message that homosexuals are inferior and immoral [1,12,31,35-37]. Indeed, anti-gay sentiments are so widely held in the Deep South that recent political campaigns have replaced the "race-baiting" of old with "gay-baiting" [38]. Many GLB people living in the rural South express feelings of shame, isolation, and lack of structural support, often using "the city" as a catalyst for their sexual discovery and disclosure [1,26,35,39-42].

## Hypotheses

Based on the literature reviewed above, we forward the following six hypotheses.

H1: GLB students in the Deep South will report low levels of disclosure.

H2: Male GLB students will report more disclosure than female GLB students.

H3: White GLB students will report more disclosure than GLB students of other racial/ethnic groups.

H4: Older GLB students will report more disclosure than younger

<sup>3</sup> We do not mean to suggest that all of the Deep South and all Southerners are hostile to GLB people. Many GLB people live an "out life" in the Deep South and have warm and supportive relationships with their family and friends [12,31]. But on average, the culture of the Deep South and the attitudes of its residents tend to be more negative towards GLB people [1,10].

GLB students.

H5: GLB students originally from less populous or more rural areas will report less disclosure than GLB students originally from more populous or urban areas.

H6: More religious GLB students and GLB students who hold more anti-gay prejudices will report less disclosure than less religious GLB students and GLB students who hold less anti-gay prejudices.

We also investigate sexual disclosure at the intersections of these characteristics and identities, but because of the complexity of possibilities, we refrain from hypothesizing anything more specific than the existence of interactional differences.

## Methods

### Procedures

The data analysed in this article emanate from a larger project on the sexual attitudes and behaviours of college students at a large, urban university in the American Deep South. During the 2002 spring semester students in undergraduate sociology courses were asked to complete a 26-page, 440-item paper survey. The survey took approximately 45 minutes to complete; students received no course credit for their participation and no penalty for non-participation. Students were informed that their participation was voluntary and anonymous; they were also informed of their right to refuse at any point in time during the survey administration. Excluding one fraudulent survey and 24 refusals, we obtained a 97 percent completion rate. The university's IRB approved all research procedures.

In total, 955 students completed questionnaires. Here we limit our analyses to the 62 (6.5%) students who, when responding to the question "Do you consider yourself heterosexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, or other", indicated that they were bisexual, gay, or lesbian. (Of the 955 students, over 93 percent or 885 students indicated that they were heterosexual).<sup>4</sup> Most of the remaining students identified as bisexual (62.9%, n=39); only one third identified as gay (21.0%, n=13) or lesbian (16.1%, n=10). All subsequent data descriptions refer to these 62 GLB students.

### Participants

Only a few freshman (11.3%, n=7) and sophomores (19.4%, n=12) completed the survey; most of the GLB participants were either juniors (37.1%, n=23) or seniors (32.3%, n=20). Sixty six percent (n=41) was<sup>4</sup> Upon completion of data collection for the larger project, of which this article represents a piece, we were surprised to find so few students identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Although the university is located in the Deep South, the city in which the university is located is known for having one of the largest gay communities in the United States and for having the Largest Black gay community. Furthermore, the university itself is relatively "gay friendly," with an active GLBTQ student group, including a Gay Straight Alliance and Safe Zone spaces on campus, along with many GLBTQ faculty members. Although we expected more students to identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual in our sample, because of the relative "gay friendliness" of the campus and the fact that sociology courses often attract students from oppressed groups, our data do exceed recent estimates of the size of the adult GLB population in the United States. Using data from multiple sources, Gates [49] estimates that 3.5 percent of American adults identify as GLB, with slightly more than half of that figure (1.8%) identifying as bisexual and nearly twice the number of gay men (1.1%) than lesbians (0.6%). We found 6.5 percent of southern college students identifying as GLB. We also found more students identifying as bisexual (4.1%) than as gay (1.4%) or lesbian (1.0%). The general patterning of responses, though, is not that different across our data and those summarized by Gates. Even so, we had to consider the possibility that our data were incomplete, that some students were so closeted that they would not even identify in an anonymous survey, and we have to admit that this could have happened. Another possibility is that some students with same-sex attractions do not use the labels of gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. [29]. However, we do know that some, seemingly completely closeted students, did identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual on the survey.

female, and 34 percent (n=21) was male. The students ranged in age from 18 to 41 (median=21). With a history as a "commuter school", the university enrolls many students of non-traditional college age; 25 percent (n=15) were 24 or older. Sixty three percent (n=39) of students was White; 27 percent (n=17) was Black. The six remaining students identified as Latino (1.6%, n=1), another racial/ethnic group (3.2%, n=2), or multiracial (4.8%, n=3). No one identified as Asian or Asian American. Eleven percent (n=7) of the GLB students indicated that they had been living outside of the United States at age 12. Yet, most (67.7%, n=42) had been living in the southern region of the United States at age 12. While a majority of the students resided in a large city (45.2%, n=28) or in a suburb of a large city (29.0%, n=18) at the time of the survey, they were a bit more evenly dispersed across the "size of place at age 12" categories. At the time of the survey, the modal religious affiliation was no religious affiliation (43.3%, n=26), although nearly one third (31.7%, n=19) identified as members of Protestant faiths. More GLB students indicated that they had been raised Protestant (40.3%, n=25) or Catholic (19.4%, n=12) than identified with those faiths at the time of the survey. On a nine-point scale indicating frequency of attendance at religious services, students fell toward the lower end of the scale (mean=3.6) for their current attendance but rated quite a bit higher for their attendance at the age of 12 (mean=6.2).

### Measures

**Demographics:** For sex, participants were given two choices, male and female. Age at the respondent's last birthday was measured in years. Race or ethnicity was measured with seven categories: White or Caucasian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Asian or Asian American, American Indian or Native American, multiracial, or some other race/ethnicity.<sup>5</sup> Because over 90 Percent of the 62 GLB students indicated they were either White or Black; we limited some of the analyses to just these students.

**Religion:** Attendance at religious services ("current" at the time of the survey and at age 12) was measured with an ordinal variable, ranging from 1 (never) to 9 (more than once a week).

**Geography:** We asked students in what region they were living at 12 years of age: north, south, midwest, west, or outside of the United States. From this information we generated two dummy variables: living in the South at age 12 (1=yes) and living outside of the United States at age 12 (1=yes). Size of residence ("current" at the time of the survey and at age 12) was measured with an ordinal variable, ranging from 1 (rural area <10,000 population) to 8 (large city >1 million population).

**Internalized prejudice:** Herek's revised Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gays (ATLG) scale was used to assess attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. The scale exhibited high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.839). Higher values on the scale indicate greater sexual prejudice or more negative attitudes.

**Gay contact:** Four items were used to assess contact with other gay men, lesbians, and the gay community. Current contact was determined by asking: "Do you currently have any friends and/or family members that are gay or lesbian?" Previous contact was determined by asking: "When you were in high school, did you have any friends and/or family members that were gay or lesbian?" These items were coded as dummy variables (0=no, 1 = yes). We asked the students to indicate if any of the gay men or lesbians they knew were their father, mother, son/daughter, sibling, grandparent, other family member, best friend, other friend,

<sup>5</sup> Even these race categories may be too broad. The "Latino" category combines people from different countries, cultures, and backgrounds. And the "African American" or "Black" categories collapse different groups of the African Diaspora.

co-worker, neighbour, other acquaintance, roommate, or “other”. We summed these items to get a rough count of the number of gay men and lesbians known by the student. Contact with the gay community was determined by asking if the student had ever participated in any of eleven different items: going to a gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender (GLBT)<sup>6</sup> bar; attending a gay pride event; belonging to a GLBT organization (Human Rights Campaign, PFLAG, etc.); purchasing a GLBT publication (books, magazines, etc.); renting or purchasing a GLBT video; attending a commitment ceremony or wedding; taking a class or attended a seminar/talk specifically on GLBT issues; attending a drag show; attending a private party, event, or social function where GLBT people were in the majority; shopping at a GLBT-owned business; or displaying or wearing merchandise supportive of the GLBT community (bumper stickers, t-shirts, flags, etc.). We summed the number of items circled to create a scale (Cronbach’s alpha=0.860) where higher values indicate more contact with, and greater integration or involvement in, the gay community.

**Sexual disclosure:** We asked students “To whom have you told of your sexual preference/orientation or have ‘come out’? Father, mother, son(s) and/or daughter(s), sibling(s), grandparent(s), other family member(s), best friend, other friend(s) who are gay/lesbian/bisexual, other friend(s) who are not gay/lesbian/bisexual, co-worker(s), neighbour(s), other acquaintance(s) who are gay/lesbian/bisexual, other acquaintance(s) who are not gay/lesbian/bisexual, roommate, other, or none/no one.” An exploratory principal components factor analysis of the 15 items (excluding the “none/no one” response) yielded a two factor solution (KMO msa=0.797); the varimax rotated solution identified a “disclosure to family” factor (eigen value=3.40) and a “disclosure to friends” factor (eigen value=3.56). Using this

<sup>6</sup> In this article we focus on the disclosure of gay, lesbian and bisexual students, not transgender students; we acknowledge that the disclosure experiences of transgender people may differ from gay students, from lesbian students and from bisexual students (just as each of these groups may differ from the others). However, in the section of the questionnaire assessing students’ contact with the gay community, we included gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in the verbiage. We retain that language here so that readers may determine for themselves if that inclusion may have affected the results.

Student is “out” to ...	Total (%)	Sex		Race	
		Male (%)	Female (%)	White (%)	Black (%)
Father	29.03	38.10	24.39	33.33	11.77
Mother	41.94	47.62	39.02	43.59	35.29
Son(s) or Daughter(s)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Sibling(s)	37.10	38.10	36.59	43.59	17.65
Grandparent(s)	11.29	19.05	7.32	7.69	11.76
Other Family Member(s)	27.42	38.10	21.95	23.08	23.53
Best Friend	75.81	71.43	78.05	76.92	64.71
Other GLB Friend(s)	83.87	85.71	82.93	87.18	70.59
Other NonGLB Friend(s)	72.58	76.19	70.73	74.36	58.82
Coworker(s)	53.23	57.14	51.22	58.97	29.41
Neighbor(s)	20.97	23.81	19.51	17.95	17.65
Other GLB Acquaintance(s)	62.90	76.19	56.10	64.10	52.94
Other NonGLB Acquaintance(s)	50.00	57.14	46.34	51.28	35.29
Roommate(s)	45.16	38.10	48.78	51.28	17.65
Other(s)	8.07	9.52	7.32	7.69	5.88
No One	6.45	4.76	7.32	5.13	11.76
Total Number of Family Members	1.47	1.81	1.29	1.51	1.00
Total Number of Friends	4.65	4.86	4.54	4.82	3.47
Total Number	6.19	6.76	5.90	6.41	4.53

Table 1: Sexual disclosure by sex and race.

Student is not “out” to ...	Total (%)	Sex		Race	
		Male (%)	Female (%)	White (%)	Black (%)
Father	54.10	61.90	50.00	48.72	76.47
Mother	39.34	33.33	42.50	35.90	47.06
Son(s) or Daughter(s)	8.33	9.52	7.69	2.63	23.53
Sibling(s)	39.34	42.86	37.50	30.77	58.82
Grandparent(s)	57.38	61.90	55.00	53.85	64.71
Other Family Member(s)	52.46	52.38	52.50	51.28	58.82
Best Friend	8.20	0.00	12.50	5.13	17.65
Other GLB Friend(s)	3.33	0.00	5.13	0.00	11.76
Other NonGLB Friend(s)	9.84	4.76	12.50	7.69	17.65
Coworker(s)	24.59	28.57	22.50	15.38	47.06
Neighbor(s)	26.67	30.00	25.00	23.08	37.50
Other GLB Acquaintance(s)	9.84	4.76	12.50	5.13	23.53
Other NonGLB Acquaintance(s)	21.67	19.05	23.08	15.79	35.29
Roommate(s)	13.11	14.29	12.50	7.69	23.53
Other(s)	9.84	14.29	7.50	5.13	5.88
No One	19.67	19.05	20.00	23.08	11.76
Total Number	3.76	3.90	3.68	2.95	5.75

Table 2: Sexual non-disclosure by sex and race.

information as a guide, we created a variable indicating disclosure to family members by summing the father, mother, sons/daughters, siblings, grandparents, or other family members items (Cronbach’s alpha=0.831). We also created a variable indicating disclosure to friends by summing the best friends, gay/lesbian/bisexual friends, non-gay/lesbian/bisexual friends, co-workers, neighbours, gay/lesbian/bisexual acquaintances, non-gay/lesbian/bisexual acquaintances, roommates, and others items (Cronbach’s alpha=0.800). Finally, a total disclosure variable was created by summing all 15 items (Cronbach’s alpha=0.868).

**Sexual non-disclosure:** We also asked students “To whom have you avoided telling your sexual preference/orientation or ‘coming out’?” The response categories for the sexual disclosure question were repeated for this item. We then summed the 15 non-disclosure items, again ignoring the last “none/no one” category, to create the non-disclosure summary variable (Cronbach’s alpha=0.866).

## Results

GLB students had disclosed their sexuality to approximately six of the (types of) people we listed and that most of these people were friends and not family members (Table 1). On average, students had disclosed to one and a half family members and three times that number, over four and a half, of friends. Among the different kinds of friend-relationships, students were most likely to disclose to other GLB friends, best friends, other non-GLB friends, and other GLB acquaintances. Not surprisingly, they were more likely to disclose to GLB friends or acquaintances than to non-GLB friends or acquaintances. Among the different kinds of family-relationships, students indicated that they were most likely to disclose to their mothers and siblings and were least likely to disclose to fathers, other family members and grandparents. None of our students had disclosed to their own sons or daughters, but only four of the 62 students had children of their own (most of these children were young – ranging in age from one to four; the oldest children were eight and 11). While the students disclosed more often to their mothers than to other family members, they were also less likely to disclose to their mothers than to almost any kind of friend, except neighbours and “others” (Table 1).

We found several key sex and race differences in the patterns of disclosure. Men reported higher average levels of disclosure than

	Age	Size of Residence at 12	Current Size of Residence	Southern Residence at 12	Foreign Residence at 12	Religious Attendance at 12	Current Religious Attendance	Internalized Prejudice
<b>Sexual Disclosure (Total)</b>	0.26	0.22	0.21	-0.08	-0.12	0.24	0.03	-0.36
<b>Male</b>	0.46	0.08	0.12	-0.21	-0.05	0.32	0.03	-0.59
<b>Female</b>	0.19	0.3	0.3	-0.02	-0.12	0.19	0	-0.27
<b>White</b>	0.2	-0.08	0.24	0.19	-0.39	0.35	0.2	-0.44
<b>Black</b>	0.27	0.38	0.25	-0.36	0.11	-0.07	-0.11	-0.07
<b>Sexual Disclosure to Family</b>	0.31	0.08	0.08	-0.07	-0.04	0.23	0.06	-0.31
<b>Male</b>	0.48	-0.02	0.03	-0.25	0.15	0.24	0.05	-0.28
<b>Female</b>	0.26	0.15	0.14	0	-0.07	0.22	0.03	-0.31
<b>White</b>	0.29	-0.11	0.17	0.11	-0.26	0.31	0.23	-0.33
<b>Black</b>	0.18	0.24	0.11	-0.39	0.35	0	-0.04	-0.15
<b>Sexual Disclosure to Friends</b>	0.15	0.25	0.25	-0.04	-0.14	0.2	0	-0.34
<b>Male</b>	0.33	0.08	0.13	-0.12	-0.17	0.33	0.02	-0.67
<b>Female</b>	0.07	0.34	0.35	-0.01	-0.12	0.14	-0.03	-0.21
<b>White</b>	0.08	-0.04	0.23	0.25	-0.39	0.33	0.15	-0.43
<b>Black</b>	0.21	0.34	0.26	-0.29	-0.05	-0.12	-0.15	-0.06

**Table 3:** Bivariate correlations of sexual disclosure and non-disclosure by sex and race.

women, and men were more likely than women to disclose to nearly every kind of relationship we listed, particularly to family. Specifically, men were more likely than women to disclose to their fathers, mothers, grandparents, other family members, other GLB acquaintances, and other non-GLB acquaintances; while women were more likely to disclose to best friends and roommates. Narrowing our focus slightly to the students who identified as White or Black (temporarily ignoring the six students who identified differently), we found that White students reported greater disclosure on average than Black students. Moreover, the race differences in disclosure exceeded the sex differences. Whites were more likely than Blacks to disclose to nearly every kind of relationship we listed, except to grandparents and other family members. Finally, Table 1 also shows that while nearly 6.5 percent, or four, of our students indicated that they had disclosed their sexuality to absolutely no one, women were more likely than men and Blacks were more likely than Whites to have disclosed to no one, or presumably to be completely closeted.

On average, non-disclosure was less common than disclosure (Table 2), students avoided disclosing to fewer than four (types of) people. Non-disclosure was more common with family-relationships than with friend-relationships. In fact, students reported that they were most likely to non-disclose to grandparents, fathers, or other family members. Race patterns in non-disclosure were similar to disclosure; just as Black students were less likely than White students to disclose their sexuality; Black students were more likely than White students not to disclose their sexuality to others. The sex differences in Table 2 are a little more complicated. In Table 1 men were more likely than women to disclose their sexuality to most people, but in Table 2 men were also more likely than women to non-disclose to some people as well – particularly fathers (Table 2).

In Table 3 we present the correlations of age, geography, religion, and prejudice with the summary measures of sexual disclosure (to all, to family, and to friends). Students' quantity of disclosure was positively associated with age, size of residence, and childhood religiosity. Older students, students who lived in more populous areas (both at age 12 and at the time of the survey), and students who attended religious services more frequently at age 12 had disclosed their sexuality to more people. Childhood southern and foreign residence and internalized prejudice were negatively associated with disclosure; students who lived in the south at age 12, who lived outside of the United States at age 12, and

who held more negative attitudes toward homosexuality had disclosed their sexuality to fewer people. The quantity of disclosure to family members reflected fewer relationships of any note. Older students and students who attended religious services more frequently at 12 had disclosed their sexuality to more family members; students who expressed more internalized prejudice had disclosed their sexuality to fewer family members. Students' disclosure to friends replicates the relationships seen with the total disclosure variable.

As in Tables 1 and 2, we also present the correlations of age, geography, religiosity, and prejudice with disclosure, controlling for sex and race. Age's positive associations with sexual disclosure (to all, to family, and to friends) were much stronger for men than for women.

	Gay Friends in H.S.	Current Gay Friends	Number of Gay Friends	Gay Community Contact
<b>Sexual Disclosure (Total)</b>	0.41	0.08	0.56	0.73
<b>Male</b>	0.53	-0.33	0.54	0.55
<b>Female</b>	0.36	0.25	0.59	0.81
<b>White</b>	0.32	0.00	0.44	0.71
<b>Black</b>	0.49	0.14	0.61	0.62
<b>Sexual Disclosure to Family</b>	0.19	-0.07	0.46	0.64
<b>Male</b>	0.34	-0.41	0.46	0.43
<b>Female</b>	0.11	0.08	0.46	0.74
<b>White</b>	0.09	-0.17	0.41	0.67
<b>Black</b>	0.29	0.00	0.42	0.37
<b>Sexual Disclosure to Friends</b>	0.47	0.17	0.52	0.64
<b>Male</b>	0.52	-0.21	0.42	0.50
<b>Female</b>	0.46	0.33	0.59	0.71
<b>White</b>	0.41	0.13	0.37	0.59
<b>Black</b>	0.50	0.17	0.60	0.62

**Table 4:** Bivariate correlations of sexual disclosure and non-disclosure with GLB contact.

Religious attendance at age 12 behaved similarly, exhibiting stronger, positive associations with disclosure (to all and to friends) for men than women. Size of residence (at age 12 and at the time of the survey) had a stronger positive association with disclosure (to all, to family, and to friends) for women than men. Living in the south at age 12 had stronger negative associations with disclosure (to all, to family, and to friends) for men than women. Living outside of the United States at age 12 reduced total disclosure more strongly for women than men, increased family disclosure for men while decreasing it for women, and reduced friend disclosure more strongly for men than women. Internalized prejudice reduced disclosure for everyone, but did so more strongly for men's disclosure (to all and to friends).

Several race differences were also found in Table 3. Age had stronger positive associations with total disclosure and friend disclosure for Black students than White students and a stronger positive association with family disclosure for White students. Current size of residence did not have different associations with disclosure across race categories, but size of residence at age 12 did. The original positive associations between disclosure (to all, to family, and to friends) and size of residence at 12 applied to Black students but not White students. Somewhat similarly, the original negative association between southern residence at 12 and disclosure applied to Black students; for White students, southern residence at 12 increased disclosures. Foreign residence at age 12 was associated with less disclosure (to all, to family, and to friends) for White students, but more disclosure (to all and to family) for Black students. Religiosity, either at 12 or at the time of the survey, was more strongly associated with more disclosure (to all, to family, and to friends) for White students; for Black students religiosity was associated with less disclosure (to all and to friends). Internalized prejudice was associated with less disclosure (to all, to family, and to friends) for White students – for Black students the association was quite weak (Table 4).

The final stage of our investigation into sexual disclosure in the Deep South looked into the contact the GLB students had with the gay community. This analysis permits us to look at the relationship between disclosures – the extent to which the GLB students were closeted in heterosexual society – and isolation – the extent to which the GLB students were connected to the gay community. Overall, greater gay contact was associated with more disclosure, or conversely, less disclosure (being more closeted) was associated with less contact (more isolation). This general pattern held for knowing someone gay in high school, knowing more GLB people at the time of the survey, and having more kinds of contact with the gay community, although the associations with contact were a bit weaker for family disclosure. GLB contact at the time of the survey was associated with less disclosure (to all, to family, and to friends) for male students. For White students, knowing someone gay at the time of the survey had no association with total disclosure, a weak association with friend disclosure, but a negative association with family disclosure.

## Discussion

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual young adults in the American Deep South are not living "beyond the closet" [4]. Southern culture is a complex and often hostile climate, whether on or off campus, making disclosure a complicated process [1,10]. While only a few may be completely closeted, disclosing their sexuality to absolutely no one, most appear to make calculated use of the closet. The GLB college students we surveyed indicated that they carefully disclose and non-disclose their sexuality. The students were most likely to disclose their sexuality to friends and acquaintances – especially those that are gay, lesbian, or

bisexual themselves [23,34,43]. In fact, a majority of our GLB students were "out" to their friends, acquaintances, and co-workers. On the other hand, only a minority of participants were "out" to their family members, fewer than have been found in other research [44]. Typically, the students had disclosed to none, or at most just one, family member, usually their mother or a sibling [43-45]. Thus it seems that the southern closet is an institution dictated by social context and relationships, used by men and women and by Whites and Blacks alike [23,46]<sup>7</sup>. Even so, we found evidence supporting sex and racial differences; both male privilege and White privilege are exerted in sexual disclosure – in that, men were less closeted than women [29] and Whites were less closeted than Blacks. These findings confirm Hypotheses 2 and 3, but confirmation or refutation of Hypothesis 1 is more complicated – GLB students did report relatively low levels of disclosure to family but higher levels of disclosure to friends.

Other characteristics were also associated with sexual disclosure. Younger students, international students, students who lived in less populous areas, students who lived in the south as children, and students with more internalized anti-gay prejudices were more closeted, supporting Hypotheses 4 and 5. But here we found substantial sex and race differences. For example, age, a southern childhood, and internalized prejudice were more strongly related to men's disclosure than to women's, while urban or foreign residence was more strongly related to women's disclosure. Unexpectedly and contrary to part of Hypothesis 6, we found that greater childhood religiosity was associated with more disclosure; this relationship was also stronger for men than women. The explanation for this finding may be found in the students' religious beliefs at the time of the survey, or more precisely their non-beliefs. Many of those students who were raised in more religious households seem to have abandoned their faiths as adults (perhaps because of their difficulty in reconciling their religious upbringing with their sexuality). Indeed, we found that the students' religiosity at the time of the survey was unrelated to their disclosure.

The sex differences discussed above were more matters of degree than of kind – age, geography, religiosity, and prejudice tended to be similarly related to men's and women's disclosure, but just more or less strongly depending on sex. The race differences were more matters of kind; many of the previously mentioned characteristics have opposite relationships with White or Black students' disclosure. Residence in southern, foreign, or more rural areas at age 12 was associated with less disclosure for White students but more disclosure for Black students. Religiosity increased disclosure for Whites but decreased it for Blacks [12,31,32]. White students may be able to resolve their religiosity with their sexuality better because they have affiliated with more liberal denominations as adults. Black students, however, may be more likely to remain affiliated with the same denomination, and the Black church can be notoriously anti-gay [51]. So, where more religious Black students were more closeted, more prejudiced White students were more closeted. Thus anti-gay prejudice and religiosity tend to behave similarly, just for different groups of students.

When all is said and done, we have found that the closet is still relevant to young adults living in the American Deep South at the start of the twenty-first century. Young gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals continue to use the closet to negotiate their lives and the relationships

<sup>7</sup> Many of these disclosure patterns do not differ markedly from those found in other locales [43-45]. In and of itself, this may be a good sign about the changing culture of the Deep South. Although the negativity of the region has been chronicled elsewhere [1,10,11] today's GLB college students are disclosing their sexuality to others like young people in other regions. Their actions not only express their comfort with their culture but also change the culture, making disclosure and an "out Southern life" more possible for future generations of GLB people [50].

they have with others – particularly family. Only a small minority of our students (approximately one in five) indicated that the closet had little relevance for them, that they were open about their sexuality to all. Not only were most students closeted from at least some (often most) of their friends and family, but they were also closeted, so to speak, from other gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. The closet may protect GLB students from the (perceived) negative reactions of others, but it also prevents them from making the kinds of connections that could help them (or the GLB community [47]). The closet represents isolation from everyone – gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual.

## Limitations

Using existing data from an extensive survey of the sexual attitudes and behavior of college students, this article examines sexual disclosure among GLB college students in the Deep South. Because the focus of the larger project was not disclosure, we did not ask questions about motivations and the context of disclosure events. Additionally, if the project had been designed with the “sexuality as structure” approach in mind, we could have collected more information on the social environments of our GLB participants and how those contexts shaped their expectations and experiences [23]. Never the less, the existing data allowed us to assess factors that encourage or discourage, ease or impede sexual disclosure. And for the first time, we were able to get at the obverse of disclosure, non-disclosure. It is critical that in order to better understand sexuality, an important contributor to social identity, we need more information on how and in what ways sexual identities are shared and disclosed, particularly those for sexual minority group members.

Other characteristics of our sample reduced our abilities to generalize our results, including its methodology (the data were collected via a convenience method). Large, probability samples on this topic for this age group do not exist. As a result, our sample of GLB college students in the Deep South is appropriate for exploring sexual disclosure among college students – a time during which young adults are forming their adult identities. Identifying GLB young adults in representative surveys is potentially fraught with measurement error. Sexual identities, relationships, and behaviors among young adults are not always in agreement, and in turn are influenced by attitudes toward homosexuality, gay men, and lesbians. Furthermore, convenience samples are useful for testing theory (Lucas, et al.). Here we sought to extend Risman’s et al. [13,14] “gender as social structure” perspective to “sexuality as social structure.”

Another characteristic of our sample, its age (the data were collected in 2002), limited our conclusions. These data were collected at the very start of the new millennium. In the years since the data were collected attitudes toward homosexuality, gay men, and lesbians have liberalized. For example, in 2002 no state was recognizing same-sex marriage. Remarkably, in the summer of 2015, same-sex marriage has become the law of the land. Attitudes toward same-sex marriage changed dramatically over the past quarter of a century. And not just attitudes about same-sex marriage, attitudes toward the “morality of homosexuality” and other gay rights have also become more favorable over time, although many of the civil rights attitudes (allowing a lesbian/gay man to give a speech in a community, permitting a book written by a lesbian/gay man in a library, and supporting lesbian/gay men teachers) had majority support before the 1990s. And law may advance at a different, in some cases faster, rate than cultural change. Even with these improvements, though, resistance to gay rights and negative attitudes and behaviors remain, and the experiences of GLB youth and young adults vary by region and social position. For example,

sexual minority youth continue to report very high levels of bullying victimization, substantially higher than that reported by heterosexual youth. A nationwide survey of LGBTQ students conducted by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network in 2013 found that 71 percent had heard homophobic remarks frequently or often, 74% had been verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation, and 36% had been physically harassed because of their sexual orientation. Thus, while there have been larger cultural improvements since the data were collected, GLB youth continue to find themselves in unaccepting and limiting (and unfortunately at times, dangerous) social environments which would impact their sexual disclosure in the ways we illuminated by this analysis. These findings will allow future researchers to document change in experiences of sexual disclosure. Moreover, the cultural changes discussed do not resonate as much in the Deep South, areas and communities of which remain steadfastly opposed to and actively fighting them.

Because our sample was comprised of college students, the results may be biased towards greater disclosure than would be found in a sample of middle- or high school students or in a sample of young adults who do not attend college. College students, after all, are more likely to have contact with other GLB individuals, which may encourage and ease sexual disclosure. Moreover, the university where the research was conducted is located in a large city with active and highly visible gay communities. Having access and knowledge of the kind of resources and role models available because of the study’s location may also encourage and ease sexual disclosure, especially to friends and non-family, as we found. However, given the fact that so little sexual disclosure was reported by our participants, we can only surmise that the suppressing effects of being raised in the Deep South (as was the case for many of the students) trump the encouraging effects of living in a relatively gay-friendly city.

Finally, the cross-sectional characteristic of the sample limits our abilities to test and infer causal relationships. As with other research, our data rely on self-reports and are thus subject to memory’s inaccuracies. Future longitudinal research will be better able to address the goal of causality.

In combination, these limitations may restrict our conclusions, but the positives outweigh the negatives. That is, these data remain the best available to address sexual disclosure among young GLB adults in the American Deep South at the dawn of the twenty-first century and test the value of the “sexuality as structure” approach. We hope future research will build on our findings and provide the ability for comparisons and theorizing about any changes over time.

## Conclusion

We must recognize the importance of post-closet theory; it is essential to gay history, scholarship, and policy work. Yet, if we do not acknowledge any internal biases and endeavour to include other realities, mainstream gay culture will replicate the prejudices and discrimination found in heteronormative society, marginalization among the marginalized [9]. Post-closet theory often minimizes variations of age, race, gender, religion, or geography, all factors that we have found to shape disclosure. Future theoretical work must incorporate these diverse, intersectional experiences [31]. After all, identifying as gay or lesbian does not exist on its own; it is one component of an identity in relation to many others. Ignoring this intersectionality privileges some identities, such as sex as male and race as white.

Thus, we argue that a “sexuality as structure” approach [13,14]

better explains the GLB college students' sexual disclosure in the Deep South than post-closet theory.<sup>8</sup> The results discussed above illustrate how various individual-level characteristics and identities influence the disclosure of a sexual identity of gay, lesbian, or bisexual. We also see how the institution of the closet is created and maintained through these individual characteristics, identities, and interactions. We have identified key individual characteristics/identities that have particular importance for these disclosure interactions. The contemporary sexuality structure privileges men and White Americans, easing their disclosure, while it constrains women and people of color, impeding their disclosure. Yet, social context can modify these constraints and privileges. Age, religion, and geography interact with sex and race/ethnicity to dissuade or persuade disclosure. Given these patterns, it becomes clear that, like gender [13] sexuality as a structure is influenced by and has consequences for other facets of society.

We might be tempted to see disclosure as an individual choice, but the "sexuality as structure" approach makes clear the social forces and contexts that shape disclosure [13,14]. We might also be tempted to see sexuality as an accumulation of social actors. But the structure of sexuality is emergent – it is more than the sum of its parts. The structure of sexuality is not reducible to people and locations. In addition, the structure of sexuality is not unchangeable destiny. Not only do GLB people interact with, and thus influence, this structure, but they can also resist and challenge it. They retain their agency within the structure. Their sexual disclosure simultaneously affirms and contests the existing structure, both supporting and challenging the status quo and heteronormativity [13] and by their disclosure actions, GLB people in turn shape the structure of sexuality [13].

The "sexuality as structure" approach not only provides a framework for understanding sexual disclosure, but it also helps direct our gaze for social change. In order to increase acceptance and visibility of GLB people, activists should direct their attention towards the kinds of social contexts and forces described above. For example, to take into account family influences – which are very important for the health of GLB young adults [45], activists may want to collaborate with groups like PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), or to take into account religious influences, activists may want to seek partnerships with churches, synagogues, and mosques. At the least, college campuses should assess their climates for GLBTQ students [22].

We view this project as a first step in understanding the Southern closet. Future research on this topic would benefit from a qualitative approach, one that would allow us to get at more of the moving parts of the on-going disclosure process – a process that may have a beginning, but often has no end [10,46]. That way Southern GLB college students will be able to express in their own words their motivations and experiences. In the end, what we have presented here is a statistical snapshot of sexual disclosure among GLB college students in the Deep South at the start of the twenty-first century. It is our hope that this research will encourage and influence future projects that take into account the diversity of the GLBTQ community. But more importantly, we hope that this research will encourage more gay, lesbian, or bisexual students to express themselves freely in a culture that both supports and protects them.

<sup>8</sup> We do not mean to suggest that all (or even most) post-closet scholarship is lacking. Instead, we contend that claims of the "demise of the closet" are premature and limited. Improvements in heterosexuals' attitudes toward GLB people (identifying reference) and reformation of gay rights organizations [2] suggest that American culture has moved along a "post-closet" or "post-gay" continuum, where human similarities are emphasized over differences.

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