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Eden B. King, Clare Reilly and Michelle Hebl

*Group Organization Management* 2008; 33; 566 originally published online  
Jul 8, 2008;

DOI: 10.1177/1059601108321834

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# The Best of Times, the Worst of Times

## Exploring Dual Perspectives of “Coming Out” in the Workplace

Eden B. King

Clare Reilly

Michelle Hebl

*Rice University*

The present article explores the complexities of sexual orientation disclosure in the workplace and attempts to identify factors that may facilitate positive or exacerbate negative disclosure experiences from the perspectives of gay and lesbian employees (Study 1) and heterosexual coworkers (Study 2). Content analyses of narrative descriptions of “coming out” experiences suggest that the supportiveness of the climate of an organization may be more critical than timing or method of disclosure for gay and lesbian individuals. Reports from heterosexual individuals, however, suggest that timing of disclosure is meaningful over and above their own attitudes toward homosexuality and the organization’s climate. These results indicate that both situational and contextual characteristics influence disclosure encounters and that disclosers’ and recipients’ experiences may differ in the extent to which they are influenced by each of these factors.

**Keywords:** *sexual orientation; disclosure; homosexuality; stigma*

During the interview process of my current job, I gave subtle hints about “my partner” to see what kind of reaction I would get. The reactions were very good, as in no running from the room screaming.

Gay participant in Study 1

[My female coworker] explained that she was in a long-term relationship with a woman. She and I were becoming friends, and she wanted me to know. I had already figured it out, but I was honored that she wanted me to know.

Heterosexual participant in Study 2

Homosexuality is one of the many “blemishes of individual character” included in definitions of social stigma (Goffman, 1963). As is true of other stigmatized group members, gay and lesbian individuals often face discrimination and prejudice (for a review, see Creed, 2006). In the case of homosexuality, the threat of discrimination is further complicated by the fact that the stigma itself is invisible; one’s sexual preference is not immediately apparent to others. In Goffman’s (1963) terminology, homosexual individuals possess a stigma that is concealable and therefore only potentially “discreditable.” As a result, gay men and lesbians face a lifetime of decisions concerning whether or not to disclose the nature of their sexual orientation to others who do not already know their sexual orientation (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005; Ragins, 2008). To disclose that one is a member of this stigmatized group is to announce an association with a group that has been historically devalued and even persecuted by society at large (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). This disclosure can change one’s status from “discreditable” to “discredited” among stigmatizers (Goffman, 1963). Despite this likely status change, researchers have associated disclosure of one’s sexual identity with psychological well-being (Cain, 1991). Disclosure is thought to alleviate the psychological strain associated with hiding parts of the self (Goffman, 1963). This is consistent with self-verification theory, which suggests that being open about one’s sexual orientation can fulfill a basic need to confirm and affirm one’s identity (Swann & Read, 1981). So disclosure can allow individuals to form an authentic and stable sense of self (Ragins, 2004), foster the emergence of a positive homosexual identity (Wells & Kline, 1987), and reduce the psychological costs of cognitive dissonance and burden of identity management (e.g., Cain, 1991).

Despite an awareness of the importance of this issue and an increased interest in understanding the disclosure dilemma faced by gay men and lesbians, there remains a relatively small body of research in this area. Although revealing most personal information about oneself to others can be a difficult task, “coming out” is a complex dilemma. As the opening quotations suggest, one particularly difficult context for managing information about one’s sexuality is the workplace (Button, 2001; Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007). Stigma in the context of work can lead to discrimination, stereotyping, social isolation, stifled advancement and opportunities, and

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**Authors’ Note:** We are grateful to Kristin Griffith and Monica Vela for their assistance in data collection, to the reviewers for their helpful comments, and to all of the participants who shared their experiences with us.

even job loss (Clair et al., 2005). Still, research suggests there are many benefits of coming out at work. For example, disclosure to coworkers is one of the final milestones cited in many models of healthy gay identity development because it can precede the emergence of a positive homosexual identity (Wells & Kline, 1987). Thus, neither the question of whether nor the questions of when and how to “come out” are easily answered. The present study investigates the complexities of coming out in the workplace and attempts to examine various factors that facilitate positive experiences, such as working in a supportive climate, or exacerbate negative experiences, such as coming out at an inopportune period of relationship development, for gay and lesbian employees as well as for their heterosexual coworkers.

The current investigation is important for several reasons. First, there is only a very small body of research that focuses on the experiences of gay and lesbian individuals. In general, homosexuality has only recently been viewed as a healthy variation of sexual development and expression and still is not viewed this way by all (Cain, 1991). In the world of psychiatry and clinical psychology, homosexuality was considered pathological as late as 1974, when it was finally removed from the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Even this removal is considered by many to have been more of a conceptual revolution rather than one in practice, as many mental health professionals continued to hold negative beliefs about homosexuality (Wickberg, 2000). Although discrimination and prejudice against homosexuality remain in society, researchers have begun addressing important issues relevant to homosexuality, such as secrecy and disclosure.

Much of the existing research has cited the positive outcomes associated with coming out of the closet. The term *in the closet* refers to those people who are gay but have not yet disclosed that information to others. A person can be “out of the closet” in one setting but very much “in the closet” in another, typically depending on an individual’s assessment of the risks and benefits of disclosure in a given context (Clair et al., 2005). The majority of the research promotes the conceptual link between coming out and healthy homosexual identity development (Berger, 1983; Cain, 1991; Cass, 1979), implicitly and sometimes explicitly advocating disclosure as central to healthy identity development. The disclosure of a gay or lesbian identity is described as “paramount in affecting positive identity development” (Wells & Kline, 1987). This contention, in turn, has created an association between covert homosexuality and pathology (Cain, 1991). This association is thought to be both psychological and political. Psychologically, keeping one’s sexual orientation concealed brings up such issues as denial, self-directed homophobia, the hindering of

positive identity development, and the anxiety associated with feeling like a fraud (Clair et al., 2005; Shallenberger, 1994; Wickberg, 2000). Politically, concerns about covert homosexuality stem from the notion that disclosure is a form of political agency; coming out is a powerful means of effecting social change (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Creed & Scully, 2000). From this perspective, remaining closeted, in a sense, perpetuates the marginalization of sexual minorities. Although research tends to emphasize that coming out is the "best" option, it is important to keep in mind that the risks associated with disclosure are very real. Thus, the current study contributes to a growing body of research on the complex factors involved in the disclosure of a gay or lesbian sexual identity by considering the factors that can facilitate positive experiences of "coming out."

A second reason the present investigation is vital is its focus on disclosure in the workplace. Research concerning discrimination in the workplace is growing (e.g., Foley, Hang-yue, & Wong, 2005; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). Organizations are beginning to recognize that the increase of diversity in the workforce necessitates greater attention to policies and procedures regarding the treatment and experiences of diverse employees (see Button, 2001; Roberson, 2006). Such attention is warranted not only in the interest of social justice but also in the interest of organizational outcomes. Unjust procedures and inequitable or unsupportive organizational contexts can have negative consequences for the organization, including decreased employee satisfaction and increased job stress and turnover (Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). Some estimate that sexual minorities constitute between 4% and 17% of the U.S. workforce (Gonsorick & Weinrich, 1991). Given these statistics and the negative attitudes often held toward gay men and lesbians (Haddock, Zanna, & Esses, 1993; Herek, 2000; Kite & Whitley, 1996; Waldo, 1999), it is particularly important for organizations and researchers to give substantial attention to gay and lesbian employees and their experiences at work (Waldo, 1999). The issues faced by gay and lesbian workers are more far reaching than many heterosexual individuals recognize. Dealing with choices, such as whether to bring a partner to an office picnic, monitoring each and every word, and changing pronouns when talking about weekend plans, may have negative consequences that could be either alleviated or intensified by disclosure depending on how the disclosure is received. Investigating the disclosure dilemma, and in particular considering not only whether an individual should come out but also how and when, will bring further insight into this complex issue.

A third contribution of the present study is that it examines the process of coming out in the workplace from two perspectives. In the first study, we take

the viewpoint of the target of stigmatization with narrative data from gay men and lesbians who have actually had an experience of coming out in the workplace. From these real-life experiences, we can learn a great deal about what makes disclosure experiences positive for the gay or lesbian individual. Though the blanket conclusion that disclosure is the “best” choice fails to take into account the complex nature of the disclosure experience, it has been shown that more openly gay and lesbian workers express greater affective commitment to their organization, are more likely to be integrated into the workgroup, have higher job satisfaction, have less job anxiety, and may be less likely to leave a company than closeted workers (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Day & Schoenrade, 1997; Griffith & Hebl, 2002). In other words, although there is a potentially unfair normative bias for disclosure in the interest of the collective, there is also empirical evidence to support its potential benefits for the individual discloser. Furthermore, individuals who feel free to disclose personal information in the workplace, such as the nature of their sexual orientation, are likely to have greater psychological commitment to an organization (Tsui, Egan, & O’Reilly, 1992). From an organizational perspective, these findings imply that employers could benefit from attention to understanding the ways they can help promote the kind of environment in which employees will be more likely to come out.

In the second study, we also explore the perspectives of heterosexual employees who have been recipients of their coworkers’ sexual identity disclosures. Some researchers have noted the importance of understanding the ways in which increased workplace diversity affects those in the majority (Tsui et al., 1992). Others have theorized about the “coming out” experience of heterosexual individuals; that is, just as homosexual individuals need time to overcome their internalized homophobia, so too might heterosexual individuals because everyone is raised in the context of institutionalized heterosexism (Creed & Scully, 2000).

In summary, the present study focuses on disclosure of sexual orientation in the workplace, with its primary goal being an exploration of factors that may lead to positive or negative coming out experiences for both gay and lesbian employees and their heterosexual coworkers. Experiences are considered either positive or negative based on the subjective descriptions provided by the participants in the study. We begin by briefly describing previous research on self-disclosure and then narrow our focus to the disclosure of sexual orientation in the workplace. As such, we build a conceptual foundation for investigating the factors that compose the best and worst coming out experiences.

## Self-Disclosure of Invisible Stigma

In an early review of research on self-disclosure, Cozby (1973) defined self-disclosure as "intentional verbal disclosure of self-referent material to others." In a more recent meta-analysis, Collins and Miller (1994) defined self-disclosure as "the act of revealing personal information about oneself to another" (p. 457). Studies have revealed its importance in friendship formation, relationships, counseling, and shorter-term interactions. Moreover, self-disclosure has been linked with intimacy and liking (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974; Ludwig, Franco, & Malloy, 1986). Consequently, self-disclosure is an essential ingredient in social relations.

Self-disclosure of a stigma is, in some cases, an optimal strategy for enhancing others' impressions and reducing others' avoidance of a stigmatized individual. For instance, studies focusing on the self-disclosure of one's physical disability have revealed that acknowledging the stigma leads to more favorable impressions than not acknowledging the stigma (Belgrave & Mills, 1981; Hastorf, Wildfogel, & Cassman, 1979; Mills, Belgrave, & Boyer, 1984). However, disclosure of a stigmatizing condition is not always positively received (i.e., disclosure does not always lead to more positive impressions of the self-disclosing stigmatized individual), depending on several factors. First, too much intimacy may be threatening and costly and result in increased reactance and avoidance (see Rubin, 1975). Second, if the disclosed stigma is invisible, recipients may be taken aback at learning this new information. In this case, recipients' personal views regarding a particular stigma (e.g., beliefs about homosexuality) may affect the way this information is received. Third, the appropriateness of the self-disclosure (Caltabiano & Smithson, 1983) and norms regarding self-disclosure (e.g., it is more acceptable for women to disclose information than men; Miell, Duck, & Lagaipa, 1979; Petty & Mirels, 1981) may also affect the reception of the disclosure. Fourth, the beliefs held by the recipient about a given stigma are likely highly related to their reaction to stigma disclosure, such that individuals with more positive attitudes have more positive reactions and vice versa (Herek, 1996). In fact, many variables affect the impact of a disclosure, including the intent of disclosure, the expected outcomes, and the situation in which one discloses (Herek, 1996; Shallenberger, 1994). For the purpose of this study, we consider two characteristics of disclosure and one characteristic of the context in which the disclosure occurs that we believe could be particularly influential: timing of disclosure, method of disclosure, and climate in which disclosure occurs.

## Timing of Disclosure

Timing of disclosure refers to the fact that individuals may disclose their stigma immediately, early in a relationship, or after the passage of some time. Research studies have shown that the time at which an individual discloses personal information during an interaction greatly affects the impressions others form of the discloser (R. L. Archer & Burleson, 1980; Hebl & Skorinko, 2005; Wortman, Adelman, Herman, & Greenberg, 1976). Jones and Gordon (1972) conducted one of the earliest examinations of the effects of timing on reactions to self-disclosure from the perspective of attribution theory. Attribution theory suggests that making attributions for negative outcomes to external forces (rather than forces that are internal or controllable) reduces negative perceptions of the actor. Drawing from this, Jones and Gordon examined the impressions formed of targets who were either responsible or not responsible for good or bad fortune in their lives and who disclosed this either early or late in the conversation. The researchers found that individuals with good fortune (going to Europe) were liked more when they delayed in revealing. When they had bad fortune (having to leave a school) and were responsible (cheating), it was best for them to reveal this immediately, whereas if they were not responsible (parent's divorce), it was best for them to delay. In this case, the way in which the private information was perceived, in terms of both good or bad and personal responsibility, affected the way in which it was received. In a more recent study of disclosure timing, Hebl and Skorinko (2005) found that disabled individuals who acknowledged their disability early in an interview were evaluated more positively than were those who waited to acknowledge. Because all other elements of the disclosure were held constant, Hebl and Skorinko's study shows the importance of the manner in which (i.e., the timing) an individual reveals his or her condition. Jones and Gordon's (1972) findings indirectly imply that the perceived controllability of the stigma that is being disclosed might possibly affect how differentially timed disclosures are received most positively. In their study, individuals disclosing negative characteristics that were perceived to be in their control were evaluated more favorably when they disclosed sooner rather than later.

Many of those members of society who have a negative view of homosexuality also view it as a matter of choice rather than as an inherent and stable trait. In the rhetoric of stigma theory, homosexuality is often seen by stigmatizers as a controllable stigma (i.e., responsibility is placed on the homosexual individual). In addition, because a gay or lesbian identity can be perceived to be a characterological flaw (Goffman, 1963), it evokes for some people a deeper question of morality. This makes simple comparisons



to the “cheating” condition in Jones and Gordon’s study, or to the disabled individual in Hebl and Skorinko’s study, problematic. Previous research has not directly tested the effect of timing of disclosure with respect to something as powerfully stigmatized as sexual orientation.

## Method of Disclosure

Less research has considered a second factor that may influence the positivity with which disclosure is received. Preliminary research (Creed & Scully, 2000) has suggested that one important factor is the method of disclosure. Although some gay and lesbian individuals disclose their sexual orientation directly, others may disclose this information indirectly (Croteau, 1996). For instance, Chrobot-Mason, Button, and DiClement (2002) noted the variability in methods of disclosure in their discussion of integration strategies of identity management:

Some reveal themselves in an indirect or unobtrusive fashion, such as making telling remarks, receiving an increased number of calls from same-sex friends, or by allowing coworkers to find evidence (e.g., a photograph with one’s partner). Others look for opportunities to tell coworkers whom they believe will be accepting. (p. 47)

Similarly, Clair and colleagues (2005) offered a typology of disclosure methods that include signaling (i.e., subtle, ambiguous communication of identity), normalizing (i.e., revealing identity and then making it seem commonplace), and differentiating (i.e., highlighting distinctions between equally valuable identity groups). Although there has been qualitative research on professionals’ motivations and experiences in coming out (Shallenberger, 1994) and on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) employees’ purposeful “deployment of identity” in workplace encounters (Creed & Scully, 2000), organizational research has still to offer systematic, quantitative investigation of the potential implications and consequences of using various methods of disclosure. We focus on directness as a dimension that may capture some of the variability considered in Clair and colleagues’ (2005) typology; signaling reflects an indirect disclosure, whereas differentiating reflects a very direct disclosure. In the current research, we consider whether individuals who directly express their orientation (e.g., “I’m gay”) garner different reactions from coworkers than do individuals who indirectly disclose (e.g., wear a rainbow sticker).

## Organizational Climate for Sexual Orientation Diversity

Previous research has supported the assertion that the context in which gay and lesbian individuals work is a critical predictor of their experiences. For example, Griffith and Hebl (2002) concluded that coworker support was integrally linked with whether or not GLBT individuals disclosed their sexual orientation at work. Similarly, Ragins and Cornwell (2001) found that whether or not an organization maintained supportive policies (e.g., nondiscrimination policy) was highly related to perceptions of GLBT discrimination. The current research extends previous studies by considering the role of organizational climate for sexual orientation diversity. Climate can be defined as shared perceptions of organizational norms, policies, and practices (e.g., Joyce & Slocum, 1984). In the case of climate for sexual orientation diversity, this broader construct captures the extent to which the larger organizational environment or the more proximate work context is supportive of GLBT issues (see Wilson, 2000). The informal norms and formal practices of an organization are likely to influence disclosure experiences. For example, if a GLBT employee reveals his or her sexual orientation in the context of a heterosexist or homophobic climate, responses will more likely be negative, in accordance with the climate. However, if a GLBT employee reveals his or her sexual orientation in a GLBT-supportive environment, responses should be more positive. In other words, the climate of the organization should influence what most members believe to be the appropriate, normative reactions to sexual orientation disclosure in that particular context. Thus, we examine the influence of organizational climate for GLBT individuals as well as timing and method of disclosure as factors that influence the disclosure experience.

### Study 1: Gay and Lesbian Perspective

#### Disclosure of Sexual Orientation in the Workplace

According to Clair and colleagues (2005), people's motivations to reveal a concealable stigmatized identity can be grouped in four categories. First, individuals are motivated to maintain a coherent and authentic sense of self. Being open about one's sexual identity is likely easier (Creed & Scully, 2000), more fulfilling, and more supportive of self-esteem maintenance than having to conceal one's identity. Second, an individual may disclose a stigmatized identity to build or maintain relationships. Honesty and openness

are considered foundational to relationship formation, and gay and lesbian individuals may disclose their identity to reciprocate disclosures or to gain social support (Clair et al., 2005). Third, an individual may reveal a concealable identity to seek accommodations for that identity. In the case of gay and lesbian employees, for example, it may be necessary to disclose one's sexual orientation to receive domestic partner benefits. Fourth and finally, some individuals may choose to reveal a devalued identity to promote social change (Creed & Scully, 2000). By disclosing a gay or lesbian identity, some individuals may intend to educate their coworkers or to promote changes in organizational policies or practices.

Taken together, such motivations might lead gay and lesbian individuals to seek disclosure opportunities, despite the potential negative consequences of stigmatization. Furthermore, immediate disclosure (in contrast to later disclosure) may relieve the anxiety associated with maintaining inauthentic and incoherent "passing" strategies (i.e., techniques such as changing pronouns that conceal a gay or lesbian identity) and may allow gay men and lesbians to feel that they can be true to their identities (Cain, 1991). In addition, for individuals who have already come out in many areas of their lives, immediate disclosure could be consistent with their prior experiences or habits and may occur naturally and automatically. Although gay and lesbian individuals are likely wary of disclosing their identity and sensitive to cues that their disclosure might be negatively received (Creed & Scully, 2000), it is also likely that the sooner individuals can reveal their identity, the more quickly they might be able to be genuine, to build stronger relationships, to obtain available accommodations, and to advocate on behalf of their identity group. As such, we anticipate the experience of disclosure of sexual orientation will be more positive for the discloser when it occurs sooner than when it is revealed after a period of time.

In addition to the timing of disclosure, the method of disclosure is also likely to affect the positivity of disclosure experiences. Similar to Clair and colleagues (2005) categories, Croteau (1996) suggested that disclosure of sexual orientation lies on a continuum, from passing strategies, to covering strategies, to direct affirmation of a gay identity. Because research has not yet considered the potential effects of the method of disclosure, it is challenging to make specific predictions. On one hand, one might argue that subtle or indirect disclosures allow the recipient to "test the waters" and identify potential allies and enemies without fully revealing his or her stigmatized status. From this perspective, direct disclosure might be more problematic than indirect disclosure. However, on the other hand, implicit disclosures may create a situation in which the discloser is not entirely certain

that his or her identity has been communicated. An individual who wears a rainbow pin or mentions a gay pride event cannot be certain that his or her coworkers infer a gay or lesbian identity. Because of this ambiguity, we speculate that direct disclosure might allow for clearer, less confusing communication between interaction partners.

Despite modern increases in social acceptance of gay men and lesbians, discrimination is still highly pervasive in the workplace (e.g., Croteau, 1996). In addition to overt discrimination, subtle manifestations of prejudice are also problematic (Croteau, 1996). Openly gay individuals, and even those persons who are merely suspected of being gay, may notice that heterosexuals give them less respect, engage in less eye contact with them, and speak fewer words to them in dialogue (Croteau, 1996; Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002). Furthermore, the degree to which organizations are supportive of GLBT people may influence the positivity of disclosure experiences (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2002; Griffith & Hebl, 2002).

Because organizational climate serves the function of communicating organizational norms and social expectations, climate for GLBT issues will influence how non-GLBT employees tend to respond to their GLBT coworkers' disclosures. In other words, organizational climate will establish the appropriate, normative response to disclosure of diverse sexual identities. In the case of GLBT-supportive climates, responses should be positive, whereas unsupportive climates will actually advocate and perpetuate negative responses.

In fact, it may be that organizational climate will influence the positivity of disclosure experiences above and beyond the effects of the timing and method of disclosure. From the perspective of gay employees, the positivity of disclosure experiences may be more strongly related to supportiveness of their organization (e.g., Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Rostosky & Riggle, 2002) than the particular conditions of their disclosure. Although the proximal characteristics of disclosure (i.e., timing and method) are expected to contribute to the disclosure experience, the contextual factor of organizational climate could soften the blow of negative reactions or bolster the positivity of reactions to disclosure. For example, a positive reaction to disclosure may be mitigated by fears of retribution in the organization, and a negative reaction may be experienced less severely if the discloser feels confident in the support of others in the organization. That is, the effects of situational characteristics (timing and method) may be less important than the broader contextual characteristics (organizational climate for sexual orientation diversity) that influence ongoing, day-to-day interactions.

In summary, we explore situational factors that may facilitate a positive coming out experience or create a negative experience through narrative

accounts of gay and lesbian individuals' coming out experiences. As such, the current research seeks to contribute to a limited body of research and illuminate the complicated dynamics of the dilemma of coming out in the workplace.

## Method

*Participants.* As part of a larger study, data were collected through several methods. First, we recruited participants through the organizations advertised in gay and lesbian publications within a metropolitan area. We offered each organization \$5 per survey completed for as many as 20 surveys and included self-addressed, stamped envelopes for the return of materials. We received 173 surveys from approximately 20 organizations. In addition, research assistants recruited 206 (of a total of approximately 250 approached) gay or lesbian attendees of a GLBT business exposition to complete surveys at a booth and afterward enter a raffle to win a \$20 gift certificate to a local bookstore. Although this approach (see also Griffith & Hebl, 2002) to data collection introduces a potential source of sampling bias (i.e., participants are likely to be "out" at work or to work in organizations that have positive organizational climates), alternative means for identification of GLBT individuals (e.g., Internet groups) can result in very low response rates and introduce other forms of error (for a discussion, see Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). In all, 141 self-identified gay men ( $n = 82$ ) and lesbians ( $n = 59$ ) completed the lengthy narrative section of the questionnaire (37% of the overall sample). Participants ranged from 20 to 71 years of age ( $M = 40.51$ ,  $SD = 11.07$ ). Most participants were Caucasian (87.9%), with an additional 1.4% African American, 1.4% Asian American, 3.6% Hispanic, and 5.7% other ethnicities.

*Procedure.* Participants responded to a number of general questions regarding their workplaces (e.g., number of employees, industry) and their demographic characteristics. Then, half randomly received the following written prompt:

Many people decide to communicate their identity as a lesbian or as a gay man to others at their workplace. Such disclosures may range from being very positive to very negative experiences. We would like you to spend 25 minutes describing, in as much detail as possible, the *worst* experience you have ever had in coming out to someone or a group of people at a place where you have worked in the past. Please be as thorough as possible. Describe why you decided to come out, how you came out, and what happened afterwards (e.g., your own reactions and others reactions). Please provide us with as much detail as possible.

**Table 1**  
**Examples From Narratives of Coded Variables in Study 1**

|            | Rating                        | Examples  |
|------------|-------------------------------|---|
| Positivity | 1. <i>Extremely bad</i>       | “After coming out I was eventually asked to resign solely on the basis of my being a gay man.”  |
|            | 7. <i>Extremely good</i>      | “It was relatively easy for me to share with them the intimacies of my relationships and gay life style. They were genuinely interested in my happiness.” |
| Timing     | 1. <i>Immediately</i>         | “When I hired my first employee . . . I wanted her to know from the very beginning that I was a gay man.”   |
|            | 7. <i>After a time period</i> | “I came out to my colleagues and coworkers. . . . I had worked there for 4 years.”  |
| Directness | 1. <i>Indirect</i>            | “I make the information available by mentioning the name of my partner of 19 years, or by being loose in my use of pronouns.”                             |
|            | 7. <i>Direct</i>              | “She was the first person I ever said the words “I’m gay” to.”  |
| Climate    | 1. <i>Not accepting</i>       | “My profession is strongly homophobic.”   |
|            | 7. <i>Very accepting</i>      | “My current job is at the ____ Counseling Center, which primarily focuses its mental health services on the gay and lesbian community.”                   |

The other half of the participants received a writing prompt that differed by only one word; instead of asking participants to describe their “worst” disclosure experience, the remaining half described their “best” disclosure experience. The purpose of this manipulation was to ensure acquisition of a range of experiences (e.g., Heatherton & Nichols, 1994). Random assignment, rather than volitional choice of writing assignments, was used to avoid memory biases. In other words, we randomly assigned participants to a “best” or “worst” condition to maximize the variability of the experiences. If a participant had never disclosed his or her sexual orientation in the workplace ( $n = 23$ ), he or she received additional instructions that are not relevant to the current research.

**Table 2**  
**Zero-Order Correlations, Descriptive Statistics, and**  
**Reliabilities of Study 1 Variables**

|            | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Positivity | Timing | Directness | Climate |
|------------|----------|-----------|------------|--------|------------|---------|
| Positivity | 5.23     | 1.65      | .87        |        |            |         |
| Timing     | 3.56     | 2.09      | -.17*      | .86    |            |         |
| Directness | 5.64     | 1.71      | .16*       | .08    | .77        |         |
| Climate    | 4.35     | 1.56      | .67**      | -.33** | .11*       | .85     |

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

## Content Analyses

Following the general procedures for content analyses outlined by Neuendorf (2002), we began with an operationalization of the theoretically derived variables (see Table 1 for examples). At least three independent coders conducted content analyses of the narrative accounts. Using 7-point Likert-type scales, coders who were blind to the study's purpose rated each of the narratives on the degree to which the disclosure was *immediate* (1) or occurred after a passage of time (7), in addition to rating whether the disclosure was *implicit/indirect* (1) or *explicit/direct* (7). Additional exemplars were used to train coders on these constructs. Coders learned to evaluate timing of disclosure with regard to whether it was one of the first things discussed in an interpersonal relationship or was discussed only after years of relationship formation. Implicit exemplars provided to coders included people "just knowing" despite never having told anyone, and an explicit exemplar provided was the outward affirmation of identity by stating their sexual orientation. The coders also rated the overall climate in which the disclosure took place with a response scale ranging from *not at all accepting* (1) to *very accepting* (7) and reported the overall positivity of the disclosure experience from *extremely bad* (1) to *extremely good* (7). Through a series of collaborative practice trials, coders learned to distinguish the global climate of the organization (ranging from "homophobic atmosphere" to "gay-friendly environment" exemplars) from the proximate evaluation of the disclosure interaction itself. The intraclass correlation coefficients for each of these constructs across coders attained acceptable levels (timing = .86, method = .77, climate = .85, positivity = .87). Thus, averages were computed and used in statistical analysis.

## Results

Zero-order correlations and descriptive statistics among study variables are reported in Table 2. Timing of disclosure was negatively correlated with positivity of disclosure experience ( $r = -.17, p < .05$ ); that is, the longer employees waited to disclose, the less positive their experience. The directness of disclosure was positively correlated with positivity of disclosure ( $r = .16, p < .05$ ). The more direct the discloser was, the more positive he or she felt about the experience. In addition, the supportiveness of participants' organizational climates was also positively correlated with the positivity of disclosure ( $r = .67, p < .01$ ). Accepting climates were related to positive disclosure experiences.

The importance of timing on disclosure experiences suggested by these correlations is supported by a careful reading of the responses provided. For example, one male participant described the positive experience of an immediate disclosure in this way:

When I opened a new office I did not want gay issues to be an issue with my new employees. When I hired my first employee for this office I called her into my office. I explained that I intended to have a good working environment. I wanted openness and honesty. . . . I wanted her to know from the very beginning that I was a gay man. Her immediate response without even thinking was, "I like men, too. So?" We laughed. I was relieved and it was just not an issue. In fact, it helped break the ice and begin our bonding. It catapulted our relationship into a much higher level.

Another male participant described a negative, later disclosure experience:

I had been considering how to tell [Sarah] that I was gay. I very much dislike dishonesty and once I came out to myself I told some close friends very quickly and had the intention of generally being out. At this point, a number of [my coworkers] already knew and my sexual orientation was apparently the subject of some gossip. [Sarah] . . . being much older than the rest of the group, was not in on the gossip circuit and hadn't heard yet. . . . I chose that moment to out myself. . . . She put down her glassware, turned to me and said, "You're gay?" I said yes. She then told me she was shocked . . . was silent for several seconds slowly shaking her head. Then she asked me, "I feel like I don't even know you. Don't you know that's unbiblical?"

These passages, both negative and positive, are representative of the wide range of experiences reported by participants in this study. The issue of method of disclosure from the perspective of gay and lesbian individuals



also emerged in many of the narrative descriptions. Many responded that they never had to specifically, directly state “I’m gay” because it was indirectly or implicitly conveyed. For example, one participant wrote,

Everyone I work with knows I’m gay because I talk about my partner in the workplace and because I’m open to talking about gay issues and being gay. . . . I’ve never made the actual grand statement of “coming out.” It just isn’t an issue where I work.

Other participants recounted experiences in which they explicitly conveyed a gay or lesbian identity. For instance, one participant described coming out as a liberating experience:

A coworker and I decided to mark “significant other” on forms and to say to hell with the organization. . . . I perform quite well in my job, so I decided it was time for [my boss] to accept all of me!

Each of these narrative responses not only describes the particular elements of the disclosure experience but also provides an opportunity through which to examine the context in which the disclosure took place. The first quote in this section refers to a “good working environment,” the second and third to generally supportive coworkers, and the last to a negative organizational climate. As such, we can examine the pattern of relations among timing of disclosure, method of disclosure, organizational climate, and the positivity of the disclosure experience.

## Statistical Hypothesis Testing

Hierarchical regression analyses were utilized to test the relative predictive value of situational and contextual factors (see Table 3). Specifically, we test the independent effects of each construct using alternative regression analyses (i.e., “usefulness analyses”). According to Organ and Konovsky (1989), “This analytic strategy allows the testing of a ‘predictor’s (or set of predictors’) contribution to unique variance in a criterion beyond another predictor’s contribution” (p. 161). For the purpose of the current study, we tested the relative contribution of organizational climate and characteristics of the disclosure (i.e., timing and method) on the positivity of the disclosure experience. In the first step of a hierarchical regression equation, positivity of the disclosure experience was regressed on timing ( $\beta = -.18$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and method of disclosure ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $\Delta R^2 = .06$ ). In the second step, organizational climate was added to the model ( $\beta = .68$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $\Delta R^2 = .40$ ).

**Table 3**  
**Alternative Regression Analyses Predicting Positivity**  
**of Disclosure Experience in Study 1**

|                      | Model 1 |       | Model 2 |       | $\Delta R^2$ |
|----------------------|---------|-------|---------|-------|--------------|
|                      | $\beta$ | $R^2$ | $\beta$ | $R^2$ |              |
| Independent variable |         |       |         |       |              |
| Timing               | -.18*   | .06*  | .08     | .46** | .40**        |
| Directness           | .17*    |       | .05     |       |              |
| Climate              |         |       | .68**   |       |              |
| Independent variable |         |       |         |       |              |
| Climate              | .67**   | .45** | .68**   | .46** | .01          |
| Timing               |         |       | .05     |       |              |
| Directness           |         |       | .08     |       |              |

Note: Sample size for full model = 130.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

In the first step of a second equation, positivity of disclosure was regressed on organizational climate ( $\beta = .67$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $\Delta R^2 = .45$ ). Next, timing ( $\beta = .05$ ,  $p > .10$ ) and method of disclosure ( $\beta = .08$ ,  $p = .09$ ;  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ) were added to the equation. Based on these results, it appears that the characteristics of disclosure (i.e., timing and method) do not account for significant variance in the positivity of the disclosure experience over and above the effects of organizational climate.<sup>1</sup>

## Discussion

The results of Study 1 provide partial support for our hypotheses and suggest that, from the perspective of gay and lesbian employees, positivity of disclosure experiences is heavily influenced by the climate of the organization in which they disclose. Though disclosing earlier and more directly in a work relationship was related to the positivity of the disclosure experience when climate was not first controlled, it appears that context was more crucial for gay men and lesbians than were these situational factors. In other words, gay men and lesbians who came out in supportive workplaces described more positive experiences than did gay individuals who came out in less supportive workplaces, regardless of how or when they disclosed. It remains unclear whether these factors influence the perceptions of heterosexual coworkers. Thus, we now turn to an investigation of the reactions of heterosexual coworkers to others' disclosure of a homosexual orientation.

## Study 2: Heterosexual Perspective

Although the first study took the perspective of gay and lesbian employees, the second examines the perspective of the individuals to whom sexual orientation can be disclosed. Because every experience of disclosure involves the perspectives of both the discloser of information and the recipient of that information, this approach allows us to explore the implications of coming out more comprehensively than studies that take only a one-sided stance (for a review of this issue, see Hebl & Dovidio, 2005). Factors that comfort gay and lesbian individuals may actually lead to discomfort for heterosexual individuals. Thus, although it is important to examine the factors that influence gay and lesbian employees' disclosure experiences, it is also necessary to consider the experiences of the recipients of the disclosure.

The old aphorism notwithstanding, timing was not everything when it came to the disclosers' experiences, but the same may not be true for the recipients. From the perspective of the heterosexual coworker, homosexuality may be perceived as a negative and controllable condition (Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988). From this perspective, early disclosure might be more stressful to the recipient, who may feel more comfortable learning of coworkers' orientations after first getting to know them. It is important to note that this preference likely reflects an underlying form of heterosexism, in which discussing a gay identity is considered to be outside polite conversation among people who do not know each other well, whereas discussing a heterosexual (e.g., married) identity is not. We anticipate, however, that with time, greater familiarity, trust, and friendship, which allow for a wider range of topics to fall in the range of acceptable conversation (Caltabiano & Smithson, 1983), may develop. Although immediate disclosure might seem inappropriate and awkward, later disclosure may serve to strengthen relationships (e.g., Collins & Miller, 1994) from the perspective of heterosexual coworkers.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the method of disclosure of sexual orientation can be conceptualized as a continuum that ranges from indirect (e.g., wearing a rainbow pin) to direct (e.g., directly stating "I'm gay") (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2002; Herek, 2003). Because research has not previously considered directness as a factor in disclosure, it is challenging to make specific predictions about its potential effects on disclosure recipients' reactions. On one hand, heterosexual individuals may perceive a direct approach to be more honest and straightforward. On the other hand, they may follow a heterosexist perspective and prefer that the flow of social interaction not be interrupted by discussion of a stigmatized, nonheterosexual

identity (Caltabiano & Smithson, 1983). Previous research has established that one of the most inhibiting factors in interactions with stigmatized individuals is discomfort on the part of the stigmatizer. Even prejudiced individuals fear that they will embarrass themselves by expressing something that is not “politically correct” (Monin & Miller, 2001). Direct disclosures in social interactions require a response of some kind that will cause anxiety for the disclosure recipient. Because direct disclosure can cause an awkward social interaction (Hebl, Tickle, & Heatherton, 2000), we expect that heterosexual individuals will describe disclosure experiences as being more positive to the extent that the disclosure is indirect. Indirect disclosures do not necessarily require an immediate response on the part of the disclosure recipient and thus may relieve the associated social anxiety and discomfort.

Heterosexual individuals’ reactions will also be heavily influenced by their own beliefs regarding homosexuality (Haddock et al., 1993). Regardless of how and when gay men and lesbians disclose their sexual orientation, individuals who are homophobic or who believe homosexuality to be morally wrong will be likely to receive sexual orientation disclosures negatively. Conversely, individuals who support the rights of gay men and lesbians will be likely to receive disclosures positively.

The climate of the organization in which disclosure occurs will also affect the recipient of the disclosure. The climate of the organization will direct the norms of responding to new situations (Schneider, Salvaggio, & Subirats, 2002), including the disclosure of sexual orientation. To the extent that heterosexuals are influenced by an organizational culture that supports diverse sexual orientations, the disclosure experience is likely to be more positive. If the organization is conservative or heterosexist, the disclosure experience will be charged with greater negativity. Social norms evoke consistent responses, such that employees will tend to respond in a manner that is consistent with the norms of their organization.

However, although we expect that the positivity of the disclosure experience from the heterosexuals’ perspective will be related to their beliefs about homosexuality and their organization’s general climate for homosexuality, the timing and method of disclosure will also likely contribute to the positivity of the disclosure experience. Because they need not be vigilant to environmental cues regarding acceptance of diverse sexual identities, heterosexual employees may be more likely than their gay or lesbian counterparts to be affected by situational (vs. contextual) factors such as timing and method of disclosure. This rationale is consistent with the tenets of social identity theory, which suggests that individuals who are “distinctive” or different will be highly attuned to the features of the context in which they are embedded (Cota & Dion, 1986;

Goffman, 1963), whereas those who are not distinctive pay less attention to contextual cues. Environmental characteristics salient to the out-group are less salient for members of the majority group, whose reactions instead may rely on the immediate features of the situation. In other words, although we expected that organizational climate would be a powerful predictor of disclosure experience from the perspective of GLBT individuals, we do not expect this to be the case for the non-GLBT recipients of disclosure.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 154 employed self-identified heterosexual individuals (57 male and 92 female participants; 5 did not report their gender) from various public locations (i.e., airports, shopping malls, coffee shops) in the southwestern region of the United States. The age of participants ranged from 20 to 70 ( $M = 39.12$ ,  $SD = 12.45$ ). In this sample, 29.9% of participants were Caucasian, 16.9% African American, 9.1% Asian American, and 36.4% Hispanic.

### *Procedure*

*Part 1.* One of four experimenters (one man, three women) approached potential participants and asked if they would be willing to complete a 20-minute survey. The first section of the study was an experimental manipulation of the between-subjects independent variables embedded within a scenario. In particular, we constructed a  $2 \times 2$  between-subjects design in which we examined timing (immediate or delayed) and disclosure method (indirect and direct). The following is an example of the “immediate” and “direct” condition:

You work in an office and share your office space with your new coworker John. John attended a small liberal arts college and graduated in the top of his class. He has received good references from his past employers. It is apparent to you that John is a good worker, as he finished his first assignment on time, and shared his ideas at the first business meeting. John holds the same position that you do. You have not known John for a long time, as he only joined the company a week ago, but you have discovered that you share similar interests. While taking a lunch break and chatting with each other, John says the following to you: “There is something I need to tell you. I’m gay.”

Alternatively, if John came out after a passage of time, the scenario read, “You have known John for a long time, as he joined the company two years

ago, and you have discovered that you share similar interests.” In the “indirect” condition, the passage read,

Very recently you noticed that John had a picture on his desk of himself romantically embracing another man, who did not appear to be a family member. In addition, you have spotted pins which sport a rainbow flag, the gay pride symbol, on his desktop.

The second section of the questionnaire assessed the participants' attitudes toward the target of the scenario. Participants reported their agreement with 26 statements about the target (e.g., “John is an intelligent person.”) using a 7-point Likert-type response scale. These responses were averaged to create an Evaluation Composite ( $\alpha = .88$ ). The third section consisted of demographic questions and the Attitudes Toward Gay Men (ATG) scale (Herek, 1988). These 10 items (e.g., “Homosexuality is morally wrong.”) were averaged to create an ATG Composite ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

*Part 2.* In the last section of the questionnaire, participants were randomly assigned to write about either a positive or negative authentic experience with a coworker who had come out to them in the workplace. If a coworker had never disclosed his or her sexual orientation to the participant, he or she was given instructions to write about another topic not included in the current analyses. Of 154 participants overall, 47 wrote about a specific disclosure experience that could be quantified according to the coding scheme. The precise wording of the prompt paralleled the wording of the narrative prompt used in Study 1:

Many people decide to communicate their identity as a homosexual to their coworkers. Such disclosures may range from being very positive to very negative experiences. Please describe, in as much detail as possible, the *best* experience you have ever had with a coworker coming out to you. Describe why they decided to come out, how they came out, and what happened afterwards. Please be as thorough as possible.

*Content analyses.* The content analysis for this study paralleled that of Study 1 and followed the process outlined by Neuendorf (2002). Three independent coders rated each of the narratives on the degree to which the disclosure was immediate (1) or after a passage of time (7), in addition to rating whether the disclosure was indirect (1) or direct (7). The climate in which the disclosure took place was rated with a response scale ranging from not at all accepting (1) to very accepting (7). Finally, coders reported the overall positivity of the disclosure experience from extremely bad (1) to

extremely good (7). As in the first study, additional exemplars and training were provided to coders for clarity and consistency (see Table 4). The intra-class correlation coefficients for each of these constructs across coders were acceptable (timing = .98, method = .84, climate = .90, positivity = .93).

## Results

*Part 1: Experimental.* In the experimental section of this study, we tested the effects of time and method of disclosure on the evaluation of a fictitious gay target. Zero-order correlations among study variables are reported in Tables 5 and 6. Positivity of the evaluation was not significantly correlated with timing ( $r = .17, p = .09$ ) or method ( $r = -.06, p = .54$ ), but was significantly related to ATG ( $r = .50, p < .01$ ). Heterosexual individuals who had positive attitudes toward homosexuality rated the disclosure scenario more positively than did those with negative attitudes.

To test the question of relative importance of situational and contextual variables, alternative hierarchical regression analyses were utilized (see Table 7). In the first model, the ATG variable was entered in the first step of the equation ( $\beta = .50, p < .01; \Delta R^2 = .25, p < .01$ ). Timing ( $\beta = .20, p < .05$ ) and method ( $\beta = .01, ns$ ) of disclosure were entered in the second step of the equation ( $\Delta R^2 = .04, p < .05$ ). When controlling for ATG, timing of disclosure was significantly related to the positivity of the evaluation of a fictitious target. In a second model, timing ( $\beta = .15, p > .10$ ) and method ( $\beta = -.04, p > .10$ ) were entered in the first step of the equation ( $\Delta R^2 = .02$ ). The second step of the model included ATG ( $\beta = .52, p < .01; \Delta R^2 = .27$ ). Taken together, the results suggest that after controlling for individuals' attitudes toward homosexuality, disclosure experiences tended to be positive to the extent that they occurred after a period of time. Interactions between these variables did not explain incremental variance in the positivity of the experience.

*Part 2: Narratives.* Zero-order correlations reveal that timing ( $r = .18, p = .23$ ) and method ( $r = .26, p = .07$ ) were not significantly related to the positivity of disclosure experiences from the perspective of heterosexuals. Organizational climate ( $r = .41, p < .05$ ) and personal attitudes toward homosexuality ( $r = .48, p < .01$ ) were related to the positivity of disclosure. To the extent that heterosexual coworkers had positive attitudes toward homosexuality or worked in an organization with a supportive climate, the experience of sexual orientation disclosure was more positive.

**Table 4**  
**Examples From Narratives of Coded Variables in Study 2**

|            | Rating                        | Examples   |
|------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Positivity | 1. <i>Extremely bad</i>       | "He decided to let everyone know he was gay. After that he affected the whole restaurant because he was constantly talking about it and making passes at the other male employees. His productivity went down, and so did the restaurant's productivity. I finally fired him, and after that he was complaining to the main office that I discriminated against him for being gay."  |
|            | 7. <i>Extremely good</i>      | "I commuted with a man and two other ladies for 6 months. As we drove home one day the man mentioned the possibility of a social engagement he was to attend. As we discussed his plans he explained that he was attending the function with his boyfriend. He explained that being gay did not mean he was a fiend or only interested in one thing. It was about being true to himself and his beliefs. I admired him for his convictions. He was who he wanted to be!" |
| Timing     | 1. <i>Immediately</i>         | "From the minute she started working with us I could tell she was lesbian. We started conversing after a few days and I found that we both had a mutual friend. This made me more comfortable around her, and I started asking questions about the homosexual lifestyle. She explained a lot of things to me, and even though I still think it is wrong it gave me a better understanding of why gays and lesbians are the way they are."                                |
|            | 7. <i>After a time period</i> | "A coworker disclosed his sexual orientation to me at work after working there over a year."   |

*(continued)*



**Table 4 (continued)**

|            | Rating                   | Examples  |
|------------|--------------------------|---|
| Directness | 1. <i>Indirect</i>       | "My work partner was a man named John. I don't recall him actually saying 'I'm gay,' but it was obvious he was because he would always mention 'his friend' [a man]. And how they would argue about something a husband and wife would argue about."                |
|            | 7. <i>Direct</i>         | "A coworker seemed kind of down, she wasn't acting her normal self, and I asked if everything was okay. She said she was suffering from a broken heart. I said tell me who he is and I'll take care of him. She quickly replied that it was a 'she, and not a he.'" |
| Climate    | 1. <i>Not accepting</i>  | "People in our office gossip and belittle the person for being gay."  |
|            | 7. <i>Very accepting</i> | "We have get-togethers outside of the office. Everyone has a great time and its not a big deal about anyone's sexual orientation."  |

**Table 5**  
**Zero-Order Correlations, Descriptive Statistics, and**  
**Reliabilities of Study 2 Experimental Section Variables**

|            | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Positivity | Timing | Directness | ATG |
|------------|----------|-----------|------------|--------|------------|-----|
| Positivity | 5.14     | 0.81      | .88        |        |            |     |
| Timing     | 1.62     | 1.50      | .17        |        |            |     |
| Directness | 1.50     | 0.50      | -.06       | -.03   |            |     |
| ATG        | 3.91     | 1.45      | .50**      | -.11   | -.10       | .91 |

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

The influence of situational and contextual factors in disclosure experiences indicated by these correlations can be supported by the qualitative responses provided by participants. For example, several heterosexual participants wrote about positive, explicit disclosures that took place after a period of relationship development in environments that were not particularly supportive:

**Table 6**  
**Zero-Order Correlations, Descriptive Statistics, and Reliabilities of Study 2 Narrative Section Variables**

|            | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Positivity | Timing | Directness | ATG  | Climate |
|------------|----------|-----------|------------|--------|------------|------|---------|
| Positivity | 4.34     | 1.58      | .93        |        |            |      |         |
| Timing     | 3.98     | 1.75      | .18        | .98    |            |      |         |
| Directness | 5.71     | 2.02      | .26        | .29*   | .84        |      |         |
| ATG        | 3.91     | 1.45      | .48**      | -.08   | .04        | .91  |         |
| Climate    | 3.35     | 1.37      | .35*       | -.29   | .01        | .35* | .90     |

Note: ATG = Attitudes Toward Gay Men Scale.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.

**Table 7**  
**Alternative Regression Analyses Predicting Positivity of Disclosure Experience in Experimental Section of Study 2**

|                      | Model 1 |                       | Model 2 |                       | $\Delta R^2$ |
|----------------------|---------|-----------------------|---------|-----------------------|--------------|
|                      | $\beta$ | <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> | $\beta$ | <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> |              |
| Independent variable |         |                       |         |                       |              |
| Timing               | .15     | .02                   | .20*    | .29**                 | .22**        |
| Directness           | -.04    |                       | .01     |                       |              |
| ATG                  |         |                       | .52**   |                       |              |
| Independent variable |         |                       |         |                       |              |
| ATG                  | .50**   | .25**                 | .52**   | .29**                 | .04**        |
| Timing               |         |                       | .20*    |                       |              |
| Directness           |         |                       | .01     |                       |              |

Note: Sample size for full model = 114. ATG = Attitudes Toward Gay Men Scale.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.

A coworker disclosed his sexual orientation to me at work after working there over a year. This disclosure did not affect our working relationship and was more matter of fact or for reference only kind of information. . . . Much later (years) his orientation was made known to everyone. . . . Other workers were offended at me because I knew of his situation and did not “blow the whistle.”

After we had been friends for about a month, he told me he had something he would like to discuss with me. . . . He told me and all I did was smile,

hug, and kiss him, and tell him that it didn't matter to me. . . . Others had not reacted as positively. . . . It saddened me to hear all of the pain he had been through.

Another participant described a negative, explicit experience that occurred early in a working relationship:

A coworker asked to meet me in private and told me he was gay. . . . The situation has been awkward, uncomfortable, and has placed a strain on our relationship and our [organization's] image.

A more positive experience was described by a heterosexual individual who learned of her protégé's lesbian identity indirectly, after a period of time:

Over time our relationship evolved and we became closer friends. One day, she started to ask me very specific questions regarding relationships, personal beliefs, and attitudes about life. . . . I returned these questions and it was then when she hinted at her sexual orientation. . . . We are still good friends and she has grown into a beautiful, strong woman.

In addition to extracting these themes, alternative hierarchical regression analyses were utilized to directly test the relative predictive value of situational and contextual factors (see Table 8). In the first step of the first regression equation, positivity of disclosure was regressed on timing ( $\beta = .11, p > .05$ ) and method of disclosure ( $\beta = .24, p > .05$ ). Next, organizational climate ( $\beta = .43, p < .05$ ) and personal attitudes toward homosexuality ( $\beta = .44, p < .01$ ) were added to the model ( $\Delta R^2 = .41$ ). In the second regression equation, positivity of disclosure was first regressed on climate ( $\beta = .37, p < .05$ ) and attitudes ( $\beta = .32, p < .05; \Delta R^2 = .30$ ). Next, timing ( $\beta = .37, p < .01$ ) and method ( $\beta = .25, p > .05; \Delta R^2 = .19$ ) were added to the model. Taken together, the results indicate that even after controlling for organizational climate for GLBT issues and personal attitudes toward GLBT individuals, timing of disclosure was positively related to the positivity of sexual orientation disclosure from the perspective of heterosexual individuals.<sup>2</sup>

## Discussion

From the perspective of heterosexual employees, the timing of coworkers' disclosure of homosexuality appeared to be meaningful over and above the effects of personal attitudes toward homosexuality and organizational climate. More specifically, when controlling for attitudes in the experimental

**Table 8**  
**Alternative Regression Analyses Predicting Positivity of Disclosure Experience in Narrative Section of Study 2**

| Independent variable | Model 1 |       | Model 2 |       | $\Delta R^2$ |
|----------------------|---------|-------|---------|-------|--------------|
|                      | $\beta$ | $R^2$ | $\beta$ | $R^2$ |              |
| Timing               | .11     | .07   | .37*    | .49** | .42**        |
| Directness           | .24     |       | .25     |       |              |
| Climate              |         |       | .43*    |       |              |
| ATG                  |         |       | .44**   |       |              |
| Independent variable |         |       |         |       |              |
| Climate              | .37*    | .30** | .43**   | .49*  | .19*         |
| ATG                  | .32*    |       | .44**   |       |              |
| Timing               |         |       | .37*    |       |              |
| Directness           |         |       | .25     |       |              |

Note: Sample size for full model = 36. ATG = Attitudes Toward Gay Men Scale.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

study and both attitudes and climate in the narrative format, the positivity of disclosure was greater when gay and lesbian individuals waited longer to disclose their sexual orientation. The directness of the disclosure did not appear to affect the positivity of disclosure in either the experimental or the narrative sections. These results suggest that the timing of disclosure of sexual orientation is meaningful from the perspective of heterosexual coworkers who may prefer that gay men and lesbians wait some time before disclosing their sexual orientation. To gain a more complete understanding of the complex process of disclosure of sexual orientation in the workplace, we now compare the perspectives of homosexual and heterosexual individuals.

## General Discussion

Disclosure of sexual orientation is a complex experience for gay and lesbian individuals, particularly in the restrictive environment of the workplace (e.g., Griffith & Hebl, 2002). The current research explores factors that influence positive “coming out” experiences from the perspectives of gay and heterosexual employees. That is, we begin to examine elements of the situation and context that may influence disclosure experiences. We attempt to go beyond the question of whether or not an individual discloses a gay or lesbian identity by considering the questions of how, when, and in

what context such a disclosure takes place. The results of our study suggest that the climate of an organization is meaningfully associated with the positivity of disclosure experiences from the perspective of gay men and lesbians. This is also true for the heterosexual recipients of disclosures, but the timing of disclosure also matters. From the perspective of recipients, later disclosures were associated with more positive experiences than were disclosures earlier in the work relationship.

In their narrative accounts of "coming out" in the workplace, gay and lesbian individuals described a range of experiences. Some revealed their orientation in the interview process for a job, whereas others waited until years had passed. These revelations ranged from hint dropping to direct disclosures of sexual orientation. The climate of the organizations in which gay and lesbian participants worked also ranged from hostile and discriminatory to open and accepting of homosexuality. After first accounting for the supportiveness of the organizational climate in which the disclosure occurred, the effects of method and timing of the disclosure did not account for any additional variance. The current research suggests that, from the perspective of gay and lesbian employees, the supportiveness of the organizational climate may be a more useful predictor of the positivity of the disclosure experience than timing and method. This is consistent with Ragins and Cornwell's (2001) finding that perceptions of positive work contexts were related to positive outcomes for gay and lesbian workers and with the notion that minority group members may be vigilant to environmental cues regarding their identity group (e.g., Cota & Dion, 1986; Goffman, 1963). This finding may also reflect identity-management strategies that facilitate positive disclosure experiences; gay and lesbian individuals may carefully monitor the context before disclosing (e.g., Creed & Scully, 2000). These interpretations are supported by a body of research that emphasizes the importance of organizational climate in determining the nature of employees' experiences in the workplace (e.g., Detert, Schroeder, & Mauriel, 2000; Schneider et al., 2002) and underscore the need for organizations to communicate support for gay and lesbian individuals in the norms, policies, and procedures they set.

From the perspective of heterosexual employees, the effects of timing of disclosure were significant over and above the effects of organizational climate and personal attitudes toward homosexuality. Although the positivity of gay men and lesbians' disclosure experiences was influenced by the climate in which the disclosure took place, the experiences of heterosexual individuals were influenced by both climate and timing of disclosure. The degree to which the organizational environment was accepting of diverse

sexual orientations likely influenced disclosure experiences in differing ways for recipients and disclosers. Although climate may influence the experiences of gay and lesbian individuals by signaling whether or not disclosure will be positively received, climate may shape the responses of heterosexual individuals by communicating normative organizational behaviors. Even after controlling for the enormous influence of attitudes toward homosexuality and organizational climate, timing of disclosure was positively related to ratings of a fictitious gay coworker (in the experimental section) and positivity of the disclosure experience (in the narrative section). Thus, according to both narrative codings and experimental results, a situational factor that can be controlled by the discloser of information (i.e., the time at which sexual orientation is disclosed) is related to the positivity of the disclosure experience for the recipient. However, this conclusion is somewhat inconsistent with the findings of Study 1. Timing of disclosure may be particularly influential from the perspective of its recipients because immediate disclosure might feel inappropriate and uncomfortable, whereas later disclosure could arise in the context of established relationships, with greater comfort, trust, and friendship between the interactants (e.g., Collins & Miller, 1994).

Taken together, the results suggest that positive disclosure experiences for gay and heterosexual employees may be influenced by somewhat different factors, revealing a true struggle of identity management: There may not be a straightforward solution to the disclosure dilemma. As such, the results suggest that researchers, organizations, and GLBT employees must consider sexual orientation disclosure both within the context of the organizational climate for GLBT issues and in the context of the particular set of attitudes and experiences that coworkers of differing sexual orientations bring to their interactions.

## **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Additional research is needed to replicate and extend the results of the current exploratory study. Because our sample for Study 1 was limited to gay and lesbian individuals who are open enough in their sexuality to attend conferences or belong to organizations for individuals of diverse sexual orientations, a broader sampling method would be beneficial for future research. Combining the sample from these two different sources could also introduce systematic, yet unaccounted for, variance if participants meaningfully differ as a function of how they were recruited. Unfortunately, the

difficulty obtaining gay and lesbian study participants from a broadly generalizable sample is a common challenge in GLBT research (for a discussion, see Creed & Scully, 2000).

The current research is also limited by the intentional manipulation of “best” and “worst” disclosure experiences; by randomly dividing the participants in this manner, we may have inadvertently created forced variance in our measure of positivity of the experience. However, as noted, follow-up analyses controlling for condition lead to identical conclusions, minimizing the problematic nature of this issue.

Another limitation of the current research is its primary reliance on single-source, retrospective descriptions of organizational climate and the positivity of disclosure experiences. A strong association between these variables brings into question the direction of causality or even the possibility of conflation. Our discussion presumes that climate shapes disclosure experiences, but the opposite might also be true. Although our discussion and presentation of the qualitative responses as well as the quantitative coding of these narratives indicated that these two variables appeared as distinguishable constructs (e.g., positive experiences occurred in negative climates and vice versa), the possibility of conflation compels replication in future research. That is, despite a high correlation between positivity of climate and disclosure in the first study, the constructs were reliably coded as conceptually distinct. Furthermore, we tested the consistency of our findings by conducting exploratory analyses in which the sample was split into participants with positive and negative climates at the median climate value. Supporting our coding scheme, for both high and low levels of climate, climate was significantly related to positivity of disclosure before and after controlling for timing and method of disclosure. Thus, content analyses of narrative statements provide a preliminary but inconclusive description of disclosure experiences (e.g., Shallenberger, 1994; Ward & Winstanley, 2004). More in-depth research is needed to fully disentangle the causal relationships among distal (i.e., organizational climate) and proximal (i.e., method and timing) characteristics and their relationship with positive disclosure experiences for recipients and disclosers.

In addition, more research that simultaneously considers both perspectives of the same disclosure experience is needed. In the current study, we asked one sample of gay men and lesbians, and then a separate sample of heterosexual workers, about their experiences. This approach is subject to many potential confounds, including variability across the samples in age and ethnicity. Future research that considers both perspectives of the

identical experience might help to find the middle ground, wherein the challenge of satisfying these two inconsistent, yet intertwined, perspectives can be overcome.

Particular attention should be paid to the inconsistency across the perspectives in the case of timing of disclosure. The conceptualization of "timing" utilized in the present study may in fact serve as a proxy for more meaningful psychological constructs; for example, the association between timing and the positivity of disclosure experiences from the perspective of heterosexual individuals may reflect trust or friendship. The intimacy of a relationship (Collins & Miller, 1994) may be a more direct indicator of positive recipient reactions than timing itself. Timing could also act as an indicator of the discloser's accumulated knowledge of the recipient; it may be that gay and lesbian individuals selectively choose the recipients of disclosure on the basis of their evaluations of interactions accrued over time (Berger, 1983). Both friendship and informed choices might explain the association between timing and positivity of disclosure; more research is needed to determine which mechanism best explains the current effects.

In addition, theoretical and empirical attention is needed to further examine the potential consequences of different methods of disclosure. Although the dimension of directness considered in the current research was not significantly related to the outcomes beyond organizational climate and personal attitudes, it may nonetheless affect disclosure experiences (see Clair et al., 2005). Future research might consider whether the method of disclosure communicates not only sexual identity but also other personal characteristics that could color the valence of the disclosure (e.g., political activism, family orientation). In the current study, we were unable to ascertain the particular motivations that led to disclosure or the motivations that were perceived by the recipient. More work is needed to untangle the factual disclosure from the symbolic accompaniments and to understand the impact of disclosure methods on the experience for both the discloser and the recipient.

## Conclusions

Goffman (1963) distinguished between individuals who possess an obvious stigma and those who possess a concealable stigma, referring to the former as "discredited" and to the latter as "discreditable." Gay and lesbian individuals are discreditable in that their stigma is not necessarily apparent to others but, if discovered, may potentially discredit them. The concealability



of homosexuality presents a dilemma of disclosure. The coming out process is a form of managing information (D. Archer, 1985) that involves more than simply choosing to announce that one is gay or choosing not to announce (Ragins, 2008). Rather, the decision of disclosure involves careful planning concerning to whom and in what environment one will let one's sexuality be known (Berger, 1983; Ragins, 2008). The disclosure dilemma, and the associated effects, may be intensified within the highly structured nature of the workplace. Because unwelcome disclosure of one's sexuality could have drastic consequences for gay men and lesbians in the workplace (Berger, 1983; Hebl et al., 2002), it is important for the factors that influence the positivity of outcomes to be examined.

Thus, the current study contributes to this emerging line of research by considering dual perspectives of coming out experiences. It highlights the need to explore not only whether one has disclosed one's stigma but also the conditions under which the disclosure occurred. The preliminary evidence from this study suggests that gay and lesbian employees have the most positive disclosure experiences when their organizations maintain a positive climate. In addition, the effects of these environmental characteristics on the overall positivity of the disclosure experience may supersede the influence of situational characteristics such as how and when disclosure occurs. Somewhat differently, the recipients of disclosure (i.e., heterosexual coworkers) tended to describe experiences that were most positive when disclosure occurred after a period of time. As the workforce continues to evolve, so must our research and practices; the current research illustrates that change may be needed for the successful management of diverse sexual identities in the workplace.

## Notes

1. To statistically account for potential effects of the condition to which participants were assigned, we also conducted regression analyses that controlled for condition. The results of these analyses led to conclusions that were identical to those described regarding the relative importance of climate and disclosure characteristics. Specifically, alternative hierarchical regression analyses in which condition was first entered as a covariate suggested that organizational climate was the primary determinant of disclosure positivity for gay and lesbian individuals.

2. As in Study 1, we conducted additional hierarchical regression analyses controlling for condition that led to the same conclusion: Timing was of additional importance for heterosexual recipients of disclosure over and above the effects of organizational climate and individual attitudes.

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**Eden B. King**, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at George Mason University. Her research focuses on the antecedents and consequences of stigmatization as well as strategies for their reduction.

**Clare Reilly**, MA, is completing law school at Stanford University.

**Michelle Hebl**, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of Psychology at Rice University. She examines manifestations of stigma as well as the ways that stigmatized individuals and organizations can increase targets' acceptance in social interactions, entry into organizations, and general interactional or organizational experiences.