

Slurs, Snubs, and Queer Jokes: Incidence and Impact of Heterosexist Harassment in Academia

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Abstract Previous research has suggested that overt hostility against sexual minorities is associated with decrements in their well-being. However, subtler forms of heterosexism and their potential effects have been overlooked, heterosexuals have not been asked how they fare in a heterosexist environment, and no research has examined whether women and men might respond differently to heterosexism. Data from 3,128 northwestern US university students (representing all sexual orientations) address these gaps. Approximately 40% reported experiences of heterosexist harassment (HH) in the past year, and those who encountered both ambient and personal HH reported worse psychological and academic well-being than those who encountered no HH.

Similar patterns of findings held for sexual minorities and heterosexuals, and for women and men.

Keywords Heterosexism · Harassment · Sexual minorities · College students · Academic outcomes

Introduction

Heterosexist acts range from anti-gay epithets to violence to murder. More common, however, are subtle slights and indignities, such as the treatment of same-sex sexuality as invisible. Individuals who deviate from traditional masculinity and femininity are particularly vulnerable to heterosexist victimization, so it is often interpreted as a punishment for violating gender-normative prescriptions (e.g., Kite and Whitley 1998; McCreary 1994). Put simply by Kitzinger (2001), “heterosexism...is one of the ways in which strict adherence to gender role stereotypes is enforced, and gender oppression maintained” (p. 277).

Past work on heterosexism has concentrated heavily on behaviors at the more extreme end of the spectrum (e.g., Berrill 1992; D’Augelli and Grossman 2001; Otis and Skinner 1996). We sought to expand this literature by investigating the nature and correlates of less extreme, non-physical heterosexist harassment in academia. This study makes novel contributions by examining both sex and sexual orientation as potential moderators of the impact of heterosexist harassment. We also undertook one of the first examinations to date of heterosexism experienced by not only lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals but also heterosexuals, arguing that one need not have a minority

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sexual orientation to be targeted with such abuse. We examined these questions using a large-scale survey of university students—heterosexual and nonheterosexual, female and male.

The Nature and Incidence of Heterosexism

Herek (1990, p. 316) defined heterosexism as “an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship or community.” He distinguished between *cultural heterosexism* (institutionalized favoritism) and *psychological heterosexism* (harassment against individuals). The latter construct encompasses a variety of behaviors, including verbal insult, property damage, theft, and physical and sexual assault against persons perceived as sexual minorities. Our focus here is on a subset of these behaviors, which we term *heterosexist harassment* (HH). HH refers to insensitive verbal and symbolic (but non-assaultive) behaviors that convey animosity toward non-heterosexuality. This conceptualization of HH encapsulates both *personal* experiences of harassment and discrimination (directly targeted acts, such as being called “dyke” to one’s face) as well as *ambient* experiences (actions that take place within the environment but are not directed at a specific target, such as the telling of anti-LGB jokes that can be heard by anyone within earshot). Consequently, the present study broadens existing conceptualizations of heterosexist victimization to include more generalized environmental actions which function to create a climate of negativity toward sexual minorities.

In addition to expanding the range of possible heterosexist behaviors, this study also extends the research by exploring how heterosexuals can be influenced by this harassment. Individuals can encounter HH regardless of their actual sexual orientation, in part because sexual identities are often invisible (Badgett 1996). In one study, 98% of a random sample of heterosexual college freshmen reported having heard occasional or frequent disparaging remarks about lesbians or gay men—a form of ambient HH (D’Augelli and Rose 1990). Furthermore, heterosexuals are not immune to being personally mistreated based on a presumption of sexual-minority status (personal HH). Heterosexism may be rooted in the enforcement of traditional gender roles, in that negative attitudes toward sexual minorities are often linked to perceptions that gay men and lesbians violate stereotypes of acceptable gender behavior (Herek 1986; Kite and Whitley 1998; Konik and Cortina *in press*). Consequently, heterosexual women and men who transgress gender norms may have their heterosexuality questioned as a means of reinforcing conventional masculinity and femininity (Kitzinger 2001). An assumption might be made that they are not heterosexual based solely on their perceived gender-role nonconformity; thus, they may be targeted with HH (Fineran 2002). In one study,

10% of heterosexual students reported being verbally insulted as a result of being *perceived* as a sexual minority (Norris 1992). For these reasons, we predicted that both sexual-minority and heterosexual students will report experiences of HH on campus (Hypothesis 1a).

Our next hypotheses pertain to the two subtypes of HH. We predicted that, among sexual minority students, those experiencing HH would be more likely to report personal HH than ambient HH (Hypothesis 1b). Individuals willing to identify themselves as non-heterosexual may be more likely to be hassled openly by insensitive others, as has been found in the workplace literature (Badgett 2003; Croteau and Lark 1995; Waldo 1999). However, the *converse* might be true for heterosexuals. Personalized hostility is not typically elicited by the heterosexuality of an individual in the way that it can be by someone’s non-heterosexuality, especially those who are “out” about their sexual orientation. Moreover, perpetrators might assume that a heterosexual audience is not opposed to hearing heterosexist remarks, and may be more likely to express ambient HH. Consequently, among heterosexuals who experience HH, we expected a higher percentage to report ambient HH than personal HH (Hypothesis 1c).

Effects of Heterosexist Harassment

Past research on heterosexist victimization has focused mostly on incidence and prevalence rates, with less attention to *effects* of such hostility on individuals. Minority stress theory asserts that socially marginalized groups, including sexual minorities, can experience mental and physical health problems resulting from negative social environments created by stigma, prejudice, and discrimination (e.g., Fischer and Shaw 1999; Gee 2002; Harrell et al. 2003; Kessler et al. 1999; Meyer 2003; Williams et al. 2003). For example, experiences of anti-gay discrimination were linked to higher scores on measures of psychological distress in a gay male community sample (Meyer 1995). Though there have been no prospective studies examining the consequences of heterosexist harassment, longitudinal research in the parallel domain of sexual harassment has found that these declines in well-being follow, not precede, victims’ harassment experiences (Glomb et al. 1997; Munson et al. 2000).

There is also empirical support for negative consequences associated with experiences of sexual-minority stress in the workplace, as Ragins and Cornwell (2001) found that LGB employees who reported more discrimination related to their sexual orientation also held more negative job and career attitudes. Another study showed that sexual minorities’ workplace encounters with heterosexism were linked with lower health and well-being (conceptualized as greater anxiety and depression, lower life satisfaction and physical

health) and greater occupational dysfunction (operationalized as greater organizational withdrawal, lower satisfaction with work, coworkers and supervisors; Waldo 1999).

While sexual-minority stress has been studied in community and workplace contexts, there has been scant research on this topic in college populations, comprised of younger people in a life stage where they are developing their adult beliefs and attitudes. One study asked LGB students to rate the offensiveness of written scenarios that represented “subtle heterosexism” (Burn et al. 2005). We located only one report that examined psychological correlates of heterosexism *experienced* by college students (Waldo et al. 1998), which focused on antecedents and consequences of victimization among self-identified sexual-minority students. The authors concluded that diminished self-esteem, greater psychological distress, and suicidality were associated with reports of greater victimization based on sexual-minority status. The study included many types of personal victimization (from verbal threats to sexual assault) but did not ask about ambient HH as we have conceived of it. The authors also did not address academic outcomes or other institutional considerations in their study, factors which may also be associated with well-being. Finally, they did not inquire into the experiences of heterosexual students.

Waldo et al. (1998) acknowledged that their study was limited by relying on a small snowball sample of sexual-minority students located through campus social organizations, thus it was likely biased toward students who are more “out” about their sexual orientation. These participants might also have been more politically active than non-participants (for example, choosing to respond in hopes that survey results would influence positive policy changes for sexual minorities). The sampling method might not have reached students who conceal or are unsure about their sexual identities, and it purposefully excluded heterosexual students. The present study builds on Waldo and colleagues’ work by examining associations between HH and well-being in a student sample that reflects a broader spectrum of sexual identities, ranging from completely lesbian or gay to completely heterosexual. We also examined associations among a variety of academic variables (academic respect, instructor relations, social acceptance, school avoidance)—in addition to mental health-related variables (depression, anxiety, problems from substance use)—and HH. To our knowledge, no heterosexism research to date has examined this range of psychological and organizational correlates in settings beyond the workplace.

Following the logic of minority stress theory, we expected to find poorer well-being among sexual-minority students who experience HH on their campus. More specifically, psychological and academic functioning should decline as sexual-minority students face additional types of HH.

Support for this argument comes from studies in the clinical psychology literature, documenting effects of multiple stressors, victimizations, and traumas (e.g., Banyard et al. 2001; Follette et al. 1996; Green et al. 2000). For example, in a study of 16,000 adults nationwide, Pimlott-Kubiak and Cortina (2003) documented more depression, substance use, and health impairment among people who had experienced multiple forms of lifetime interpersonal aggression (including verbal harassment), compared to non-victims and victims of single forms of abuse. Educational functioning was also compromised by double victimization (sexual harassment and assault) in graduate and undergraduate women at a large university (Cortina et al. 1998).

Little prior research has investigated how anti-gay hostility affects the well-being of heterosexuals. In addition to being directly targeted themselves due to gender atypicality or mistaken presumptions about their sexual orientation, heterosexuals who are sensitive to minority issues in general might also empathize with sexual-minority students who must struggle to succeed in a heterosexist environment and could become distressed at abuses directed at valued peers. Providing qualitative evidence, Norris (1992) reported that one heterosexual respondent who overheard frequent anti-gay language said, “I find this behavior very offensive, and in fact become depressed when it occurs” (p. 89). Moreover, research on the related construct of workplace sexual harassment has demonstrated that “bystander stress” and “ambient harassment” are related to job dissatisfaction, health impairment, and psychological distress among employees who are not direct targets of harassment (Glomb et al. 1997; Schneider 1996). Importantly, these negative correlates of ambient sexual harassment (of women) extended to both female and male bystanders (i.e., people who witnessed or overheard the sexual harassment but were not themselves targeted), as they reported more negative outcomes (Miner-Rubino and Cortina 2004; Richman-Hirsch and Glomb 2002). Likewise, Whites reported greater stress when they perceived higher levels of discrimination against Hispanics in their work unit (Gutierrez et al. 1994). Because they may experience bystander stress as a result of ambient HH (in addition to the potential for experiencing personal HH), we predicted that psychological and academic well-being would be lower also for heterosexuals when they reported multiple forms of HH.

In the current study, we examined both psychological and educational outcome variables. Depression, anxiety, and substance abuse have been commonly used as outcomes in research with both college students and workplace samples, and these variables have been related to college success (Brackney and Karabenick 1995; Svanum and Zody 2001). Students’ educational success depends also on the context of and attitude toward their education (Tinto 1993), including their sense of school and social “inclu-

sion” and “exclusion” (Benjamin et al. 2003; Harrist and Bradley 2002). We therefore focused on academic well-being in terms of students’ relationships with instructors, sense of being respected academically, sense of social acceptance, and frequency of school-avoidant behaviors. These educational constructs are reasonably comparable to those commonly used in workplace research, such as satisfaction with supervisors and coworkers, the sense of being recognized for one’s work, the sense of being ostracized, and work withdrawal behaviors (i.e., work avoidance). We expected that students who had experienced both ambient *and* personal HH would report lower psychological well-being (i.e., more depression, anxiety, and problems with substance use), and lower academic well-being (i.e., lowered sense of academic respect, poorer relations with instructors, less social acceptance, and more school avoidant behaviors) than those who experienced only one type of HH, and the latter group would have lower well-being across all domains than those who reported no HH at all (Hypothesis 2a).

However, given that sexual orientation is a facet of identity that typically has more salience for sexual minorities (Eliason 1996) we also predicted that experiences of heterosexism would have greater effects on sexual-minority students, compared to heterosexuals. In other words, sexual orientation should moderate the impact of HH, such that sexual minorities show worse consequences than heterosexuals (Hypothesis 2b).

Past research suggests that experiences of HH might also vary by sex. Kite and Whitley’s (1996) meta-analysis found that heterosexual *men* consistently exhibit more negative attitudes toward sexual minority persons and behavior than do heterosexual *women*. For example, although men reported hearing considerable harassment of lesbians and gay men on one campus, they did not think it was very serious and failed to empathize with the targets (D’Augelli and Rose 1990). Female students, faculty, and staff at another campus perceived a more negative climate for sexual minorities than did males in all groups (Brown et al. 2004). Given the general insensitivity shown by undergraduate men toward heterosexism, in contrast to women’s concern and empathy for targets of HH, we predicted that women would also directly experience HH more negatively than men. In other words, we also expected sex to moderate the impact of HH, with women showing worse outcomes than men (Hypothesis 2c).

In summary, we predicted that not only sexual-minority students but also heterosexual students would report HH (Hypothesis 1a), that sexual-minority students experiencing HH would report more personal HH than ambient HH (Hypothesis 1b), and that the heterosexual students who experienced any HH would report more ambient than personal HH (Hypothesis 1c).

We also hypothesized that students experiencing both ambient and personal HH would have worse psychological well-being (more anxiety, depression, and problems with substance use) and academic well-being (lower academic respect, instructor relations, and social acceptance; and more school avoidant behavior) than students who experienced only ambient HH, and that the latter would show lower well-being than students who experienced no HH (Hypothesis 2a). Finally, we predicted that these outcomes would be worse for sexual-minority students than heterosexuals (Hypothesis 2b) and worse for women than for men (Hypothesis 2c).

Method

Participants

The data were collected at a small public university in the northwestern US, where despite a lack of statewide LGB-protective legislation, the school’s non-discrimination policy expressly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. We invited all students with current addresses on record to complete a “Respectful Climate Survey” if they were: (1) degree-seeking, (2) age 18 or older, and (3) enrolled at least half-time. Of these 8,172 students, 3,347 participated, yielding a 41% response-rate (typical for lengthy surveys of sensitive topics, e.g., Hinrichs and Rosenberg 2002; Schneider 1987). We excluded 219 surveys from analysis due to extensive missing data (i.e., over 50% of the survey was blank, or the HH scale items were not responded to), resulting in a final sample of 3,128.

Demographic characteristics of the sample closely matched those of the overall student body. The sample was 49% female and 82% undergraduate, with a mean age of 23 years. On average, these students had attended the university for slightly over two years, and 36% lived on campus. Ninety percent identified as White/European American; 5% identified as Asian American or Pacific Islander; just over 2% identified as Hispanic American; 1% identified as Native American or Alaskan Native; and just under 1% identified as Black/African American. Eighty-nine percent of the sample self-identified as “completely heterosexual” ($n=2,777$). Eleven percent described their sexual orientation as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or between bisexual and heterosexual; we collectively refer to this group as “sexual minority” ($n=351$).

Measure

The survey began by addressing very general issues (e.g., demographics, academics, well-being), and the HH questions did not appear until the middle of the survey. Thus,

students were not primed to think about issues of heterosexism or harassment before describing their psychological, physical, and educational well-being. Past victimization research has emphasized the value of this approach, which reduces biased responding and does not require participant insight into event–symptom relations (e.g., Resnick et al. 1993). For potential correlates of HH, we examined students' mental health, school avoidance behaviors, and perceptions of the academic climate. Scores for each variable were represented by the means of the underlying items, unless noted otherwise.

Sexual Orientation

We asked participants, "How do you define your sexual orientation?" and offered five response options: (1) *completely heterosexual*, (2) *mostly heterosexual*, (3) *bisexual*, (4) *mostly lesbian/gay/homosexual*, and (5) *completely lesbian/gay/homosexual*. Students were dichotomously coded as either *completely heterosexual* (response option 1) or *sexual minority* (response options 2, 3, 4, or 5). One may wonder whether the "mostly heterosexual" students might be best grouped with the "completely heterosexual" students. To test this possibility, we conducted analyses comparing "completely" heterosexuals ($n=2,777$), "mostly" heterosexuals ($n=252$), and all others ($n=99$). We found that on all outcome measures, the "mostly heterosexual" group was significantly different from the "completely heterosexual" group, but nearly indistinguishable from the other sexual minorities. Thus we combined the "mostly heterosexual" students with the other sexual-minority students for all analyses reported in this paper. Given their small numbers compared to the "completely heterosexual" group, "mostly heterosexual" students represent a clear minority on campus.

Heterosexist Harassment

To assess experiences of *heterosexist harassment*, we adapted five items from Waldo's (1999) Workplace Heterosexist Experiences Questionnaire to fit a university setting. Following the stem, "During the past year, has any University faculty, staff, administrator or student...", three items gauged *ambient HH* ["Told offensive jokes about lesbians, gay men or bisexual people (for example, 'fag' jokes)"; "Made crude or offensive remarks about gay people (for example, saying they're 'sick')"; "Called someone else homophobic names (like 'dyke,' 'fence-sitter,' 'faggot,' etc.) in your presence"], and two assessed *personal HH* ["Called you a 'dyke,' 'faggot,' 'fence-sitter' or some similar slur"; "Made homophobic remarks about you personally (e.g., saying you were abnormal or perverted), regardless of your sexual orientation"]. Response options for each item were *never*, *once or twice*, and *more than once or twice*. Because data on both

subscales were highly skewed, we created a dichotomous variable for each (1=*any* experience of that type of HH, 0=no experience).

Psychological Well-being

Participants completed the *anxiety* and *depression* subscales of the Brief Symptom Inventory (Derogatis and Melisaratos 1983), widely used to assess psychological distress in the general population. This measure asked them to indicate the extent that each of a list of symptoms (e.g., "feeling no interest in things," "feeling tense or keyed up") had distressed them during the previous seven days, on a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*extremely*). Extensive psychometric evaluations support the reliability and validity of this measure, including strong correlations with relevant MMPI subscales (Boulet and Boss 1991; Derogatis and Melisaratos 1983; Derogatis and Savitz 2000). In our sample, Cronbach's alpha was .86 for the six-item depression subscale and .79 for the six-item anxiety subscale.

To assess problems resulting from *substance abuse*, we drew five items from Boyd and McCabe's (1999) Student Life Survey. These items assessed impairment due to the use of substances (including alcohol), as indicated by such behaviors as missing a class, getting into a heated fight, or performing poorly on a test. Students indicated how frequently in the past year they had experienced each behavior "as a result of drinking and/or other drug use," on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*6+ times*). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .79.

Academic Well-being

To assess global perceptions of the academic environment, we drew items from the General Campus Climate scale, developed by Cortina and colleagues (1998). Specifically, five *social acceptance* items measured the sense of "fitting in" or feeling interpersonally comfortable on campus (e.g., "I have found the atmosphere at this university to be friendly"; Cronbach's $\alpha=.70$). Perceptions of respectful treatment in the academic setting were assessed with five *academic respect* items (e.g., "When I try to speak up in class, I am sometimes interrupted or ignored" (reverse-coded); $\alpha=.73$). The six-item *instructor relations* subscale assessed students' perceptions of positive relationships with faculty and instructors (e.g., "I feel comfortable approaching my instructors for advice and assistance"; $\alpha=.79$). Responses to all items fell along a seven-point scale (from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*).

School avoidance was assessed using an eight-item instrument developed by Ramos (2000). Patterned after measures of organizational withdrawal (Hanisch and Hulin 1990, 1991), this scale assesses behaviors that effectively

disengage students from educational activities. Respondents described how frequently in the previous semester (1=*almost never* to 7=*almost always*) they had done such actions as arriving to class tardy, making excuses to get out of class, and thinking about quitting school altogether. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .76.

Procedure

Surveys were completed via the internet during February and March, 2002. This timing avoided potential disruptions and stresses associated with the beginning and ending of semesters. Using implementation procedures suggested by the Tailored Design Method for internet surveys (Dillman 2000), eligible students received advance emails alerting them to an upcoming survey, followed by invitation letters via first class US mail, with a follow-up thank-you/reminder postcard and email message. Finally, students who had not yet responded after three weeks received a second reminder postcard. All communications included the university letterhead and were signed by the university president. These contact materials contained instructions for creating a code to enter a restricted-access website, where the professionally designed survey could be completed. Students were assured that their identities would be kept confidential, that identifying information would not be stored with survey responses, and that university officials would never have access to any of

their data. As a participation incentive, opportunities to win gift certificates were offered.

Results

Means and standard deviations for all study variables appear in Table 1, organized by sex and sexual orientation. Correlations by sexual orientation appear in Table 2, and correlations by sex appear in Table 3. Examining the Pearson's r values among the study variables by sexual orientation, 79% were statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level, though many r values were small. This high level of significance among variables may be due to the large sample size. Statistically significant correlations ranged in magnitude between $-.060$ (for ambient HH and academic respect for heterosexuals) and $.669$ (for instructor relations and academic respect for sexual minorities). Eight percent of the intercorrelations for heterosexuals represented "large" effects (equivalent to a Cohen's $d \geq .80$), and for sexual minorities, 28% of the intercorrelations represented "large" effects (Cohen 1988; see Table 2).

Examining intercorrelations by sex, 92% of the correlations were significant at the $p < .001$ level, although many r values were small, again likely due to the large sample size. Eleven percent of the correlations for women represented large effects; for men, 22% represented large effects (equivalent to a Cohen's $d \geq .80$). The range of statistically significant correlations was from $-.057$ (for ambient HH and

Table 1 Means and standard deviations of study variables.

	Women				Men			
	Sexual minority		Heterosexual		Sexual minority		Heterosexual	
	$n=190$		$n=1351$		$n=158$		$n=1419$	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Ambient HH ^a	.53	.50	.36	.48	.56	.50	.39	.49
Personal HH ^a	.19	.39	.03	.18	.35	.48	.09	.28
Anxiety ^b	.96	.75	.74	.68	.90	.85	.59	.59
Depression ^b	1.03	.88	.75	.76	1.14	.99	.66	.71
Substance problems ^c	1.28	.42	1.28	.46	1.44	.63	1.31	.49
Academic respect ^d	5.32	.97	5.39	.87	5.18	.99	5.38	.89
Instructor relations ^d	4.93	1.12	5.06	.99	4.94	1.14	5.0	1.01
Social acceptance ^d	5.10	1.06	5.47	.95	4.95	1.08	5.35	.97
School avoidance ^e	2.05	.80	1.90	.79	2.35	1.13	1.99	.79

^a HH=heterosexist harassment. This variable is scored dichotomously, such that 0=*no experience* of behavior in this category, 1=*experienced at least one* behavior in this category.

^b 0=*not at all*; 4=*extremely*.

^c 1=*never*; 4=*six or more times*.

^d 1=*strongly disagree*; 7=*strongly agree*.

^e 1=*almost never*; 7=*almost always*.

Table 2 Intercorrelations among study variables for full sample by sexual orientation.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Ambient HH ^a	–	.282	.137	.121	.183	.122	–.093	–.060	–.075
2. Personal HH ^a	.495	–	.092	.098	.097	.091	–.145	–.073	–.092
3. Anxiety	.134	.139	–	.666	.147	.245	–.266	–.207	–.155
4. Depression	.100	.139	.659	–	.178	.316	–.346	–.305	–.222
5. Substance problems	.128	.083	.322	.310	–	.366	.023	–.120	–.082
6. School avoidance	.129	.155	.413	.366	.403	–	–.190	–.363	–.252
7. Social acceptance	–.148	–.244	–.332	–.374	–.087	–.360	–	.545	.497
8. Academic respect	–.075	–.188	–.288	–.400	–.287	–.482	.578	–	.618
9. Instructor relations	–.077	–.106	–.185	–.309	–.217	–.333	.514	.669	–

Correlations for sexual-minority students ($n=341$) are below the diagonal; $r |.12| - .14| = p < .05$; $r |.14| - .16| = p < .01$, $r > .16| = p < .001$. Correlations for heterosexual students ($n=2,772$) are above the diagonal; $r < .07| = p < .01$, $r > .07| = p < .001$.

^a HH=heterosexist harassment; 0=no experience of behavior in this category, 1=experienced at least one behavior in this category.

instructor relations for men) to .685 (for depression and anxiety, also for men; see Table 3).

Incidence Rates

Of the 3,128 respondents to the HH scales, 41% reported some experience with HH on campus during the prior year. This included 39% of the heterosexual students ($n=1,077$) and 57% of the sexual minorities ($n=195$). This supports Hypothesis 1a, which predicted that both heterosexual and sexual-minority students would report encounters with HH.

Within each sexual orientation group, we conducted nonparametric chi-square analyses of participants who had experienced any HH, to examine Hypotheses 1b (sexual-minority students would report more personal than ambient HH) and Hypothesis 1c (heterosexual students would report more ambient than personal HH). The first was not supported—sexual-minority students who had experienced HH reported similar levels of ambient and personal HH [53%

and 47% respectively; $\chi^2(1, n=195) = .62$, *n.s.*]. However, Hypothesis 1c was supported by the data, with more heterosexuals providing reports of ambient HH (84%) than personal HH (16%) [$\chi^2(1, n=1077) = 501.60$, $p < .001$].

As a follow-up, we also conducted supplementary chi square analyses of HH type by sexual orientation. These tests demonstrated that sexual minorities reporting HH were more likely than heterosexuals to describe personal HH [$\chi^2(1, n=1272) = 98.64$, $p < .001$], but the groups did not differ on likelihood of reporting ambient HH [$\chi^2(1, n=1272) = .67$, *n.s.*]. Similar analyses by gender revealed that, among HH victims, men compared to women were more likely to report personal HH [$\chi^2(1, n=3202) = 38.74$, $p < .001$], though the reporting of ambient HH was similar [$\chi^2(1, n=3202) = 1.99$, *n.s.*].

Well-being Correlates

To create a variable to indicate type of HH experience, we categorized respondents into three groups. The first group

Table 3 Intercorrelations among study variables for full sample by sex.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Ambient HH ^a	–	.387	.137	.104	.169	.129	–.096	–.029	–.057
2. Personal HH ^a	.257	–	.156	.179	.128	.125	–.180	–.072	–.084
3. Anxiety	.171	.130	–	.685	.202	.315	–.287	–.221	–.173
4. Depression	.166	.102	.658	–	.231	.372	–.369	–.327	–.242
5. Substance problems	.186	.035	.164	.171	–	.414	–.026	–.159	–.108
6. School avoidance	.129	.095	.269	.303	.321	–	–.216	–.405	–.274
7. Social acceptance	–.126	–.180	–.304	–.362	.045	–.225	–	.543	.508
8. Academic respect	–.101	–.136	–.228	–.315	–.121	–.355	.555	–	.643
9. Instructor relations	–.094	–.104	–.157	–.230	–.089	–.250	.486	.605	–

Correlations for female students ($n=1550$) are below the diagonal; $r > .05| = p < .001$.

Correlations for male students ($n=1578$) are above the diagonal; $r |.05| - .06| = p < .05$, $r |.061| - .08| = p < .01$, $r > .08| = p < .001$.

^a HH=heterosexist harassment; 0=no experience of behavior in this category, 1=experienced at least one behavior in this category

contained the 1,699 heterosexual and 144 sexual-minority students who did not report *any* encounter with HH during the previous year (i.e., response of “never” to all items). In group two were those who had experienced *at least one ambient* HH behavior, but no personal HH at all (906 heterosexuals, 103 sexual minorities). The third group consisted of respondents who reported *both ambient and personal* HH (157 heterosexuals, 88 sexual minorities). Due to the small number of participants who had experienced personal HH without concomitant ambient HH, (about 1% each of heterosexuals, $n=14$, and sexual minorities, $n=4$), we excluded this “personal HH only” group from all subsequent analyses.

To test Hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c, a $2 \times 2 \times 3$ between-subjects multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA with post-hoc Tukey HSD tests) was performed on the seven dependent variables representing psychological well-being (anxiety, depression, substance use problems), and academic well-being (school avoidance, academic respect, social acceptance, and instructor relations). Independent variables were sex (female, male), sexual orientation (sexual-minority, heterosexual), type of HH (none, ambient only, both ambient and personal), three two-way interactions, and one three-way interaction. Because this analysis is comprised of seven tests and because of the large sample size (with its attendant high statistical power), we sought to reduce the possibility of Type I error. Therefore we used a Bonferroni-corrected p -value of .007 to determine significance in the results of the analyses ($.05/7=.007$).

To create a balanced design for the MANOVA, we took random samples of approximately 100 cases from the four cells with greater than 400 cases (heterosexual women and men reporting no HH and ambient-only HH). The cell sizes then ranged from 35 (sexual-minority women reporting both ambient and personal HH) to 118 (heterosexual men reporting both ambient and personal HH), with an average across all 12 cells of 74 cases per cell. The subsample of the data used to test Hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c thus included 190 sexual-minority and 246 heterosexual women, and 151 sexual-minority and 298 heterosexual men (total $n=885$). All significant findings are reported below.

Hypothesis 2a stated that students experiencing no HH would fare better than those experiencing ambient-only HH, and that the group scoring the worst on all seven dependent outcomes would be those who experienced both ambient and personal HH. The multivariate test supported this hypothesis [$F(14, 1704)=6.51, p<.001, \eta^2=.051$], as did each of the univariate tests for the seven outcomes (all $ps<.001$; F s from 8.96 to 25.32; η^2 s ranging from .020 to .056). For six of the seven outcomes (anxiety, depression, academic respect, social acceptance, instructor relations, and school avoidance), the post hoc Tukey HSD comparisons revealed significant differences between the ambient +

personal HH group and the ambient-only group, and between the ambient + personal HH group and the no-HH group. The no-HH group, however, was statistically indistinguishable from the ambient-only HH group on these six outcomes. By contrast, for problems with substance use, the group reporting no HH was significantly lower than the other two groups, which were statistically indistinguishable from one another. Figure 1 displays means for these outcomes (standardized for display purposes), showing a clear pattern of decreased well-being as a function of more types of HH.

Hypothesis 2b predicted that sexual-minority students would experience worse well-being than heterosexuals as they reported more types of HH. To support such a moderation hypothesis, a significant interaction between sexual orientation and HH would be needed. However, the multivariate test for this interaction was not significant [$F(14, 1704)=.41, n.s.$].

Hypothesis 2c, which predicted that women would experience worse well-being than men as they reported more HH, would also require a significant interaction term, this time between sex and HH. The interaction between sex and type of HH, however, was also not significant [$F(14, 1704)=1.71, n.s.$].

Discussion

The current study explored experiences of heterosexism in academia, focusing on the nature, incidence, and correlates of this mistreatment. Results converged on the conclusions that heterosexist harassment (HH) takes different forms, is experienced by not only sexual-minority but also hetero-

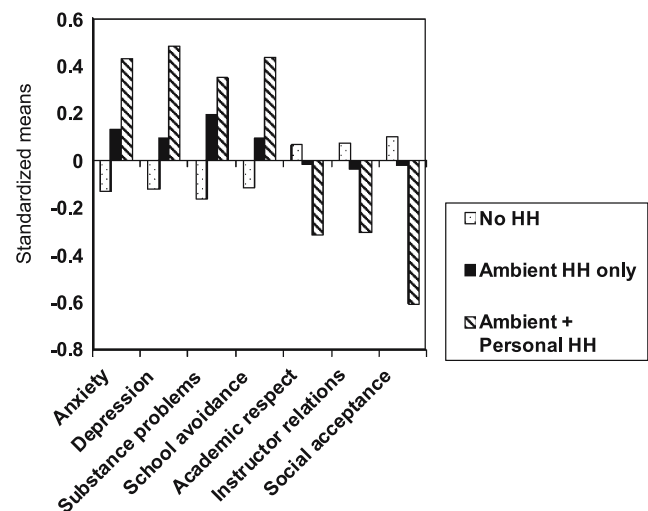


Fig. 1 Standardized means for each well-being variable by type of heterosexist harassment (HH) experienced.

sexual individuals, and has a negative impact regardless of sex or sexual orientation. Here we discuss these findings and their implications.

Incidence of Heterosexist Harassment

Hypothesis 1a predicted that sexual-minority, as well as heterosexual students, would report experiences of HH. Not surprisingly, a high percentage of sexual minorities (58%) faced HH on campus, but so did a substantial number of heterosexuals (39%). Among sexual-minority victims, similar proportions experienced ambient HH (53%) versus personal HH (47%). This finding is contrary to Hypothesis 1b, which predicted that more personal than ambient HH would be reported by sexual minorities. In contrast, Hypothesis 1c predicted more ambient than personal HH for *heterosexual* victims. This hypothesis was supported, with 84% of victimized heterosexuals describing ambient HH and 16% reporting personal HH.

These results confirm that a sexual-minority identity is not a prerequisite for encountering heterosexism, as nearly forty percent of heterosexual students reported some exposure to HH during the previous year on campus. Though some of the HH reported by heterosexuals may have been intended as “joking” or “kidding around,” other factors may sometimes drive the behavior, including punishment of individuals who fail to conform to rigid gender roles. One important area for continued research is the motivations behind HH. Franklin (2000) found that perpetrators of anti-gay behaviors (from name-calling to assault to murder) were most often men with traditional attitudes toward masculinity. Surprisingly, the most common motivation for their actions was peer acceptance, not anti-gay attitudes. It would be useful to determine the motivations of those who express HH (which is arguably less extreme than most of the behaviors studied by Franklin), as a way of locating entry points for intervention to decrease their expression.

These findings extend the previous literature on anti-LGB victimization, which had primarily focused on more extreme forms of hostility and violence (D’Augelli 1992; Herek 1993; Norris 1992; Rankin 2003). Similar to the concepts of “everyday sexism” (Swim et al. 2001), and racial microaggression (Sue et al. 2007), less extreme forms of HH represent more commonplace acts that may or may not be meant to intentionally harass others but nevertheless convey hostility, insult, or derogation toward sexual-minority persons. We expanded the scope of the construct of heterosexist abuse to include ambient heterosexist harassment, which has been largely overlooked in past research. Perhaps in an academic climate characterized by increased diversity training (e.g., Finkel et al. 2003) and concerns about political correctness, campus communities are grow-

ing less tolerant of obvious and personally-directed forms of HH, while ambient HH lives on beneath public scrutiny.

Correlates of Heterosexist Harassment

In addition to exploring the prevalence of HH on campus, we examined how psychological health and academic well-being varied as a function of HH experiences. Hypothesis 2a predicted that students who experienced both forms of HH would have poorer well-being than those who experienced only ambient HH, and those reporting no HH would have better outcomes than the other two groups. The multivariate test for type of HH experienced was significant (with an effect size of $\eta^2=.051$), as were the univariate tests for each individual outcome. The effect sizes for these outcomes ranged from $\eta^2=.020$ to $\eta^2=.056$, representing significant though small effects (an additional 2% to 6% of variance explained by HH experiences). However, the post-hoc Tukey HSD tests revealed that for six of seven dependent variables, only the group experiencing both ambient and personal HH showed lower well-being compared to the other groups. For the seventh variable (substance use problems), the other two groups were both statistically different than the no-HH group.

Our expectation was that those reporting ambient-only HH would also have significantly lower well-being than those reporting no HH, and though the bar graphs of HH type by outcome exhibit this trend (see Fig. 1), these group differences were not statistically significant. Perhaps our five-item HH measure did not adequately assess the range of HH experiences. With an expanded instrument, we might have captured additional behaviors that would differentiate the no-HH and ambient-only groups across our outcome variables. It is also possible that the context in which heterosexist remarks are made is related to the effect that those behaviors ultimately have on an individual’s well-being. For example, anti-gay joke-telling or name-calling may be perceived as “male bonding” (by those not targeted) in a sports team or fraternity setting and not be associated with distress, whereas the same behavior in a classroom might be experienced as hostile. Future work could include questions about the context in which HH occurred and the emotional impact it had on targets, in order to tease out these possibilities. Nevertheless, it appears that the combination of experiencing both ambient and personal HH relates to consistent downturns in important domains of well-being.

Hypothesis 2b, predicting that sexual orientation would moderate the impact of HH, with sexual minorities showing worse effects than heterosexual students, was not supported by the multivariate test. Because the effects of a heterosexist climate on heterosexuals have not been previously examined, this finding highlights that heterosexual identi-

fication does not shield individuals from heterosexist harassment and its association with negative outcomes. Because heterosexual students experiencing HH overwhelmingly reported ambient rather than personal HH (84% and 16%, respectively), it is possible that our results can be explained by bystander stress. In other words, heterosexual students tended to suffer from overhearing others make negative remarks about sexual-minority people. Rather than sexual-minority students being the only ones to experience negative effects of HH (explained by minority—and perhaps also bystander—stress) and heterosexual students remaining unaffected, the similar outcomes for each group may reflect distinct but parallel mechanisms. This finding thus may be a contribution to the growing literature on bystander stress, and further research is needed to determine whether this is the case.

Another consideration for the significant associations between experiences of HH and well-being for heterosexuals is whether they were being “punished” for deviating from traditional gender roles. Though personal HH rates were low for heterosexual students, ambient HH could be elicited from others by the presence of someone who appears or acts in ways that seem counter to typical gendered expectations. Questions about whether others perceive the respondent as “gender-typical” or not could be included on future surveys, to investigate the possible role of gender policing. Examining motivations of perpetrators of HH could also help explain its wide prevalence.

Because college women have consistently been found to have more positive attitudes toward sexual-minority persons and issues, Hypothesis 2c predicted that women may feel more distress or alienation when encountering HH. However, the multivariate interaction test was not significant, providing evidence that HH affects women and men in similar ways. Nonetheless, further research is needed to determine whether parallel psychological mechanisms are involved, given that men are more dismissive of minority sexual orientations. Could women be experiencing bystander stress, while men are exhibiting distress resulting from threats to masculinity, even if not their own? Future studies might inquire into the specific nature of the HH encountered (e.g., was it directed at a specific individual? did it disparage females or males?) to investigate this potential for difference.

We have demonstrated for the first time that negative psychological and academic correlates of HH extend beyond sexual-minority persons to include their heterosexual counterparts. Furthermore, we found that differences in associated outcomes between the two sexual orientation groups, as well as between the sexes, are insignificant. This consistent pattern of HH outcomes indicates that an

institutional environment in which anti-LGB remarks and jokes are present may have negative implications for the whole campus community, regardless of sex or sexual orientation. This suggests that the harms of heterosexist victimization are more widespread than once believed and may have a troublesome influence far beyond harm to any direct targets.

Strengths, Limitations, and Conclusion

One strength of this study is the number of sexual-minority students identified in our sample. A comparatively high percentage of respondents (11%) self-reported that their sexual orientation was something other than “completely heterosexual.” In past surveys of student bodies, smaller proportions identified as non-heterosexual (e.g., 4.1% in Waldo’s 1998 random sample of 1,927 students at a large Midwestern university). We attribute the larger percentage in the current study to our offering five response options to assess sexual orientation, similar to the seven-point sexual orientation scale of Kinsey et al. (1948). Our measure included a choice that fell between exclusively heterosexual and bisexual, and this might have appealed to students who had experienced limited same-sex sexual contact, were questioning their sexual orientation, or for other reasons were reluctant to categorize themselves as strictly heterosexual (Green 1998). Had the item been limited to less-nuanced response options (e.g., “I would describe myself as: (a) heterosexual (b) gay or lesbian or (c) bisexual,” as in Waldo 1998), they might have answered “heterosexual” for lack of a better choice. Additionally, our use of “mostly heterosexual” avoided using any words associated with sexual minority labeling, allowing respondents this option without suggesting to them that they were identifying themselves with a possibly stigmatizing label, such as “bisexual” or “partly gay/lesbian.”

An additional strength is that the study design might have overcome some of the sampling biases that are apparent in previous work, where investigators recruited participants from sexual-minority community events and membership lists of gay rights organizations. (e.g., Ragins and Cornwell 2001; Rankin 2003; Waldo 1999). By contrast, in the present study, the survey was advertised generically as a study of “respect on campus,” and virtually all students were invited to participate. None of the survey announcements or invitations discussed sexual orientation. Moreover, our sample demographics were similar to the overall student body. For these reasons, we feel confident that this study did not disproportionately attract “out” or activist sexual-minority respondents, nor any particular subset of heterosexual respondents.

However, like any research, this study also has its limitations. Owing to the cross-sectional nature of the data, causal interpretations must remain tentative until confirmed with longitudinal or experimental research. For example, it is possible that students' dissatisfaction and distress led them to perceive more harassment, rather than vice versa. Additionally, because our data consist exclusively of single-source, self-report measures, supplementing these data with records from the university registrar or health center, as well as peer, professor, or counselor ratings, would strengthen future work on this topic.

Though prior research had largely overlooked ambient HH, we found that this form of heterosexist hostility is quite pervasive and argue that it warrants continued study, as do less extreme forms of personal HH (such as being ignored because of one's sexual orientation). In the future, it will be important to expand measures of heterosexism to explore the full range of behaviors in these domains. Although the brevity of our HH scale has practical advantages (being quick and easy for respondents to complete), there are more facets of ambient and personal HH than we captured with our adapted scale (for example, we did not inquire about encounters with anti-LGB graffiti, or receipt of harassing or disparaging email). Future studies might also examine issues related to bystander stress, such as whether having LGB friends or acquaintances are factors that increase distress, as well as inquiring into the context of and motivations for the hostility. Finally, because we documented that the connection between HH and well-being is not limited to the relatively small percentage of individuals who self-identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, future research should continue investigating heterosexist victimization as it affects individuals of diverse sexual orientations.

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