

ARE STIGMA AND OUTNESS ASSOCIATED WITH DIFFERENCES IN WORKPLACE  
STRESS BETWEEN SEXUAL MINORITY COLLEGE UNDERGRADUATES AND THEIR  
HETEROSEXUAL PEERS?

by

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### Abstract

This study is aimed at finding the differences in workplace stress between heterosexual and sexual minority undergraduate students in North Carolina Universities. The relationship between workplace stress, outness, and stigma consciousness due to sexual orientation, will be examined through analysis of survey results distributed to undergraduates. Due to the financial burden of a college education, around 80% of college undergraduates have a job during college (Carnevale, Smith, Melton, & Price, 2015). This situation is unique when considering sexual minority students. Employment could be harder to navigate as a sexual minority student due to complicated decisions such as whether or not to be out in the workplace, choosing to actively hide one's orientation, and managing the possibility of harassment or discrimination. These factors could lead to sexual minority students having higher levels of workplace stress. The effects of outness and stigma consciousness on workplace stress will be examined to create a detailed approach to sexual minority experiences. High workplace stress has negative side effects on both physical and mental health (Colligan & Higgins, 2006). Data will be collected through a survey given to undergraduates in North Carolina. The survey will include the Maugeri Stress Index reduced form (Massidda, D., Giorgi, I., Vidotto, G., Tringali, S., Imbriani, M., Baiardi, P., & Bertolotti, G., 2017), the Nebraska Outness Scale (Meidlinger & Hope, 2014), and the Stigma Consciousness Questionnaire (Pinel, 1999). A short answer question will be given to obtain qualitative data. This study fills important gaps in past research by examining this population and their experience's in the workplace.

*Keywords:* sexual minority, workplace stress, outness, stigma consciousness

## Are Stigma and Outness Associated with Differences in Workplace Stress between Sexual Minority College Undergraduates and Their Heterosexual Peers?

Undergraduates in college face a variety of stressors, from financial to personal, making them a unique subset of the population. In a study of British Undergraduate students, 9% of previously symptom free students became depressed and 20% became anxious. This same study showed that financial stress made independent contributions both to depression and anxiety (Andrews & Wildlings, 2010). Because of this financial stress, 80% of undergraduate students are employed during their collegiate career (Carnevale, Smith, Melton, & Price, 2015). College students are employed for a variety of reasons. For example, they may require income in order to pay for tuition, living expenses, and emergency situations that may arise. Although being employed while attending college is not uncommon, the effects of working while in college may differ for minority students, including sexual minorities. Unfortunately, these effects have not been well studied in comparison to heterosexual college students.

Sexual minority is defined by the variety of sexualities and expressions that differ from what is considered “normal”. This population includes individuals who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, and any other terminology used to express no (in regard to individuals who identify as asexual), some or complete attraction to the same sex (Cochat Costa Rodrigues, Leite & Queirós, 2017). This also includes individuals who identify as questioning. In the case of sexuality, questioning means someone who is not sure of their attraction to the same sex. Along with this definition, it is important to know the meaning behind the term “out”. “Out” or outness is the extent or number of other people who know an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity (Whitehead, Shaver, and Stephenson, 2016). For example, an individual’s close friends may know their sexual orientation, but their coworkers may not be aware. Another factor

examined is that of Stigma Consciousness. Stigma Consciousness is defined as how much someone expects or feels like they stereotyped or treated differently by others (Pinel, 1999). Stigma, as defined by Whitehead et al. has three domains including anticipate, internalized, and enacted stigma. Anticipated stigma is the concern a minority may have for discrimination that may occur in the future. Internalized stigma is feelings of internal worthlessness and devaluation. Enacted stigma is real experiences of discrimination whether it is verbal or physical (Whitehead et al., 2016). Stereotypes that are hurtful may lead to one or more types of stigma in the workplace. An example could be made with a hypothetical bisexual individual. Bisexuals are often stereotyped as being sexual promiscuous and may fear that people in the workplace will treat them differently based on this stereotype by not interacting with them or assuming they would not have a stable partner (anticipated stigma). This may lead the bisexual person to feel badly about themselves and their orientation (internalized stigma). If a coworker were to inappropriately flirt with or make innuendos about this person that would be enacted stigma. Fear of these consequences will lead to higher scores in stigma consciousness.

This fear is not unfounded. Based on the General Social Survey, 37.7% of “out” sexual minority workers have experienced some form of discrimination and 27.1% of all sexual minority workers have experienced some form of discrimination regardless of outness (Sears & Mallory, 2011). Research is limited in terms of whether or not there is more stress in the workplace for those in the sexual minority community compared to heterosexual individuals. The purpose of the current study is to add to the knowledge about the differences in workplace stress among sexual minorities and their heterosexual peers. Additionally, this study aims to identify the factors that influence the working environment and potential contributors to workplace stress for people who identify as sexual minority.

Working through college and possibly getting the first job where the money has a real effect on your livelihood is a big deal and often challenging. This poses a unique situation for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (sexual minority) college students. Employment is harder to navigate as a sexual minority student. Complicated situations like being out in the workplace, the possibility of harassment, and discrimination make it more difficult to have a positive work environment for sexual minorities. In a study by Sears and Mallory (2011), those “out” at work faced higher rates of discrimination, harassment, and job loss compared to sexual minority individuals who were not “out” at work. This could lead to an increase in stress for sexual minority students in their work life, especially when this may be the first job they have or in which they are out. While this is a deterrent, the financial and personal satisfaction achieved by having a job in school is necessary for many students. Students that work 10 hours a week have the highest satisfaction of any working or non-working student because the students feel as though they are helping their financial situation with the money they make from a job (Tessema, Astani, & Ready, 2014).

While discrimination in the workplace has been understudied for sexual minorities, there is more research about discrimination in school. Thirty-three percent of sexual minority students report being bullied on high school property, and 24.3% of questioning students report being bullied on high school property. It is then possible there would be an increased fear of these situations being replicated in the workplace. In addition to negative experiences from school-based bullying, in the workplace, bullying based on sexual orientation could have financial repercussions. This may mean sexual minority students choose not to disclose their sexuality even though being “out” leads to positive social adjustment in life and better mental health (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card & Russel, 2010). The increase in stress at work may then have

negative consequences on school life and grades. There is a significant negative correlation between the number of hours worked and the GPA of undergraduate students (Tessema, Astani, & Ready, 2014), and this is without the stress of hiding your sexual orientation. Hiding your sexuality can cause a variety of effects such as higher stress levels and greater endorsement of depressive symptoms (Juster, Smith, Ouellet, Sindi, & Lupien, 2013). The benefits of disclosing your sexuality (e.g., lower stress) and the potential harms (e.g., discrimination) that may come from being out at work mean that sexual minority students may have a variety of decisions that they must make in the work place, which may cause stress not experienced by their heterosexual peers.

The purpose of this study is to examine the differences in workplace stress between heterosexual and sexual minority undergraduates. The study will utilize the Maugeri Stress Index in order to explore the differences in workplace stress between heterosexual and sexual minority students across the domains of wellness, resilience, perception of social support, and negative coping styles. Further, for sexual minority students, the association between workplace stress outness (Meidlinger & Hope, 2014), and Stigma Consciousness (Pinel, 1999) will be examined. Finally, qualitative data related to personal experience with workplace stress was also collected to contribute to the sparse literature in this area. It is expected that sexual minority students will experience greater stress than their heterosexual peers, and that this stress will be significantly and positively correlated to their outness and stigma consciousness.

### **Methods**

All surveys and data collection were approved by the Institutional Review Board of East Carolina University (UMC IRB 19-002445). All participants were informed that their participation would remain confidential due to the sensitive nature of disclosing sexual

orientation and provided informed consent before taking the survey. Data were collected from February 28 to April 10th.

### **Participants**

Participants were all undergraduate students attending East Carolina University. All participants were under the age of 25 and were currently employed at a job or internship. The sample included 33 individuals total, consisting of 22 heterosexual students and 11 sexual minority students. Students were recruited through a variety of methods, including email advertisements to University departments, fliers, social media, and personal contact through the Jesse Peele LGBT center on campus. Participants were screened through the demographic questionnaire, which included age, work status, and major. Electronic consent was obtained following an informed consent procedure. Participants then completed the Maugeri Stress Index. If participants endorsed a sexual minority identity, they were also prompted to complete the Outness Scale survey and The Stigma Consciousness survey. Sexual minority students were also asked an open-ended question about their workplace environments and how their sexual orientation influenced their work stress in the form of a short answer question. All surveys were administered online, and the students were assured that their answers would remain anonymous.

### **Measures**

The current study included the Maugeri Stress Index, the Stigma consciousness survey, the Outness Scale survey, and an open-ended question. The Maugeri Stress Index was used to measure workplace stress in both sexual minority and heterosexual undergraduates. The Maugeri Stress Index measures is a 50-item survey measuring workplace stress across the domains of a) wellness b) resilience c) perception of social support and d) negative coping styles using a 5-point Likert Scale. Participants were asked to select the answer that best described their

workplace; response options ranged from *never* to *very much*. The Stigma consciousness survey was used to measure the amount of stigma (negative beliefs based on the persons sexuality) that sexual minority undergraduates perceive to occur in their daily life. Responses were measured in the form of a Likert scale (e.g., 5-point scale with 5 being strongly agree and 1 being strongly disagree). The scale asks questions about stereotypes, differential treatment, and interpretation of behaviors. This survey was only given to those who indicated that they were a sexual minority in the demographic section of the survey. The Nebraska Outness scale was used to measure disclosure and concealment of sexual identity. Participants were asked to choose the percentage of people in different areas of their life (family, friends, work, and school) who know about their sexual orientation. Answers were all between 0-100% as indicated by the participant. Qualitative results were gathered from answers to an open-ended question “Do you believe your sexual orientation impacts your stress at work more than your heterosexual peers?”. Answers were given in sentence and paragraph form in order to provide a more well-rounded interpretation of the results.

### **Data Analysis**

For analyzing the data, SPSS software was used. In order to compare the results of workplace stress in heterosexual and sexual minority undergraduate students, an independent t-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant relationship between workplace stress in these two populations. The Maugeri Workplace Stress total scores were derived from adding together 3 positive subscales (wellness, social support, resilience), where higher scores would indicate less stress, and subtracting 1 subscale (negative coping mechanisms). The subscales of negative coping mechanisms was subtracted because higher scores, meaning a person has more negative coping mechanisms, is a negative subscale unlike the other three positive subscales.



Higher scores in this area would indicate maladjustment so it was subtracted from the sum of the positive score. Each subscale was also used to compare heterosexual and sexual minority workplace stress. An independent t-test was conducted for each to determine if their significant differences emerged across the two populations. In order to determine if there was a correlation between perceived stigma and workplace stress within the sexual minority community, a two-tailed correlation was used to find significance. Lastly, a two-tailed correlation was also used to determine the relationship between outness and workplace stress in the sexual minority population.

Outness was measured in the form of a percentage. The total score of outness was determined by adding together the reported percentages from each question in the Nebraska Outness Scale. Each question asked the participants in the sexual minority to assess how “out” they were to different groups of people. Immediate family, extended family, friends, coworkers, schoolmates, and strangers were the populations the participant reported on. Each group was given a value 0-100% for the percentage of people in the group that knew of the participant’s sexuality. Percentages were added and averaged for these groups to obtain the total score. Higher percentages overall indicated that a person was more “out”.

## **Results**

### **Demographic Information**

A total of 33 participants were included in the study out of 34 who responded. One participant did not fulfill the eligibility requirements because they were not an undergraduate at ECU and were out of the age range of the study (18-25). Demographic information on participants is provided in the table below

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<b>Gender</b>			<b>Relationship Status</b>		
Cisgender female	29	87.9%	Single	15	45.5%
Cisgender male	2	6.1%	In a Relationship	17	51.5%
Transgender	1	3.1%	Engaged	1	3.0%
Nonbinary	1	3.1%	<b>Seriousness of Relationship</b>		
<b>Sexuality</b>			Very Serious	5	27.8%
Heterosexual ( <u>straight</u> )	22	66.7%	Serious	7	38.9%
Bisexual	8	24.2%	Somewhat serious	3	16.7%
Gay	1	3.0%	A little serious	3	16.7%
Lesbian	1	3.0%	<b>How often are you stressed about your income?</b>		
Queer	1	3.0%	All of the time	5	15.2%
<b>Undergraduate Year</b>			Most of the Time	4	12.1%
Freshman	10	30.3%	Sometimes	14	42.4%
Sophomore	10	30.3%	A little	8	24.2%
Junior	8	24.2%	Never	2	6.1%
Senior	5	15.2%			
<b>Age</b>					
18	10	30.3%			
19	8	24.2%			
20	7	21.2%			
21	6	18.2%			
22	2	6.1%			
<b>Jobs (More than one option could be selected)</b>					
University Employment	17	51.5%			
Childcare	11	33.3%			
Internship	11	33.3%			
Food Service	10	30.3%			
Retail	10	30.3%			
Healthcare	6	18.2%			
Office Job	4	12.1%			
Management	1	3.0%			
Military	1	3.0%			
Professional	1	3.0%			
Independent Contractor	1	3.0%			
<b>Race</b>					
White/Caucasian	28	85.0%			
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	6.1%			
Mixed	1	3.0%			
Native American	1	3.0%			
Black/ African American	1	3.0%			
<b>Ethnicity</b>					
Hispanic/Latino	1	3.0%			

**Quantitative Results**

At an alpha level of 0.05 ,results show that there was no significant difference in total workplace stress between those participants identifying as sexual minority individuals (M=87.92, SD=13.14) and heterosexual participants (M=95.86, SD=10.16), t(33)=1.94, p=0.061 (two-tailed independent t-test), d=0.676. This means that participants who identified as sexual minority individuals did not experience higher stress than their heterosexual peers. This contradicts the

original hypothesis that participants who identified as sexual minority individuals would experience more stress at work. At an alpha level of 0.05, results show that there was no significant difference in the workplace stress subscale of wellness between those participants identified as being part of the sexual minority ( $M=25.67$ ,  $SD=4.98$ ) and heterosexual participants ( $M=28.62$ ,  $SD=3.87$ ),  $t(33)=1.90$ ,  $p=0.067$  (two-tailed independent t-test),  $d=0.661$ . These results indicate that participants who identified as sexual minority individuals were not less or more well than their heterosexual counterparts. This is contrary to the original hypothesis that participants who identified as sexual minority individuals would have lower scores in wellness than their heterosexual counterparts. At an alpha level of 0.05, results show that there was no significant difference in the workplace stress subscale of resilience between those participants identified as a sexual minority ( $M=59.25$ ,  $SD=7.93$ ) and heterosexual participants ( $M=62.19$ ,  $SD=5.11$ ),  $t(33)=1.299$ ,  $p=0.265$  (two-tailed independent t-test),  $d=0.441$ . These results indicate that participants who identified as part of the sexual minority were not less or more resilient than their heterosexual counterparts. This is contrary to the original hypothesis that participants who identified as sexual minority individuals would have lower scores in resilience than their heterosexual peers. At an alpha level of 0.05, results show that there was no significant difference in the workplace stress subscale of social support between those participants identified as sexual minority individuals ( $M=19.08$ ,  $SD=2.15$ ) and heterosexual participants ( $M=19.57$ ,  $SD=2.27$ ),  $t(33)=0.605$ ,  $p=0.550$  (two-tailed independent t-test),  $d=0.223$ . These results indicate that participants who identified as sexual minorities did not have less or more social support than their heterosexual counterparts. This is contrary to the original hypothesis that participants who identified as sexual minority individuals would have less social support than participants who were heterosexual. At an alpha level of 0.05, results show that there was no significant difference

in the workplace stress subscale of negative coping skills between those participants identified as being in the sexual minority ( $M=16.08$ ,  $SD=1.56$ ) and heterosexual participants ( $M=14.52$ ,  $SD=2.64$ ),  $t(33)=-1.86$ ,  $p=0.072$  (two-tailed independent t-test),  $d=0.719$ . These results indicate that participants who identified as sexual minority individuals did not have more or less negative coping skills than their heterosexual counterparts. This is contrary to the original hypothesis that participants who identified as sexual minority individuals would have more negative coping skills than their heterosexual counterparts.

A correlation was also conducted between outness and total workplace stress. Results of a two-tailed correlation show that outness ( $M = 5.96$   $SD = 2.06$ ) had no significant correlation with total workplace stress,  $r(33) = 0.199$ ,  $p > 0.01$ . This indicates that there is no relationship between outness and workplace stress. This indicates that there is no correlation between how “out” someone is and how stressed they are at work. This contradicts the original hypothesis that higher outness scores would positively correlate to more workplace stress. Another correlation was conducted between perceived stigma and total workplace stress. Results of a two-tailed correlation show that perceived stigma ( $M = 28.75$   $SD = 10.35$ ) had a significant negative correlation with total workplace stress scores,  $r(33) = -.745$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . This indicates that higher scores on workplace stress scale are related to higher perceived stigma scores, and vice versa. Because higher scores on the total workplace stress scale indicate a positive working environment (less stress), it can be concluded that there is a positive correlation between more workplace stress and perceived stigma. This supports the original hypothesis that higher perceived stigma scores from participants who identified as sexual minority individuals would positively correlate with more workplace stress (lower total workplace stress index scores).

### **Qualitative Results**

Sexual minority participants were asked to answer the question “Do you believe your sexual orientation impacts your stress at work more than your heterosexual peers?”. While there were a variety of answers given by participants, there were themes that pervaded throughout the answers. A number of the participants did not believe that their sexual orientation made any difference in their workplace, supporting the results that there was no significant difference in the stress levels of sexual minority individuals and heterosexual undergraduates (n=4). Many of these participants though, did express that they felt “lucky” that they had not had any issues, and one mentioned that a previous employer would often ask inappropriate question because he was aware of their sexuality, but now their new employers treated them with respect. An example response of this nature is given below:

“Not in a sense. I think that I have also been extremely lucky because everywhere that I have worked, they have been very open and accepting of my personal preferences. However, I do think it also helps that my work experiences have gotten to know me as a person and who I am and all the quirks that I have before knowing about my sexual orientation. At first, I could tell that some people didn't know if they should change how they do things or say things, but as I continued doing the same things I always do, they realized that nothing had to change on my account.”

A common theme was also that people felt “alienated” or “different” ( n=3). More than one participant mentioned filtering their language to avoid expressing their orientation or to not make others uncomfortable. Similarly, some participants noted coworkers being concerned about how they acted or if they should change, due to learning a person’s sexuality. A participant stated about this issue

“I think that the lack of a well-rounded education of different sexual orientation tends to make some people nervous because they don't want to make a mistake and hurt someone because the majority of the things they see in the media are the loud, angry, extreme versions of my sexual orientation instead of the normal average Joe like myself that looks and acts pretty similarly to everyone else, just with a different preference for sexuality”.

For a few of the participants, the active decision to not tell other coworkers about their love life or the lack of interaction with coworkers, meant their sexuality was either not known, or not important (n=2). These participants described their orientation as a “passing thought” or “last-minute consideration”, highlighting that they did not feel it was important, so it often did not come up. . An example of a response in this category is given below:

“It has only ever been a passing thought to me while at work. I work at the hospital, and a majority of the workers are extremely accepting. I would feel comfortable talking about my sexual orientation with a few people, but it's just my personal preference to keep my love life and work separate. I am already so young and face adversity with just this fact alone when working in the medical field. Considering I also have not come forth with such information to my immediate family, I have found it best to just keep to myself.”

Some participants also reported that they did feel as though their orientation led to more stress at their workplace (n=2). The reasons for this stress varied from hearing derogatory comments to being afraid to slip up and put themselves in danger. An example of a typical response in this category is:

“I think it does. Straight people don't have to think about what they say, how they phrase things, or their safety if they say the wrong thing. They don't have to force themselves to laugh at

hurtful jokes. I can't always use my personal experiences to relate to my coworkers because it might make them uncomfortable. Sometimes it can be alienating”

Along with these different categories of response, many participants acknowledged that their orientation could add stress but had not due to a safe and inclusive environment or other employees who identified as a sexual minority that they worked with (n=5). This supports the result findings that those that perceive more stigma due to their sexuality, are more stressed at work. Those who do not feel that stigma, due to inclusive environments, seem have less stress at their job but acknowledge that this could change.

### **Discussion**

Stigma conscientiousness was found to be significantly correlated with workplace stress. The more a participant who identified as sexual minority individuals thought they were being judged or treated differently due to their sexuality (stigma conscientiousness), the more stress they reported at work. Past research has shown that discrimination happened to 27.1% of sexual minority individuals at work (Sears & Mallory, 2011). With this in mind, many people who identified as sexual minority individuals may be concerned about their wellbeing. Those who feel they are treated differently, may see this as a threat to their safety or comfort level at work, causing them to have more stress. The average age of someone “coming out” or disclosing they are a sexual minority, occurred at around 20 (“Chapter 3: The Coming Out Experience”, 2013). Undergraduates are most often age 18-22 when they are in college. This means the jobs they have as undergraduates may be the first at which they disclose their sexuality. Being cautious of the reactions and treatment from others may lead to more stress for these individuals. Future research is warranted to observe the correlation between workplace stress and stigma conscientiousness changes depending on how long a person has been out. This is an important

subject to study due to the nature of being a minority in a professional environment. In order for minorities to feel comfortable and safe in their environment, employers must be aware of the sources of perceived stigma. What makes people feel as though they are being treated differently and how can it be addressed? This is an important research question that should be explored in the future to determine what steps employers, universities, and everyday citizens should make to create a safe environment for those who are in the sexual minority, so they do not perceive stigma from the rest of the population. This change could benefit everyone but especially employers. High stress work environments positively correlate with poor work quality and less productivity (Ajayi, 2018). By eliminating the correlation between more workplace stress and perceived stigma, people who identify as sexual minority individuals may experience less of these negative effects.

Results of the current study showed that among undergraduate college student in NC there was no significant difference in workplace level stress between sexual minority and heterosexual participants. Workplace stress had not been examined in college students in this population in previous literature, although the general social survey found that and 27.1% of all sexual minority workers have experienced some form of discrimination (Sears & Mallory, 2011). The fact that no significant difference was found is a positive finding. Students who identified as sexual minority individuals did not have higher rates of stress due to their sexuality. Results may be indicative of a change in our society and social perceptions of individuals who identified as sexual minorities. Individuals who identified as sexual minorities showed no significant difference in any subscale of the workplace stress survey, suggesting that across the areas of wellness, social support, resilience, and negative coping strategies, there were no significant differences between individuals who identified as sexual minorities and their heterosexual peers.



This supports the earlier result that there is no overall significant difference in workplace stress in these two populations. Earlier studies show that individuals who identified as sexual minorities do experience discrimination in high school and in their careers (Sears & Mallory 2011) (Russel, Tumey, Ryan, & Diaz, 2010), but no study had been done specifically on the college student population in their workplace. The fact that no significant difference was found, is a positive finding from this study. Employment through college is often financially necessary and can be the first jobs the people often have in their fields. A stressful work environment could lead to students having a harder time in the future with their career.

Outness was also measured for participants to determine if the amount of people who were aware of their sexuality was correlated to their overall workplace stress levels. There was no significant correlation with outness and workplace stress across participants who identified as sexual minorities. While research has not addressed this exact correlation, outness has been shown to lead to better mental health and wellbeing in people who identified as sexual minorities. Conversely, based on prior research, those who are out at work do report more acts of discrimination than those who are not (Russel, Tumey, Ryan, & Diaz, 2010). This was not specific, though, to college students and rather included a large age range. The fact that outness had no significant effect on workplace stress may be due to the accepting nature of many of the participants, who identified as sexual minorities, place of work. In responses to the qualitative question posed to participants “Do you believe your sexual orientation impacts your stress at work more than your heterosexual peers?”, many participants stated that they worked in a welcoming and accepting environment that treated them with respect regardless of their sexual orientation. Within an accepting atmosphere, the worry of discrimination for being “out” may not be high, if it exists at all. The findings from this study may reflect positive changes towards

undergraduate students being able to express their sexuality without fear of retaliation at work, although more should be researched on this subject to see just how outness plays a role in the workplace environment.

The qualitative findings of this study provide an impactful contribution to the literature. They help portray personal explanations as to how undergraduates in identifying as a sexual minority react to their workplace in regard to their sexuality. Responses to the question fell into one of four categories: no impact without explanation, no impact due to being “lucky” a safe environment was provided, no impact due to choosing not to discuss sexuality, or impacted due to feelings of alienation. The themes that emerged add an interesting perspective to the data. Many students suggested that having a job they felt safe in was a “lucky” chance, and many of these students worked for the university, which has a very active LGBT Center and that educates employees and professors on ways to create a safe environment for students who identify as sexual minorities. It could be, that the university created a safe space for these students to find employment, regardless of their orientation. This idea of being “lucky” also shows an anticipation of working in a hostile environment.

Students who did not choose to disclose the information did so, in all cases, because they did not find it to be important, not because they were fearful of the reaction of their coworkers. In fact, students often stated they knew their coworkers would be supportive, but they were either private individuals or did not see their coworkers enough for it to come up

Other students expressed that they did feel more stress at work due to feeling different from the rest of their coworkers. While these responses were in the minority, it is important to note that they did exist. These students often mentioned changing how they talked or what they talked about in order to be able to relate to coworkers more easily or to avoid making anyone

uncomfortable. The act of filtering and changing what you say and do in order to avoid being seen as a sexual minority is called concealment, and has been found to lead to depression, anxiety, preoccupation, social isolation, and more (Pachankis, 2007). Healthy work environments where this behavior is not necessary are ideal although may be hard to find for some.

This qualitative data was helpful to put into words, the experiences of undergraduates in North Carolina who identified as sexual minorities. Without it, insight into the common issues that caused higher perceived stigma and higher workplace stress to be correlated may not have been as clear. Future research may be interested in exploring these personal experiences in order to better understand the narrative of individuals who are in the sexual minority and their life experiences.

The implications of this research are important to consider for a variety of professionals. It is beneficial for the sexual minority community that employers are aware that the environment they create for their employees can lead to more or less stress. In order for employers to create a successful business, they need successful employees, and this means creating a work environment conducive to all workers, and in this case, an environment free from stigma for those in the sexual minority. Creating an inclusive and accepting environment that lowers the stigma a person who identifies as a sexual minority may perceive, is helpful in making sure they are not more stressed than their heterosexual counterparts. For psychologists working with people who identify as sexual minorities, it is necessary to be aware that high levels of stigma in the workplace could have effects on their client's stress levels and therefore mental health. Making sure that people who identify as sexual minorities find environments that are safe for them to work in and succeed is an issue to be addressed. These findings show that, while they

may not be more stressed at work overall, a negative environment can lead sexual minority individuals to being more stressed at work. Future research may be interested in examining what people who identify as sexual minorities perceive as threats or discomforts in order to give those working with them a clear way to make their work environment more comfortable. Job stress has been shown to correlated to low productivity, increased absenteeism, higher error rates, poor quality of work, alcohol and drug abuse, and cardiovascular problems (Ajayi, 2018).

Although the current study has many positive implications towards the literature in this area, it is not without limitations. One limitation of this study is the generalizability of the results; given that this study was conducted on a small pool of participants in a limited geographical area, results may not be generalizable to the larger population. Replication with a larger participant group with a more diverse range of experiences could add to its generalizability. During this study, an international pandemic arose limiting the number of people who could be recruited and changing the employment of many in the state of North Carolina, leading to a smaller sample population. This study was also conducted with participants mostly from East Carolina University, less than 5 were from other colleges in the state. Replication at different universities and in different areas of the country may lead to different results and could add to the diversity of information on experiences seen in the sexual minority community. Future research is warranted in looking more closely at the perceived stigma measure, in order to determine what practices and action led to higher rates of stigma could lead to a more applicable intervention for employers to create a safe work environment for sexual minorities. The unique in environment throughout different industries could also be examined in order to learn what fields support or are lacking support for their employees who identify as sexual minorities, should be considered as well in future research. The effects of

workplace stress and high levels of perceived stigma on the long-term success of those under more stress due to their orientation would also provide evidence as to why change is needed in places of employment and is a needed area of future research.

### **Conclusion**

Higher levels of stigma Consciousness were significantly correlated to higher levels of workplace stress in sexual minority undergraduate students in North Carolina. There was no significant difference in overall levels of workplace stress in sexual minority undergraduates compared to their heterosexual peers. Outness was not significantly correlated to higher levels of workplace stress. Qualitative data suggested that individuals felt differently about the question “Do you believe your sexual orientation impacts your stress at work more than your heterosexual peers?”. Sexual minority students who felt there was no difference either felt that this was due to sexuality not being brought up at work or being “lucky” enough to find a safe work environment. Those who did report that they felt higher levels of stress said it was due to feelings of alienation or being different from their coworkers. Limitation on the pool of participants should be considered due to the global pandemic that took place in the spring of 2020. Future research avenues should look at what leads to higher levels of perceived stigma for people who identified as a sexual minority in the workplace and how to create a better environment. Future research should also consider replicating the study in a larger geographical area with a more diverse sample population.

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