Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Lesbian Women and Work-Relationship Conflict

Traci Y. Craig, University of Idaho

Abstract

"Don't ask, don't tell" policies are detrimental to the economy, the workforce, women, and their relationships. Requiring individuals to hide their sexual orientation is damaging to the workplace by creating a chilly work environment for lesbians. In addition, the lack of support in the workplace and remaining closeted in order to keep one's job may also be detrimental to personal relationships. The gender expression of lesbian women may lead to gender and sexual orientation specific issues that serve both as added stressors as well as buffers to the inherent conflict between work and family for women who must remain closeted at work.

A sample of 126 lesbian women were surveyed regarding their gender expression, their partner's gender expression, relationship commitment, relationship satisfaction, relationship longevity, and level of disclosure of their lesbian identity in the workplace. Results indicate that gender expression impacts the ways in which being out as lesbian in the workplace may impact personal relationships. These policies and the resulting chilly work climate reach beyond the workplace and into the home.

Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Lesbian Women and Work-Relationship Conflict

We learn from an early age that there are good fun secrets and bad dirty secrets. Not telling your mom about her surprise birthday party falls into the good fun secret category. However, if a neighbor tells you that you must never tell anyone what you do at his or her house, this takes on the feel of a bad dirty secret. It is a cultural indicator that whatever is to be kept secret is shameful; that it is not meant to be aired in public. Sexual orientation and the policies that have been put in place to keep one's sexual orientation a secret have more the feel of a bad dirty secret than your mother's surprise birthday party. This seems all the more pronounced when some people can tell and some people can't tell. Heterosexual individuals can wear wedding rings and put up wedding photos, while gay and lesbian couples may face unemployment lines if they do so in a don't ask, don't tell workplace.

"Don't' Ask, Don't Tell" originated in a U.S. military policy (US Code Title 10, 1993) that prohibits anyone who "demonstrate(s) a propensity or intent to engage in homosexual acts" from serving in the military, because it "would create an unacceptable risk to the high standards of morale, good order and discipline, and unit cohesion that are the essence of military capability." The policy goes on to forbid not only disclosing one's orientation, but also from speaking about any homosexual relationships, including marriages or other familial attributes.

While the policy originated as a compromise between legislators and the military, it has become a common way in which organizations refer to similar policies or their approach to diversity when it comes to sexual orientation. This may be formalized policy or an informal organizational cultural norm that is communicated by the phrase "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." The

implication generally being that a person is allowed to work, exist within, or be a member of an organization so long as one does not disclose a bisexual or homosexual orientation. Making it clear that heterosexual people are given free reign to talk about their sexual orientation, including their families and children (Pobo, 1999).

Even when there is no explicit policy about disclosing a lesbian or gay sexual orientation at work, it is not something that people do lightly. Regardless of the policy in place, coming out (disclosing one's sexual orientation) at work is considered a problem by two-thirds of individuals (Levine & Leonard, 1984; Winkelpeck & Westfelt, 1982). One coping mechanism is to stay closeted, pass as heterosexual at work by devoting energy to portraying oneself as heterosexual, separating work and home life, and avoid social situations with co-workers (Garnets & Kimmel, 1991). A workplace that is supportive of workers being honest about who they are and employees being out in the workplace is related to decreased job anxiety and increased job satisfaction (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Ragins, 2004).

Deciding whether or not to come out is not a one-time decision. Rather, it is a decision that is made many times during the course of one's career (Sedgewick, 1990). A change in jobs or the hire of someone new at the workplace leads to another decision point. At each of these decision points the organizational climate comes to bear on the decision about whether or not to disclose one's sexual orientation to that person. Being out about being gay or lesbian is not always an all or none situation. Rather, most individuals are out to some people, but not others. Some are out to absolutely no one in the work environment, while others may be out to everyone in the work environment. It is important to understand how individuals who are out to one or two people and those that are out to everyone with whom they work may differ considerably. Even being partially closeted is likely to have some impact on feelings of stress in the workplace and stress specifically about their family life. The costs of closeted work environments are not only personal but financial as well.

From a capitalistic viewpoint, the organization's bottom line is negatively impacted by "don't ask, don't tell" policies. The United States Department of Defense has spent millions of dollars enforcing the policy (Carpenter, 2006). The costs are financial in the removal of people who violate the policy by outing themselves. However, the costs are also financial when company time is spent with lesbian and gay employees censoring their casual conversations or contemplating how to keep their sexual orientation from leaking out during a water cooler chat in

which weekend plans were discussed. The cognitive effort expended to stay closeted decreases work productivity (Blank & Slipp, 1994). These policies also undermine integrity of employees, by requiring individuals to lie or engage in lies by omission when asked the most mundane questions about their families. Enforced subterfuge takes cognitive effort, especially when a pronoun error could cost the employee their job. Failure to maintain the cover could lead directly to the unemployment line, with no recourse.

Currently in 33 of the United States, it is legal to fire someone based on their sexual orientation and in 42 states, it is legal to do so based on gender identity. Gender identity is a broad term and not reserved only for individuals who identify as transgendered. In these states even being too masculine or too feminine are viable grounds for dismissal. Also, it is not necessary to prove that you are in fact gay or lesbian or even other gendered, simply the perception that a person is outside the normative gender or sexual orientation is considered enough evidence to be legally dismissed.

It would seem that the government is lagging behind the corporations that have embraced sexual orientation diversity in their workforces. Fortune 500 companies are lining up to get on the gay-friendly bandwagon (Kuhr, 2005). This is clearly a positive step, but one that may disproportionately benefit men and leave women who choose other careers with little hope of a warmer workplace. Women are more likely than men to choose to work for smaller organizations (Cleveland, Stockdale, & Murphy, 2000). Women are also more likely than men to work in positions in daycare, nurseries, pre-school, and elementary schools which are notably less tolerant to gay-friendly policies (King, 2004). The over-representation of women in these occupations and smaller organizations means that many women are not going to reap the benefits of the corporate progressive stance any time soon. There are other ways in which the experiences of lesbians as minority women in the workforce may be impacted by don't ask don't tell policies. The impact is not only felt in the workplace, but that chilly workplace may also impact family life. Work Family balance is a widely discussed issue, but has not been addressed in a context that examines how minority stress at work could throw the balance off.

Recent models examining the interplay between work and home life acknowledge that work and home life are intertwined and impact one another (Zedeck, 1992). The segmentation model that posits that work and home life are distinct and the stressors in one do not impact the other has largely fallen by the wayside. The spillover model and compensation models of

understanding work-family balance have dispensed with this notion and acknowledge that stress from work or home can spillover into the other domain. The compensation model also illustrates that work and home do not exist on separate planes and proposes that positive experiences in one area may make up for negative experiences in the other. Both models demonstrate that work life does impact home life and vice versa (Zedeck, 1992).

This interaction between work life and home life has been explored largely in heterosexual populations with a focus on chore division (Zedeck, 1992). The work and personal lives of sexual minority individuals have also been explored, but the boundary between the two is rarely crossed. There is work that focuses on the work experiences of gay and lesbian employees. Waldo (1999) shows that heterosexism in the workplace decreases job satisfaction, psychological well being, and physical health. Others have examined sexual minority women to understand how minority status may impact the workplace experience (Balsam, 2003). There is also a considerable body of work that examines how the relationships of gays and lesbians (Herek, 2006). Still other work has examined the coming out process at the individual level and impact of minority stress on individuals (Herek, 1998). Lesbians may experience a dual minority status and additional stress in the workplace, as they are both women and lesbians (Hall, 1989; Schneider, 1986). However, examining the ways in which the pressure of being a sexual minority at work impacts relationships has not been explored.

Personal Costs

One of the major predictors of relationship longevity is social support from friends and family (Bryant & Conger, 1999). Numerous studies have shown that a romantic relationship that receives social support is more likely to persist than a relationship that does no have social support (Agnew, Loving & Drigotas, 2001; Johnson & Milardo, 1984). Kurdek (1998) found that the most frequent social support providers for gay and lesbian individuals were, in order, friends, partners, family, and coworkers.

The family portion of the social support network may be smaller for lesbian women than for heterosexual women. Research has also shown social support networks for lesbian and gay individuals to be truncated by those that reject them once they divulge their sexual orientation (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005). This means that each member of the smaller social network carries more weight and more responsibility for supporting (or not supporting) the romantic relationship. Married couples have more kin in their social support networks than do

unmarried couples (Fischer, 1982; Gerstel, 1988; Hurlbert and Acock, 1990; Wellman, 1985). The inability to be legally married in the United States may lead gay and lesbian couples to also have fewer kin in their networks and be more reliant on friends and co-workers for this support.

Co-workers are increasingly becoming an important part of social networks, as individuals spend more of their waking hours at work than socializing, engaging in leisure activity, or housework (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). Interaction with network members that are not in the workplace may be limited by the amount of time and energy expended at work (Blau, 1973; Pugliesi and Shook, 1998; Waite and Harrison, 1992). Co-workers can be an important source of social support (Lewittes, 1989; Moore, 1990). In addition, co-worker reactions to the coming out process have been shown to mediate workplace heterosexism (Waldo, 1999). A positive co-worker reaction can ameliorate the negative impact of a heterosexist organizational culture, and a negative co-worker reaction can make the diversity-friendly workplace policy seem moot.

Julie, Chartrand, and Begin (1999) have also found that the social networks of gay and lesbian couple members tend to have greater overlap than the social networks of heterosexual couples. Gay and lesbian couples share more mutual friends with their partners and may have relatively few individuals in their social support network that are not also friends with their partners. Co-workers likely represent some portion of the social support network members who are unique to the individual, making them particularly vital sources of information. A network member who has only one member of the couple's interest in mind may be seen as a more reliable source of information than a network member who may also take your partner's side.

The social support networks of gay and lesbian individuals have many unique qualities. They may be smaller, more reliant on non-kin members, and co-workers may be especially important members for helping individuals deal with heterosexist based work stress. Lesbians however may be more impacted by these social support networks than gay men.

Women more frequently seek out social support (Thoits, 1995) and are even more sensitive to a lack of social support than are men (Bryan, Fitzpatrick, Crawford & Fisher, 2001). Other research on minority stress has identified familial rejection as a particularly stressful event for lesbians compared to gay men (Todosijevic, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2005). Disapproval of relationships and lack of social support were both reported to be included in this lesbian-specific stressor. Women who are widely out about their sexual orientation experience feelings of more

social support to women who are more closeted (Jordan, 1998). Thus, policies that encourage women to be closeted may decrease perceptions of social support. Taken together this body of research indicates that lesbian women in particular may be particularly impacted by the perception that co-workers disapprove of their romantic relationships.

Social support clearly predicts commitment, though there are other well-researched predictors. Namely, the Investment Model proposed by Rusbult (1980, 1983) has been frequently used to understand relationship commitment by measuring satisfaction, willingness to sacrifice, alternatives to the relationship, and investments in the relationship. It is unclear where support (or lack of support) from others might factor in to this model. In addition, it is possible that minority stress or in this case lesbian specific stressors may also impact relationship commitment.

Lehmiller & Agnew (2006) used the investment model to explore how commitment levels in stigmatized relationships were impacted by perceived social support. Perceptions of social disapproval of the relationship were related to significantly lower levels of commitment. This effect persisted even after all other investment model factors were included (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006). It is clear that how others view the relationship contributes in meaningful ways to relationship commitment (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004). Lehmiller and Agnew (2006) investigated not only same-sex couples but also interracial couples and age-gap couples. There are likely important distinctions among the types of couples they investigated. Specifically, the ability for a gay or lesbian partner to hide their relationship from others to avoid overt social disapproval may still be based on the perception that such disapproval exists. In the next section the ways in which gender expression impacts disclosure and visibility of sexual orientation will be addressed.

Gender Expression: Beyond Sexual Orientation

Discussions of organization diversity were initially limited to race and sex and only recently has sexual orientation been addressed (Croteau, 1996). Organizations are even less likely to address the issue of diversity in gender expression or the outward display of gender (Hill, 2006). It is important to understand that the ways in which women are treated and the ways in which sexual minority individuals are treated may be impacted by the ways in which lesbian women in particular engage in gender expression.

Butch and femme gender identities have existed in the lesbian community since at least the early 1900s. However, it is likely that these terms and concepts were used prior to that point as well. The terms fell out of favor for middle class white women during the height of the Women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s (see Levitt & Hiestand, 2004 for a review). Blue-collar women, women in rural areas, and other women who did not feel included in or indeed felt ostracized by the second-wave women's movement, continued to use these terms and engage in these gender expressions. More recently, the study of queer theory and a push to understand gender expressions beyond the binary (in which masculinity is to be opposed because it oppresses) have led to a re-emergence of butch/femme culture in the greater lesbian community. This re-emergence has reshaped and re-defined the terms by broadening the variation of gender expressions that can be encompassed or expressed by using these terms as both nouns and modifiers.

The term "butch" typically refers to a lesbian who expresses gender in a more masculine way via dress, demeanor, nonverbal behaviors, or choice of activities. Lesbians who express gender in a more feminine than masculine way may choose to use the term "femme". These labels do not require that a person behave or do certain things in their lives or that they behave consistently within the scope of masculine or feminine across contexts. There is no specific definition that has been widespread and it is often a learned understanding of what it means to be butch or femme within the culture. The re-emergence has led to the development of a recent research literature on butch and femme genders (Levitt & Hiestand, 2005). The terms may be used as descriptors themselves or as identities. In some cases the terms are used as modifiers of other terms expressing sexual orientation, political orientation, or other identities (e.g., radical butch dyke). What remains constant is that the terms butch and femme do contain some information about gender expression.

Historically the terms butch and femme were used as indicators within lesbian subculture to identify with whom a person might partner. Prior to the women's movement, locations in which there was a critical mass of lesbians in which to establish a cultural understanding butch and femme might indicate something about partner preference. For example, it was considered taboo for a butch woman to partner with another butch woman. This no longer seems to be the case, though there may still be some women who abide by this norm. Today, gender expression in terms of masculinity and femininity or butch and femme does not reliably denote or

necessarily define anything about what sexual activities a person might choose to engage in or with whom.

For the purposes of this work, the term "butch" was used to represent a myriad of identities that would be considered more masculine than feminine. The term "femme" was used to represent a myriad of identities that would be considered more feminine than masculine. Individuals who do not see their gender expression or use these terms for their gender expression chose to use the terms androgynous, queer, or other language that did not communicate masculinity or femininity. Lesbian gender expression is an important consideration when understanding the impact of coming out in the workplace and how that experience in turn impacts romantic relationships. Butch and femme lesbians may share a sexual orientation but the ways in which others perceive them is quite distinct.

Femme women have passing privilege in that they frequently do not have to make drastic alterations to their appearance or behavior for others to assume they are heterosexual. Femme women do not appear to be very different on the surface from heterosexual women. They do not evoke the idea of lesbian and therefore easily pass as heterosexual in the workplace, in public, and in some cases unintentionally in social settings. The cost of the passing privilege is that femme women often face invisibility and femme phobia within the lesbian community (Levitt, Gerrish, & Hiestand, 2003). A woman that appears to be heterosexual may be assumed to be heterosexual by other lesbians and find it difficult to meet potential partners or even make friends in the lesbian community until it is somehow made clear that she is not a heterosexual woman. Femme women and lesbian women who previously identified as heterosexual may change their nonverbal behavior or appearance in an attempt to be seen as lesbian and make connections with the lesbian community (Larson, 2006).

Butch women face quite a different set of circumstances. Depending on how masculine a woman's appearance or carriage may be it could be difficult or impossible for this woman to *not* have her sexual orientation questioned. There may be the assumption that this woman is a lesbian because of the way that she carries herself, dresses, or even cuts her hair. Butch women have in some spaces become the definition of lesbian (Geiger, Harwood, & Hummert, 2006). When a person considers what a lesbian looks like, it is likely that butch identity markers come readily to mind. Butch women who choose or feel pressured to be closeted, may even put extra effort in trying to divorce themselves from their butch gender expression identity in order to pass as

heterosexual. Butch women may find it more difficult to be closeted at work even if they wished to be.

The types of interactions that butch and femme women face in the workplace may largely be driven by the extent to which they are out to co-workers, but even then there are stressors for both butch and femme women. Butch women may find that male co-workers do not see them as female and will engage them in overtly sexist discussion. That is, a butch woman is more lesbian than woman. However, a femme woman might find that heterosexist language abounds from her colleagues unless she frequently reminds them of her non-heterosexual identity because she is seen as more woman than lesbian.

When lesbian women couple in a variety of combinations of butch and femme identities, (i.e., Butch-Femme, Femme-Femme, Butch-Butch,) the ways in which a femme's privilege to pass and a butch partner's inability to do so may create specific hurdles for a couple overcome in order to remain in a socially supported committed relationship. Femme women who are out at work may be view themselves and be viewed by their partners as more invested and committed to the relationship, as they have sacrificed their passing privilege. Butch women on the other hand, do not seem to have as much latitude for remaining closeted and their being out at work may be less indicative of commitment to the relationship and more a matter of circumstance.

Current Study

The goal of this survey was to determine what impact being out at work has on lesbian relationships. In addition, the survey explored the impact that a person's gender expression might have on the relationship between being out at work and relationship commitment. Several hypotheses were explored.

Hypothesis 1: Being out at work will be related to higher levels of relationship commitment and relationship satisfaction. In addition, having a partner who is out at work will also increase relationship commitment and relationship satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2: Butch women will be out to more individuals in the workplace than femme women.

Hypothesis 3: Gender expression will impact the relationship between commitment and being out at work. The correlation between relationship commitment and being out at work will be stronger for femme women than for butch women.

Hypothesis 4:   Partner's gender expression will also impact the relationship between commitment and a partner being out at work. The correlation between relationship commitment and a partner being out at work will be stronger for partners of femme women than for partners of butch women.

Method

Much research on the lesbian community has examined communities in urban coastal areas (e.g., San Francisco, New York) which are more liberal than other regions of the United States. In this work, we wanted to include women from the Midwest and from a variety of geographic settings. It was also important that we have at least some women who were not out at the workplace in order for us to determine what the impact of being closeted might be. Given the sensitive nature of disclosing one's sexual orientation, especially if one is closeted at work and issues surrounding class and Internet access made options of Internet surveys less appealing. In light of the specific needs of this project, it was determined that one source of lesbian community that would meet the criteria of being relatively under-studied and accessible to a variety of women would be an annual music festival held in Michigan each year. The festival is attended predominantly by lesbian women (approximately 95%) and represents a specific geographic area that is rarely included in this type of research (for a description see Kendall, 2006).

Participants

In August of 2005, 178 lesbian women participated by completing a short questionnaire about their workplaces and their most recent romantic relationship. The sample was 95% Caucasian, 2% African American, 1% Asian American, 1% Hispanic, and 1% Native American. The mean age was 27 years old with a range of 18-63. Twenty-six states were represented, with high representation from the Midwest as that is where the survey was conducted.

Fifty women indicated they were currently single and the 129 remaining women were currently in relationships that had persisted 3 months or longer. One hundred of these couples reported that they were cohabiting and two reported being in long distance relationships. The mean relationship length was 6.5 years with a maximum of 35 years. If both members of a couple were present and completed questionnaires, one questionnaire from the couple was selected randomly to include in the analyses. Three questionnaires were subsequently not analyzed to avoid dependence in the data leaving 126 participants included in this analysis.

The sample was predominantly employed and included few students or unemployed individuals. The majority of our sample was employed full-time (77%). Part-time workers (10%) and self-employed women (8%) made up an additional 18% of the sample. Less than 2% of our sample reported they were students, retired, homemakers, or unemployed.

Measures

Relationship Measures. Single items from the original Investment Model Scale were used to represent each of the model's constructs: commitment, satisfaction, investments, willingness to sacrifice, and alternatives (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). While single items are not ideal, given limited resources in terms of time and participant incentives it was imperative to reduce the total number of items included in the questionnaire.

Gender Expression. The scale construction commenced by naming two large categories and labeling them butch and femme, where butch was expected to be more masculine than feminine and femme more feminine than masculine. Then through discussion with community members and online searches of personal web sites that included gender expression identity markers, a larger list of expression labels were generated. Independent coders, using a sort re-sort technique, sorted these labels into three piles. One pile representing butch, one pile representing femme, and a single pile that included terms that were neither butch nor femme. Each pile was then sorted through again into additional piles that ranged from extremely butch to extremely femme. Labels that were redundant were removed from the sort and represented only once. There were a resulting 22 unique labels of which two were thought to be offensive to a large portion of the community and were removed. The remaining 20-gender expression labels were placed along a continuum that coders generated together and through consensus determined the order of specific items about which there may have been disagreement.

This resulted in a scale that ranged from Stone Butch to Stone Femme with 18 other labels between these two representing variations of butch and femme expression. The midpoint was labeled as androgynous and was thought to indicate an equal proportion of masculinity and femininity in gender expression. For purposes of statistical analyses, a participant was considered to be butch if they responded anywhere on the butch side of the scale and femme if they responded on the femme side of the scale. Analysis of each of the 20 categories individually would result in sample sizes too low to provide meaningful data. In addition, the hypotheses

speak to the broader gender expressions of butch and femme rather than to a specific way of expressing that gender that might be captured by an individual label.

Participants were asked to read through the labels and make a determination if any of these labels fit their own gender expression. They were also encouraged to add their own labels and place them on the continuum where they felt they would fit. Participants that did not want to use the scale were provided a space to describe their gender expression in way that they felt comfortable. They were then asked to do the same for their perception of their partner's gender expression.

Out at Work. In order to measure whether a participant was out at work and to what extent we asked a series of questions. First, participants were asked to indicate the percentage of supervisors, co-workers, subordinates, and clients/customers that they were out to in their workplace. Then participants were asked for an overall percentage of their workplace that knew that they were lesbian. In addition, participants were asked to indicate the same percentages for their partner. Percentages were averaged to create an out at work percentage.

Several items were also included that asked participants if their workplace had any anti-discrimination policies in place. Participants were asked to indicate the first person from work that they told they were lesbian and if they were not out the reasons they were not out.

Demographic Items. Participants were asked to report their age, length of relationship, sexual orientation, and zip code.

Procedure

Participants were approached while they were waiting in line to gain admission to the festival. The line typically forms in the early morning hours and admission doesn't begin until 1 pm. During these hours research assistants approached women in the line and asked if they would be willing to complete a short survey. If the woman agreed she was given a consent form and asked to read through it and sign. Once the consent form was returned and placed in a separate envelope, the participant was handed the questionnaire on a clipboard with a pen. Of the women approached to complete the questionnaire only 5 refused. The researcher asked if there were any questions before proceeding to the next woman in line. The questionnaires were returned to the experimenter or to a centrally located drop box. The debriefing was then made available at the drop box site or handed to the woman by the researcher.

Results

First a series of descriptive statistics were calculated to explore the workplace climate for the women in our sample. One-third of the participants reported that their company offered partner health benefits. Sixty-five percent of participants indicated that their workplace included a non-discrimination policy. However, 30.5% of participants did not know what the policy was or indicated that policies were informal.

Co-workers (69%) were most frequently chosen as the first work-other to be told of a participant's sexual orientation; 30% of participants chose supervisors. Fifty-four percent of participants voluntarily come out, 4.5% were asked by someone at work if they were lesbian, 9.5% of participants told one person who then told others, 3% introduced their partners as a way to come out at the workplace.

Another 28% of women listed they had come out in other ways. Most of the butch women wrote open-ended responses indicating that they came out by showing up or statements such as, "It's kind of hard to hide you're a dyke when you look like me." Femme women who wrote open-ended responses were more likely to indicate that they became good friends with someone at work and it came up through the friendship or that they met other women who were lesbian and were "outed" by association with others.

Congruent with the re-emergence of butch-femme terminology only 10 women (6.4%) chose to identify as having an androgynous or non-butch/femme gender expression. More participants identified on the femme side of the scale (57%) than on the butch side of the scale (37%).

Hypothesis 1. The first hypothesis that relationship commitment and satisfaction would be positively correlated with the percent of workplace others that knew about the participant's sexual orientation was tested via correlational analysis. It should be noted that satisfaction and commitment were highly correlated in the sample ($r = .72$, $p<.001$) as would be expected from the Investment Model. Commitment was significantly correlated with being out at work ($r = .176$, $p=.049$). Satisfaction was not significantly correlated with a participant's out at work percentage ($r = .176$, $p=.365$).

The extent to which the partner was out at work was positively correlated with commitment ($r=.241$, $p=.009$). However, satisfaction was not impacted by the partner being out at work ($r=.102$, $p=.267$).

Hypothesis 2. Butch women were more likely than femme women to be out at work. An Analysis of Variance indicated that femme women were out to fewer people (65.38%) than butch women (75.66%) or Androgynous/Other women (82.37%), $F(2, 136) = 2.66$, $p=.054$.

Hypothesis 3. The correlation between relationship commitment and being out at work was stronger for femme women than for butch women. For femme women the correlation between relationship commitment and being out at work was present and significant ($r= .278$, $p=.038$) ; for butch women the correlation did not reach significance ($r= -.097$, $p=.531$).

Hypothesis 4. Partner's gender expression also impacted the relationship between commitment and the partner being out at work. It was predicted that the correlation between relationship commitment and being out at work would be stronger for partners of femme women than for partners of butch women. In order to examine this hypothesis correlations were calculated for all possible couple gender combinations (i.e., butch-butch, femme-femme, butch-femme).

Results indicate that in butch-butch couples commitment was not correlated with a partner being out in the workplace ($r(19)=.279$, $p=.246$), nor was commitment correlated with their own level of being out in the workplace ($r(19)=-.202$, $p=.421$). Femme-femme couples showed that their levels of commitment were correlated with their own level of being out at work (($r(54)=.279$, $p=.043$) and their femme partner's being out at work ($r(54)=.306$, $p=.028$).

Butch-femme couples also showed a pattern consistent with the hypothesis. Specifically, butch participants' commitment was correlated with their femme partner's being out at work ($r(24)=.279$, $p=.246$), but not with their own level of being out at work ($r(24)=-.043$, $p=.846$). Femme participants' commitment was not correlated with their butch partners being out at work ($r(30)=.221$, $p=.258$), but was significantly correlated with their own level of being out at work ($r(30)=.401$, $p=.028$). Femme women who were out at work were more committed to their relationships. The partners of femme women who were out at work were also more committed to their relationships.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which workplace policies that encourage sexual minorities to be closeted have impacts in the personal relationships of lesbian women. This is also one of the first explorations of the ways in which gender expression in terms of butch/femme identities have been explored in a context that also examined workplace

factors. Findings suggest that the gender expression of lesbian women can change the ways in which being out in the workplace impacts their relationships.

Butch women were out to a larger percentage of people at their workplace than were femme women. However, when femme women were out in the workplace it positively impacted their own and their partner's commitment to the relationship. For butch women there appears to be little impact on their relationships of being out in the workplace. This could be in part because butch women are more likely to be out in the workplace and do not have passing privilege. For a butch woman being out is not necessarily a choice in the way it is for femme women. Femme women on the other hand may be demonstrating their relationship commitment to their partners and themselves by choosing to be out in the workplace.

While this study did provide a unique non-urban Midwestern sample of lesbian women, it was drawn from a specific population that may be more inclined to disclose their sexual orientation. Attending the festival itself may be seen as a sign that one is out of the closet enough to identify the event as lesbian. Women who are not out to anyone or to very few people were not likely to be included in the study as they are unlikely to be represented in the festival-going population. In addition, there can be some class issues in that women who cannot afford such a trip or couldn't afford to arrive on the first day of the seven-day festival may also be underrepresented. Women who partner with transgendered or transsexual individuals may also have been underrepresented as the festival is open only to women-identified born women. Given idiosyncratic limitations and the specificity of the sample, it is all the more surprising that differences in the degree a woman was out at work was related to commitment and that gender expression was also an integral part of our findings.

It would be reasonable to expect that women who are not out at all or who are in other demographics would show similar patterns with regard to gender expression, level of sexual orientation disclosure at work, and relationship commitment. It may even be that the effects would be larger in a more diverse population in which women who were absolutely closeted and women who were quite publicly out (e.g., Ellen DeGeneres, Rosie O'Donnell) were included. The data are also correlational rather than causal so it is equally likely that femme women who are less out in the workplace may have partners who are less committed for other reasons.

Although it was predicted that satisfaction would be correlated with being out at work, this was not the case. Thus, it may be that social support has more of an impact on commitment

than on satisfaction with the relationship. This would be congruent with the research that demonstrates that social support is related to longevity and persistence, but does not really explore whether it increases satisfaction directly. Therefore, the social support that one might experience by being out in the workplace may not actually change the relationship functioning in ways that increase satisfaction, but rather only in ways that directly impact commitment to the relationship.

Social support networks were not explicitly investigated in this study. Future work should examine the ways in which perceptions of social support from workplace others impacts lesbian relationships and whether this effect is mediated by butch/femme identities. It would also be prudent to include more specific and elaborated measures to disentangle whether femme women being out at work is an expression of commitment and if it might be related to investments in the relationship.

Don't ask, don't tell policies and other chilly work climates may make coming out as lesbian in the workplace difficult, especially for femme women. One participant wrote, "As a butch, I'm always out, even when I don't want to be." Therefore the policy may be clearly a negative indicator for a butch woman and it may lead her to choose her occupation and work settings carefully to ensure her safety and income. However, femme women may be passing unintentionally as heterosexual women and be caught off guard by workplaces that go cold once she divulges her lesbian identity. Policies (both formal and informal) that encourage sexual minorities to be closeted may have very different effects on lesbians depending on their gender expression. In either case, such policies have not been successful in creating a tolerant or positive environment for anyone. The policy has served to give access to the military and other organizations to individuals who might otherwise be denied access to what remains an unwelcoming environment.

There are many reasons that policies should be changed and chilly work climates should be warmed when possible. Lower productivity, high turnover, increased absenteeism, and a lower bottom line are all organization-level reasons to do away with policies that encourage subterfuge. Employee stress, health, self-esteem, and increased minority stress are also excellent reasons to do away with policies that discriminate against sexual minorities. "Don't ask, don't tell" policies are blatantly unfair by asking sexual minorities to remain silent about their home lives, while handing the microphone to the heterosexual majority.

Conclusion

This paper is the first exploration of the ways that closeted work environments can harm the personal relationships of the women affected in specific ways that are dependent on gender expression. The harm of these policies reaches beyond the individual, into their home, and into their personal relationships. "Don't ask, don't tell" also hurts the company's bottom line with increased turnover, decreased employee well-being and productivity, lowered employee morale, and negatively impacted employee families. Conversely, organizations that are open, warm, and inviting to all of their employees equally will allow for the creation of not only happy healthy employees, but happy healthy partners, parents, and families. The idea of "don't ask, don't tell" is not about valuing the dollar and it certainly isn't valuing families.

Reference List

Agnew, C. R., Loving, T. J., & Drigotas, S. M. (2001). Substituting the forest for the trees: social networks and the prediction of romantic relationship state and fate. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81, 1042-1057.

Balsam, K. F. (2003). Trauma, stress, and resilience among sexual minority women: Rising like the phoenix. *Journal of Lesbian Studies, 7*, 1-8.

Blank, R., & Slipp, S. (1994). *Voices of Diversity*. New York: American Management Association.

Blau, Z. S. (1973). Old Age in a Changing Society. *Viewpoints*, New York.

Bryan, L., Fitzpatrick, J., Crawford, D., & Fischer, J. (2001). The Role of network support and interference in women's perception of romantic, friend, and parental relationships. *Sex Roles, 45*, 481-499.

Bryant, C. M., & Conger, R. D. (1999). Marital success and domains of social support in long-term relationships: Does the influence of network members ever end? *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 61*, 437-450.

Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2007). American Time Use Survey-2006 Results. United States Department of Labor.

Carpenter, D. (2006). The Cost of Don't Ask Don't Tell. *Outright* in *Metroweekly*. Retrieved September 10, 2007. (http://www.metroweekly.com/gauge/commentary.php?ak=2003)

Cleveland, J. N, Stockdale, M. S., Murphy, K. R. (2000). Women and Men in Organizations: Sex and Gender Issues at Work, Mahwah New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

D'Augelli, A. R., Grossman, A. R., & Starks, M. T. (2005). Parents' awareness of lesbian, gay and bisexual youths' sexual orientation. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 67*, 474-482.

Croteau, J. M. (1996). Research on the work experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people: An Integrative review of methodology and findings. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 48*, 195-209.

Etcheverry, P. E., & Agnew, C. R. (2004). Subjective norms and the prediction of romantic relationship state and fate. *Personal Relationships*, 11, 409-428.

Fischer, C. S. (1982). *To Dwell Among Friends: Personal Networks in Town and City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Garnets, L., & Kimmel, D. (1991). Lesbian and gay male dimensions in the psychological study of human diversity. In J. D. Goodchilds Ed. , *Psychological Perspectives on Human Diversity in America* pp. 143-189 . Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association.

Gerstel, N. (1988). Divorce, gender, and social integration. *Gender and Society, 2,* 343–367.

Geiger, W., Harwood, J., & Hummert, M. L. (2006). College students' multiple stereotypes of lesbians: A Cognitive perspective. *Journal of Homosexuality, 51*, 165-182.

Griffith, K., & Hebl, M. (2002). Acknowledgment of sexual orientation in the workplace. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87, 1191-1199.

Hall, M. (1989). Private experiences in the public domain: Lesbians in organizations. In J. Hearn, D. L. Sheppard, P. Tancred-Sheriff, & G. Burrell Eds. , *The Sexuality of Organization* pp. 125-138 . Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Herek, G. M. (1998). *Stigma and Sexual Orientation: Understanding prejudice against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Herek, G. M. (2006). Legal recognition of same-sex relationships in the United States: A Social Science Perspective. *The American Psychologist*, *61*, 607-621.

Hill, R. J. (2006). What's it like to be queer here? *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Educaiton, 2006*, 7-16.

Hurlbert, J. S., & Acock , A. C. (1990). The effects of marital status on the form and composition of social networks. *Social Science Quarterly, 71*, 163–174.

Johnson, M. P., & Milardo, R. M. (1984). Network interference in pair relationships: A Social psychological recasting of Slater's theory of social regression. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 46*, 893-899.

Jordan, K. M. (1998). Coming out for lesbian women: Its relation to anxiety, positive affectivity, self-esteem, and social support. *Journal of Homosexuality,35,* 41-63.

Julien, D., Chartrand, E., & Begin, J. (1999). Social networks, structural interdependence, and conjugal adjustment in heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 61*, 516-530.

Kendall, L. J. (2006). From the Liminal to the Land: Building Amazon Culture at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. University of Maryland Dissertation, 2006.

Kuhr, F. (2005). Welcoming workplaces. *The Advocate*. FindArticles.com. 13 Sep. 2007. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1589/is_2005_Oct_11/ai_n15777087

Kurdek, L. A., (1988). Perceived social support in gays and lesbians in cohabitating relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 54*, 504-509.

King, J. R. (2004). The possibility of gay teachers for young children. *Theory Into Practice*. FindArticles.com. 13 Sep. 2007. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0NQM/is_2_43/ai_n6143389

Larson, N. C. (2006). Becoming "One of the Girls" The Transition to lesbian in midlife. *Journal of Women and Social Work, 21*, 296-305.

Lehmiller, J. J., & Agnew, C. A., (2006). Marginalized relationships: The Impact of social disapproval on romantic relationship commitment. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 32*, 40-51.

Levine, M. P., & Leonard R. (1984). Discrimination against lesbians in the workforce. *Signs, 9*, 700-710.

Levitt, H., Gerrish, E., & Hiestand, K. (2003). The misunderstood gender. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research, 48,* 99-113.

Levitt, H. M., & Hiestand, K. R. (2004). A quest for authenticity: contemporary butch gender. *Sex Roles, 50,* 605-621.

Levitt, H. M., & Hiestand, K. R. (2005). Gender within lesbian sexuality: Butch and femme perspectives. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology, 18,* 39-51.

Lewittes, H. J. (1989). Just being friendly means a lot—women, friendship, and aging. *Women and Health, 14*, 139–159.

Moore, G. (1990). Structural determinants of men's and women's personal networks. *American Sociological Review, 55*, 726–735.

Pobo, K. (1999). The Gay/Lesbian Teacher As Role Model. *Humanist*. FindArticles.com. 13 Sep. 2007. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1374/is_2_59/ai_54099135, 2007.

Pugliesi, K., & Shook , S. L. (1998). Gender, ethnicity, and network characteristics: variation in social support resources. *Sex Roles, 38*, 215–238.

Ragins, B. R., 2004). Sexual orientation in the workplace: The Unique work and career experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual workers. *Research in Personnel and Human Resources management, 23*, 35-120.

Rusbult, C. E. (1980). Commitment and satisfaction in romantic associations: A test of the Investment Model. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 16*, 172-186.

Rusbult, C. E. (1983). A longitudinal test of the Investment Model: The development (and deterioration) of satisfaction and commitment in heterosexual involvements. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 45*, 101-117.

Rusbult, C. E., Martz, J. M., & Agnew, C. A. (1998). The Investment Model Scale: Measuring commitment level, satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size. *Personal Relationships*, *5,* 357-387.

Schneider, B. (1986). Coming out at work: Bridging the private/public gap. *Work and Occupations, 13*, 463-487.

Sedgewick, E., (1990). *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Thoits, P. A. (1995). Stress, coping, and social support processes: where are we? what next?. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior,* Extra Issue, 53–79.

Todosijevic, J., Rothblum, E. D. & Solomon, S. E. (2005). Relationship satisfaction, affectivity and gay-specific stressors in same-sex couples joined in civil unions. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 29*, 158-166.

Waite, L. J., & Harrison , S. C., (1992). Keeping in touch: How women in mid-life allocate social contacts among kith and kin. *Social Forces, 79*, 637–655.

Wald, C. R. (1999). Working in a majority context: A structural model of heterosexism as minority stress in the workplace. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 46*, 218-232.

Wellman, B. (1985). Domestic work, paid work, and net work. In: S. Duck and D. Perlman, Editors, *Understanding Personal Relationships*, Sage, London (1985 , pp. 159–191.

Winkelpeck, J. M., & Westfelt, J. S. (1982). Counseling considerations with gay couples. *Personnel and Guidance Journal, 60*, 294-296.

U.S. Code. Title 10 Subtitle A Part II Chapter 37 § 654. Policy concerning homosexuality in the armed forces. http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=browse_usc&docid=Cite:+10USC654 Retrieved September 10, 2007.

Zedeck, S. (1992). *Work, families, and organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.