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# The Differential Roles of Minority Stressors in LGB Identity Disclosure

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## ABSTRACT


Sexual minorities face multiple distinct stressors, including internalized stigma, felt stigma, and everyday discrimination. Prior research shows that these stressors are critical to their decisions to disclose their sexual orientation. However, many prior studies examined each stressor independently. It remains unclear how each minority stressor uniquely contributes to disclosure, and how they may relate to one another. This study addresses these gaps by analyzing a national probability dataset of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people in the United States ( $N = 944$ ) that measured outness (i.e. how out you are) and disclosure behavior (i.e. told someone you're LGB). Using multilevel path analysis, we tested a linear model and three distinct mediation models that describe the process of how minority stressors affect outness and disclosure behavior. Results revealed that when all minority stressors are considered simultaneously, disclosure behavior is best predicted by everyday discrimination, whereas outness is best predicted by internalized stigma. In addition, the best-fitting model suggests that on average, everyday discrimination predicts internalized stigma and felt stigma, which in turn predict less outness, but more disclosure behavior. We also explored the results by three age cohorts. Together, this work deepens a theoretical understanding of how minority stress shapes disclosure.

## KEYWORDS

Sexual minorities; disclosure; coming out; sexual orientation; minority stress; stigma; discrimination

As of 2021, the United States was among the top 25 lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB)-friendly countries in the world and demonstrated increased social acceptance of LGB people (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2022; GLAAD, 2023; Williams Institute, 2021). Yet, LGB people in the U.S. still face various social and psychological barriers in their lives such as discrimination and hostility. One of the distinctive barriers that LGB people may have to face is sexual identity disclosure or coming out of the closet. Although coming out provides numerous well-being benefits for LGB people (Brownfield & Brown, 2022; Legate et al., 2012, 2017), many people choose not to disclose their sexual identity (Jackson & Mohr, 2016; Pachankis, 2007; Pachankis & Jackson, 2023).

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What leads LGB adults to disclose their sexual orientation? Past research has shown that disclosure is related to both the context (e.g., having a nondiscrimination policy in the workplace) and the individual (e.g., less internalized stigma; Rostosky & Riggle, 2002). In particular, LGB individuals have the urge to express their authentic self through identity disclosure (Brownfield & Brown, 2022; Legate et al., 2017), but sexual minority stress (i.e., the distinct stress experienced by sexual minorities; Frost & Meyer, 2023; Meyer, 2003) may prevent them from doing so. Yet, past work has tended to examine each stressor in isolation (e.g., only measured felt stigma or internalized stigma and used it as a sole predictor; Brooks et al., 2020; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Herek et al., 2009), rather than investigating multiple stressors simultaneously. In the present work, we aimed to describe the relationship between minority stressors and how they contribute to sexual identity disclosure. Specifically, we modeled the relationships among the three stressors identified from the minority stress framework (i.e., internalized stigma, felt stigma, and everyday discrimination; Meyer, 2003) to elucidate the unique role of each in the process of disclosure.

### **Minority stress**

The minority stress model is an influential framework that explains mental health disparities between sexual minorities and heterosexual people (Meyer, 2003; Frost & Meyer, 2023). Minority stress is not characterized by a single event, but by ongoing experiences that sexual minorities have within cultural and social structures in addition to general stressors that affect everyone (Meyer, 2003). This framework identifies three such stress phenomena: acute and chronic forms of discriminatory events (i.e., everyday discrimination), expectations of those discriminatory events (i.e., felt stigma), and internalizing negative societal attitudes (i.e., internalized stigma). Here we use these three stressors to predict disclosure.

### **Everyday discrimination**

Everyday discrimination refers to daily experiences of discrimination or microaggressions (Frost & Meyer, 2023). It has also been referred to as enacted stigma (Chaudoir et al., 2013; Pachankis et al., 2018). Experiencing discrimination can lead LGB individuals to believe that being their authentic selves brings social disapproval, avoidance, and in extreme cases, physical harm (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003). As a result, sexual minorities who have experienced discrimination may decide not to disclose their sexual minority identity. For example, a cross-national study has found that individual-level discrimination (e.g., personally felt harassed) is consistently associated with lower levels of outness (Giraud & Leonard, 2024).

### ***Felt stigma***

Felt stigma or anticipated stigma refers to anticipating likely discrimination toward one's sexuality from others (Meyer, 2003; Herek, 2009a). It can manifest as an individual's knowledge or belief that LGB people are treated poorly in their social environments (Herek, 2009a; Herek et al., 2009). Felt stigma can happen because of first-hand experience with discrimination or as one learns from society's negative treatment of the group. Felt stigma may be related to actual discrimination, but is distinct, and people may experience the anticipation of stigma more frequently than actual discrimination (Scambler & Hopkins, 1986). In turn, when sexual minorities fear being a target of prejudice and discrimination, they may attempt to pass as straight or not disclose their identity (Brooks et al., 2020; Fuller et al., 2009; Goffman, 1963).

### ***Internalized stigma***

Internalized stigma refers to the internalization of negative attitudes toward one's own sexual orientation (Meyer, 2003). It often begins during the early socialization process where institutions propel people to form the expectation that being heterosexual is the norm (Herek et al., 2009). They learn that being homosexual is devalued in society and are aware that there are negative stereotypes attached to LGB people (i.e., felt stigma). Internalized stigma happens when they may incorporate these negative beliefs into their value system to align with societal values. When people feel negatively about their own sexual orientation, they may be unlikely to tell others that they hold that identity. Indeed, many past studies have documented that the more negatively a person feels about their sexual orientation, the less out they are to others (Berman et al., 2023; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Herek et al., 2009; Jackson & Mohr, 2016; Moskowitz et al., 2022; Rostosky & Riggle, 2002; Torres & Rodrigues, 2022).

### **Relationships between the minority stressors**

Although each minority stressor has been shown to relate to sexual orientation disclosure (Legate et al., 2012; Riggle et al., 2017; Solomon et al., 2015; Whitman & Nadal, 2015), some stressors may account for more variance in coming out. Prior work clearly shows that internalized stigma relates to less outness (i.e., the extent to which one is open about their sexual orientation; Durso & Meyer, 2013; Jackson & Mohr, 2016; Meidlinger & Hope, 2014; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Pachankis et al., 2018). Some studies suggest that felt stigma and everyday discrimination are associated with outness, whereas others suggest they are not (Durso & Meyer, 2013; Giraud & Leonard, 2024; Pachankis et al., 2018). However, because these findings examined one

minority stressor at a time and limited their operationalization of disclosure to outness, we do not yet know how minority stressors interact or their respective role in other forms of disclosure.

How might different minority stressors contribute to disclosure? First, it is plausible that the three minority stressors all predict disclosure concurrently. Chaudoir et al. (2013) propose that these stressors are all products of societal devaluation of the stigmatized identity. Furthermore, these minority stressors likely relate to one another as part of a process that ultimately leads to disclosure. Several researchers have theorized that such a process exists. Herek (2009a) theorizes a process by which people first experience discriminatory events that target their sexual orientation. This leads to anticipating becoming a victim of discrimination or being aware that such stigma exists in their community. Finally, they may start to incorporate the stigma into their value system and form a negative image of themselves and their identity. Hatzenbuehler (2009) describes a similar process in which chronic exposure to objective prejudice events (everyday discrimination) contributes to negative self-views (internalized stigma). These theories suggest that everyday discrimination might be an antecedent of felt stigma and internalized stigma. Indeed, empirical work has often used experience of discrimination as an exogenous variable to predict internalized stigma (Bruce et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2024; Walch et al., 2016). Thus, we see at least two plausible patterns of relationships between minority stressors: one where everyday discrimination predicts felt stigma and internalized stigma simultaneously, and the other where everyday discrimination predicts felt stigma, which in turn predicts internalized stigma.

Following the above theories on sexual stigma (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Herek, 2009a), we propose another possible relationship among the minority stressors. Specifically, the magnitude of the effect of everyday discrimination on felt stigma may differ depending on the level of internalized stigma. Unlike everyday discrimination and felt stigma, internalized stigma is an individual difference factor that reflects devaluing one's own identity (Chaudoir et al., 2013; Pachankis & Jackson, 2023). It is plausible that LGB people who are high in internalized stigma may be more negatively affected by discrimination than are LGB people low in internalized stigma, because they can feel there is greater negativity toward them in their social environments (i.e., higher felt stigma), which leads to less disclosure.

### **Outness and disclosure behavior**

Minority stressors relate to disclosure of one's LGB identity. Disclosure can be conceptualized in at least two ways: outness and disclosure behavior. Outness reflects overall openness about one's own sexual orientation, whereas disclosure behavior refers to a situational or goal-dependent one-time event of

disclosing one's sexual orientation (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Schwartzman & Neel, 2025). For example, a lesbian woman can come out to a heterosexual man with the goal of avoiding unwanted romantic interest while maintaining low overall outness. Therefore, it is meaningful to distinguish them as separate constructs. Disclosure is related to, but distinct from, concealment. Concealment involves specific behaviors or strategies to prevent information related to one's identity from being revealed (Le Forestier et al., 2024). Concealment is an important component of the minority stress framework, but can reflect distinct behaviors that are not simply the opposite of disclosure.

In the current study, we operationalize outness as the proportion of people to whom the participant has disclosed their sexual orientation, and disclosure behavior as an active decision to reveal one's sexual orientation to specific others for the first time (Meyer et al., 2002). These constructs could be, but are not necessarily, positively related to one another. For example, at high and low levels of outness, disclosure behavior may be low because either no-one or everyone knows one's sexual orientation, leading to the greatest disclosure at moderate levels of outness. Furthermore, outness and disclosure behavior may or may not be related to the same minority stressors. While most extant research has demonstrated the positive association between minority stress and outness (Durso & Meyer, 2013; Jackson & Mohr, 2016; Meidlinger & Hope, 2014; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Pachankis et al., 2018), the relationship between minority stress and this exact operationalization of disclosure behavior has not been examined. In addition, this construct is distinct from common conceptualizations of disclosure. For example, Meidlinger and Hope (2014) measures disclosure as the perceptions of the percent of the people in a specific group who are aware of one's sexual orientation, rather than measuring the actual disclosure behavior as a single event. Thus, examining how minority stress relates to disclosure behavior can be novel and expands current knowledge of identity disclosure.

## **Present work**

Sexual orientation disclosure is an important part of identity development for sexual minorities (Bruce et al., 2015; Dorri & Russell, 2024; Moskowitz et al., 2022) and is related to key mental health outcomes (Legate et al., 2017; Morris et al., 2001; Solomon et al., 2015; Whitman & Nadal, 2015). Not disclosing one's sexual identity is linked to increased risk of depression and lower well-being (Cipollina et al., 2025; Le Forestier et al., 2024; Pachankis, 2007; Pachankis et al., 2020; Riggle et al., 2017). Therefore, it is crucial to understand factors that are associated with LGB people's decision to disclose their sexual orientation.

The current research makes a number of novel contributions to our understanding of minority stress and disclosure. Research often has looked at one

minority stressor at a time or in isolation rather than taking all minority stressors into account (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Jackson & Mohr, 2016, Meidlinger & Hope, 2014; Pachankis et al., 2018; Rostosky & Riggle, 2002). In the work that has examined the relationships among minority stressors (Bruce et al., 2015, Liu et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2024; Walch et al., 2016), disclosure was not examined as the outcome. The current work then fills in this gap by examining all three minority stressors simultaneously and how they relate to disclosure specifically. In addition, most work on minority stressors and disclosure has examined either outness or disclosure behavior (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Riggle et al., 2017; Solomon et al., 2015), whereas here we compare and contrast them. Finally, by using a national probability sample, rather than a convenience sample, this study offers a unique opportunity to produce findings that are highly likely to generalize to the population of LGB people in the United States. Discovering the relative contributions of the different stressors to disclosure with such a sample can suggest potential intervention targets in the general population.

Building on prior theories of sexual minority stigma (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Herek, 2009a), we created four models to describe the relationship between the minority stressors and disclosure. Here, we focus on disclosure to straight friends and family because both outcomes were assessed only in reference to these targets, specifically. The first model tests whether all minority stressors are linked to outness and disclosure behavior simultaneously. The second model tests whether felt stigma and internalized stigma both mediate the effect of everyday discrimination on outness and disclosure behavior. The third model tests whether internalized stigma moderates the relation of everyday discrimination to felt stigma, which in turn relates to outness and disclosure behavior. Finally, the fourth model tests whether everyday discrimination relates to felt stigma, which relates to internalized stigma and the outcomes sequentially. By examining three minority stressors altogether with two outcomes, these four models can test each stressor's distinct relation to disclosure behavior and outness, thus broadening current theoretical understanding of minority stress and sexual identity development.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The present study analyzed public-use data from Generations: A Study of the Life and Health of LGB People in a Changing Society (Meyer, 2023). Generations is a longitudinal study of a national probability sample of 1518 LGB adults from the United States collected between 2016 to 2019. Specifically, wave 1 sample was collected between March 28, 2016 and March 30, 2017; wave 2 sample was collected between April 1, 2017 and

**Table 1.** Participant demographic characteristics.

Variable	N = 944	
	n	%
Gender		
Woman	398	42.2
Man	399	42.3
Transgender Woman	3	0.3
Transgender Man	1	0.2
Non-binary/Genderqueer	64	6.8
Did Not Answer	79	8.4
Age		
Younger (18–25)	391	41.4
Middle (34–42)	223	23.6
Older (48–55)	330	35.0
Sexual Orientation		
Lesbian/Gay	496	52.5
Bisexual	261	27.6
Other Sexual Minority	103	10.9
Did Not Answer	84	8.9
Race		
White	674	71.4
Multiracial	108	11.4
Hispanic/Latinx	76	8.1
Black/African American	70	7.4
Asian	10	1.1
Native American	3	0.3
Middle Eastern	2	0.2
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1	0.1

*Note.* We primarily used Waves 2 & 3 data to answer our research question, therefore we used participants' gender and sexual orientation responses from Wave 2. Race information was obtained from Wave 1 because it was only assessed once. Age cohort was only assessed once at the beginning of Wave 1.

March 30, 2018; wave 3 sample was collected between April 1, 2018 and March 30, 2019. Participants were recruited by the survey research company Gallup via random-digit dialing in a two-phase procedure in which the first phase served to identify LGB individuals, while the second phase confirmed their eligibility to participate in the study. Participants had at least a sixth-grade education, were able to speak English, and were in one of three age cohorts (18–27, 32–42, or 50–61). Self-administered survey questionnaires were returned in a pre-addressed envelope or submitted online, and participants received a \$25 gift card in exchange. In the current analytic sample, we used two waves of data because the disclosure behavior outcome was only assessed in the last two waves. After excluding missing data in the key variables, the final sample consisted of 944 participants (see sample characteristics in Table 1; see Meyer, 2023 for data source and materials).

## Measures

### Disclosure behavior

Disclosure behavior was measured using two items (Meyer, 2023; e.g., Have any of these things happened in the past year? You told a straight friend/a

family member that you are LGB for the first time; 0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*;  $r_{\text{tet } w2} = .62$ ,  $r_{\text{tet } w3} = .56$ ).

### **Outness**

Outness was measured using two items (Meyer et al., 2002; e.g., “Are you out to all, most, some, or none of your straight friends/family?”; 1 = *none*, 4 = *all*;  $\rho_{w2} = .61$ ,  $\rho_{w3} = .58$ ). Although the original dataset also assessed outness toward healthcare providers and coworkers, we did not include these two items in the current analysis. This is because disclosure behavior was only assessed among straight friends and family members, and we wanted to maintain the consistency across the two outcomes.

### **Everyday discrimination**

Everyday discrimination was measured using the average of a 9-item scale (Williams et al., 1997; e.g., “In your day-to-day life over the past year, how often did any of the following things happen to you? You were threatened or harassed”; 1 = *never*, 4 = *often*;  $\alpha_{w2} = .91$ ,  $\alpha_{w3} = .91$ ). Participants were presented with nine forms of discrimination, such as receiving poorer service, being treated with less respect, and being insulted.

### **Internalized stigma**

Internalized stigma was measured using the average of a 5-item scale (Herek et al., 2009; e.g., “I wish I weren’t LGB”; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha_{w2} = .75$ ,  $\alpha_{w3} = .77$ ).

### **Felt stigma**

Felt stigma was measured using the average of a 3-item scale (Herek, 2009b; e.g., “Most people where I live think less of a person who is LGB”; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha_{w2} = .74$ ,  $\alpha_{w3} = .78$ ).

### **Analytic approach**

The skewness of all variables is within the range of  $-2$  to  $+2$  which is considered normal (Hair et al., 2010). To describe the relationship among the three minority stressors (i.e., everyday discrimination, felt stigma, and internalized stigma) and how they play different roles in disclosure, we built and compared four multilevel path models using the *lavaan* package in RStudio (Posit Team, 2025; Rosseel, 2012) and its robust maximum likelihood estimator.

We chose to use multilevel path analysis to analyze the data for three reasons. First, the data has a nested structure where the wave/time is nested within participants. By estimating a random intercept in multilevel modeling, we can control for the participant cluster in all models and to adjust standard

errors. Second, our primary goal is to understand the general effects of minority stress between participants rather than how minority stress or coming out shifts within a person or over time. For the same reason, we calculated the group means by participant for each predictor and then used the group means as predictors. This allowed us to specifically focus on the between-participant effects. Finally, we have a unbalanced design where some participants completed both waves and some participants did not. Multilevel modeling would allow us to preserve all data without compromising results or excluding those who only completed one wave.

For each direct path, we also controlled for wave as a fixed effect to account for the potential influence of time on the outcomes. We also allowed minority stressors to covary if they are the exogenous variables or parallel mediators. We reported robust fit indices and generally accepted models that have  $CFI > .90$ ,  $RMSEA < .08$ ,  $SRMR < .08$  (Hu & Bentler, 1999; MacCallum et al., 1996). For accepted models, we then compared their  $BIC$ . If a  $BIC$  change is greater than 10, we determine the model with a lower  $BIC$  is a better fitting model (Raftery, 1995).

The first model was a linear model. We tested whether minority stressors are linked to outness and disclosure behavior. We entered all three minority stressors at the same time and examined their direct paths to outness and disclosure behavior, while allowing the three minority stressors to covary.

The second model was a parallel mediation model. We tested whether felt stigma and internalized stigma both mediate the effect of everyday discrimination on outness and disclosure behavior. Here, we entered everyday discrimination first, then specified two direct paths from everyday discrimination to felt stigma and internalized stigma as well as four indirect paths from everyday discrimination to outness and disclosure behavior through felt stigma and internalized stigma, while allowing the two mediators to covary.

The third model was a moderated mediation model. We tested whether internalized stigma moderates the effect of everyday discrimination on felt stigma which in turn predicts outness and disclosure behavior. We used grand mean-centered everyday discrimination, internalized stigma, and their interaction term to predict felt stigma, which predicts the outcomes.

The fourth model was a serial mediation model. We tested whether felt stigma and internalized stigma mediate the effect of everyday discrimination on the outcomes in two steps. Here, we used everyday discrimination to predict felt stigma, which predicts internalized stigma, which predicts the outcomes alongside the indirect paths.

Finally, we explored the relationship between outness and disclosure behavior in a linear and quadratic model. For the supported models, we also explored whether age cohort moderates the associations between the predictors and outcomes. To do this, we conducted multi-group path analysis comparing constrained and unconstrained models. For the unconstrained

model, we estimated each path separately for each cohort. For the constrained model, we set the corresponding paths to be equal across cohorts. We compared these models using a chi-square difference test to evaluate whether cohort moderates the relationships of interest. When the chi-square difference is significant, we then fit a partial model by constraining only the paths that compose the indirect effect under investigation, then comparing it to the fully free model to localize which path accounts for the cohort differences.

## Results

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between variables can be found in Table 2. All minority stressors were significantly correlated with outness and disclosure behavior at the zero-order level. Notably, the three minority stressors were negatively correlated with outness but were positively correlated with disclosure behavior. For linear paths, all the reported coefficients are standardized. For quadratic paths, we reported unstandardized coefficients and standard errors for better interpretability.

### Path models

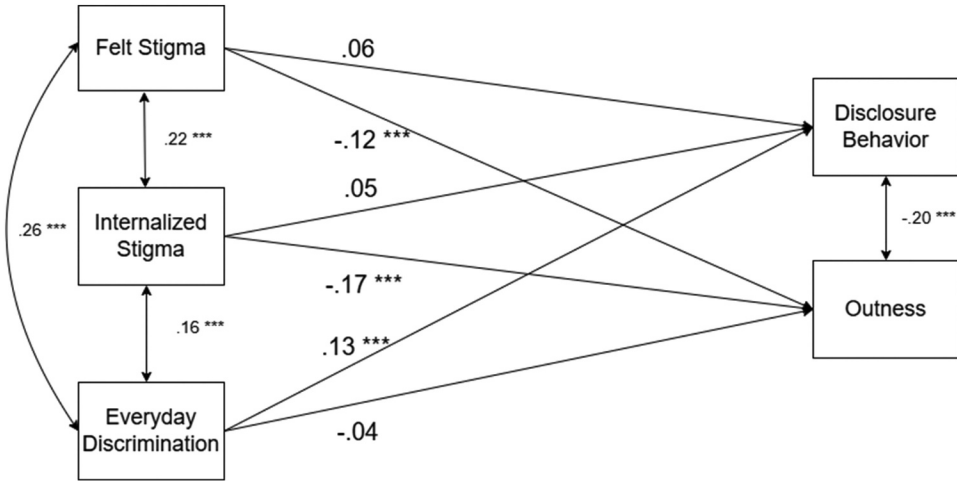
The first model examined the direct effects of three minority stressors on disclosure behavior and outness (see Figure 1). This model demonstrated good fit,  $CFI = .995$ ,  $RMSEA = .02$ , 90%  $CI [.01, .04]$ ,  $SRMR = .01$ ,  $BIC = 14179.20$ . Specifically, felt stigma predicted less outness ( $\beta = -.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while its relationship with disclosure behavior was only marginally significant ( $\beta = .06$ ,  $p = .06$ ). More everyday discrimination predicted greater disclosure behavior ( $\beta = .13$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not outness ( $\beta = -.04$ ,  $p = .171$ ). Internalized stigma predicted less outness ( $\beta = -.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not disclosure behavior ( $\beta = .05$ ,  $p = .123$ ). We then compared the constrained to the unconstrained model and found that the slopes do not significantly differ across cohorts,  $\Delta\chi^2 (df = 16) = 20.12$ ,  $p = .215$ .

The second model examined the indirect effects of everyday discrimination on outness and disclosure behavior through internalized stigma and felt stigma (see Figure 2). This model demonstrated good fit,  $CFI = .95$ ,  $RMSEA = .08$ , 90%  $CI [.05, .13]$ ,  $SRMR = .02$ ,  $BIC = 11418.01$ . Specifically, everyday

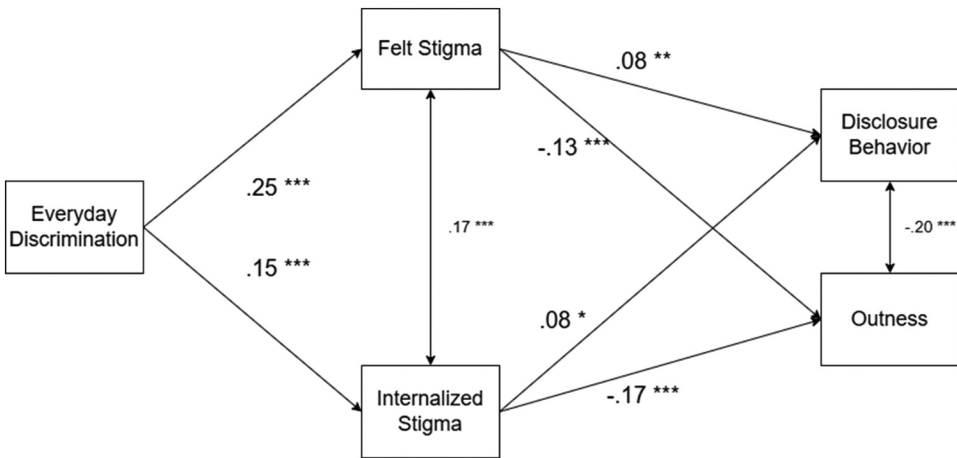
**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Everyday Discrimination	1.74	0.63				
2. Internalized Stigma	1.48	0.67	.16**			
3. Felt Stigma	2.49	0.92	.26**	.21**		
4. Disclosure Behavior	0.23	0.31	.16**	.09**	.11**	
5. Outness	3.16	0.84	-.10**	-.22**	-.17**	-.25**

Note. The means and standard deviations are participant-level statistics. Correlations are between effects.



**Figure 1.** Linear model. *Note.* This model shows three minority stressors predict disclosure behavior and outness simultaneously. Bidirectional arrows show the standardized covariance paths between the variables and unidirectional ones show the standardized regression coefficients and their corresponding significance levels; \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



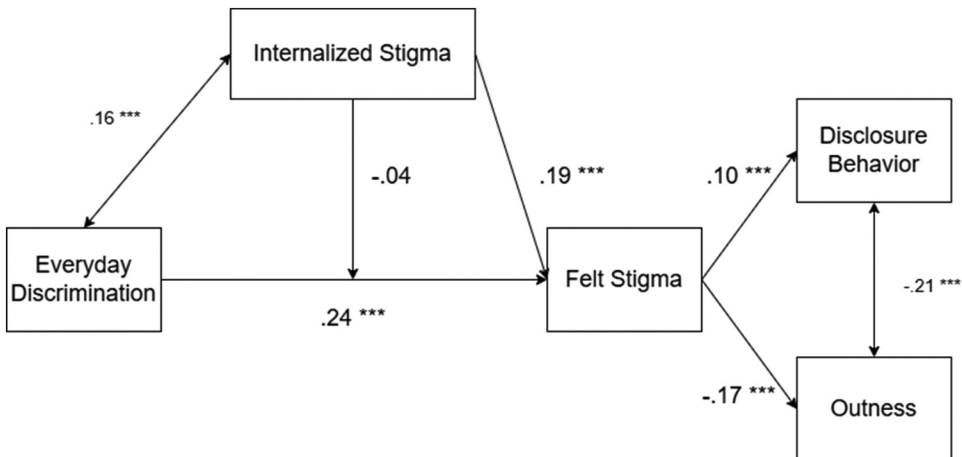
**Figure 2.** Parallel mediation model. *Note.* This model shows that everyday discrimination predicts disclosure behavior and outness through internalized and felt stigma. Bidirectional arrows show the standardized covariances between the variables and unidirectional ones show the standardized regression coefficients and their corresponding significance levels; \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

discrimination was positively associated with both internalized stigma ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and felt stigma ( $\beta = .26$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Felt stigma positively predicted more disclosure behavior ( $\beta = .09$ ,  $p = .003$ ) and negatively predicted outness ( $\beta = -.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Internalized stigma positively predicted disclosure ( $\beta = .06$ ,  $p = .04$ ) and negatively predicted outness ( $\beta = -.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In addition, experiencing more everyday discrimination indirectly predicted greater

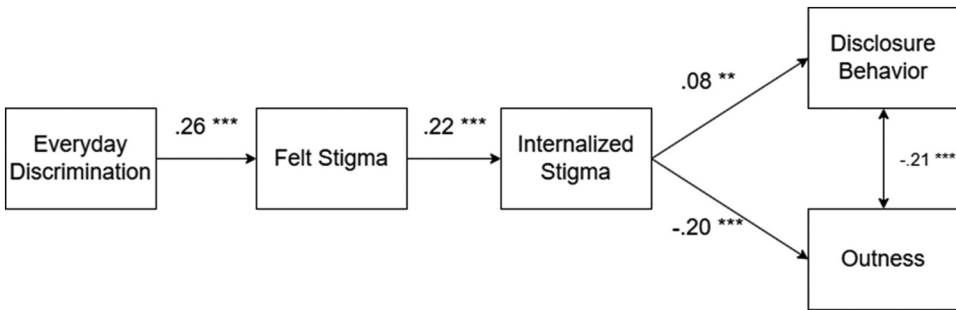
disclosure behavior through felt stigma ( $\beta = .02, p = .008$ ) and marginally through internalized stigma ( $\beta = .01, p = .056$ ). Outness was indirectly predicted by everyday discrimination through both felt stigma ( $\beta = -.04, p < .001$ ) and internalized stigma ( $\beta = -.03, p = .001$ ). We then compared the constrained to the unconstrained model and found that the two models are significantly different,  $\Delta\chi^2 (df = 20) = 32.42, p = .039$ . Specifically, constraining the indirect path where everyday discrimination predicts outness through felt stigma to be equal across age cohorts significantly worsened the model fit,  $\Delta\chi^2 (df = 4) = 10.40, p = .034$ . In particular, this indirect path was significant among the middle-aged ( $\beta = -.05, p = .008$ ) and older-aged cohorts ( $\beta = -.06, p = .001$ ), but it was not significant among the younger cohort ( $\beta = -.02, p = .349$ ).

The third model tested whether internalized stigma moderates the effect of discrimination on felt stigma, which in turn predicts outness and disclosure via felt stigma and the interaction term (see Figure 3). This model did not demonstrate good fit,  $CFI = .74, RMSEA = .09, 90\% CI [.07, .11], SRMR = .05, BIC = 14231.42$ . Therefore, we rejected the model and did not interpret the slopes.

The fourth model tested whether felt stigma and internalized stigma sequentially mediate the effect of everyday discrimination on disclosure behavior and outness (see Figure 4). This model did not demonstrate good fit,  $CFI = .83, RMSEA = .09, 90\% CI [.07, .12], SRMR = .05, BIC = 11445.93$ . Therefore, we rejected the model and did not interpret the slopes.



**Figure 3.** Moderated mediation model. *Note.* This model estimates that internalized stigma moderates the effect of everyday discrimination on felt stigma which predicts disclosure behavior and outness. However, fit indices do not support this model. Bidirectional arrows show the standardized covariances between the variables and unidirectional ones show the standardized regression coefficients and their corresponding significance levels; \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

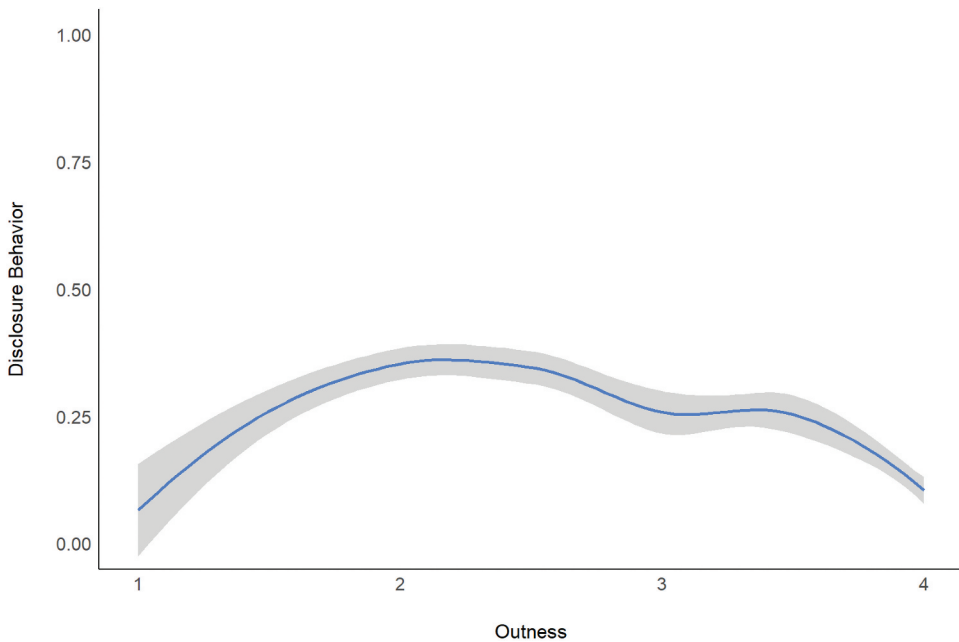


**Figure 4.** Serial mediation model. *Note.* This model estimates that internalized stigma moderates the effect of everyday discrimination on felt stigma which predicts disclosure behavior and outness. However, fit indices do not support this model. Bidirectional arrows show the standardized covariances between the variables and unidirectional ones show the standardized regression coefficients and their corresponding significance levels; \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

The positive association between minority stressors and disclosure behavior, as well as the negative association between disclosure behavior and outness, were somewhat unexpected. We decided to explore the association of disclosure behavior and outness further by testing for a quadratic relationship, which would allow us to observe whether disclosure behavior varies non-linearly across levels of outness. When using outness to predict disclosure behavior, the quadratic slope was significant,  $B = -0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ ,  $t(1368.2) = -7.72$ ,  $p < .001$ , controlling for the linear slope (see Figure 5). The quadratic model ( $BIC = 745.10$ ) also showed a better fit than the linear model ( $BIC = 796.14$ ). This suggests that the relationship between outness and disclosure behavior is curvilinear, whereby people at moderate levels of outness are more likely to disclose than people at either low or high levels of outness. Upon examining the linear relationship between outness and disclosure behavior by age cohorts, we did not find any significant variation. However, there is a difference in the curvilinear relationships such that the relationship is stronger among the younger cohort ( $B = -0.14$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than the older cohort ( $B = -0.04$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p = .021$ ),  $z = -3.34$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

In the present work, we explored the relationship of different minority stressors with sexual orientation disclosure. Specifically, we tested four plausible models in which minority stress can affect disclosure and found evidence for both direct and indirect effects. When modeling direct paths between the stressors and disclosure, we found that everyday discrimination uniquely relate to more disclosure behavior, whereas felt stigma and internalized stigma uniquely relate to greater outness. When modeling indirect paths, we found support for a model whereby everyday discrimination is associated with more



**Figure 5.** Correlation between outness and disclosure behavior. *Note.* Loess line illustrating the curvilinear relationship between outness and disclosure behavior. Disclosure behavior initially increases with outness, peaks around a moderate level, and then declines.

disclosure behavior and less outness indirectly by contributing to a greater sense of felt stigma and internalized stigma. However, we did not find support for the model where everyday discrimination predicts felt stigma and internalized stigma sequentially, nor for the model where internalized stigma moderates the effect of everyday discrimination on felt stigma. Additionally, when comparing the two retained models, the parallel mediation model demonstrated a better fit. These findings suggest that although minority stressors can influence disclosure directly, it appears that everyday discrimination simultaneously relate to the anticipation of discrimination and the internalization of stigmatizing beliefs about one's group. These beliefs may then guide choices to disclose one's sexual orientation. This result is consistent with past theories on sexual minority stigma (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Herek, 2009a).

Given the literature on the generational differences in minority stress and coming out (Frost et al., 2022; Meyer et al., 2021), we further conducted an exploratory analysis to compare whether the associations are different depending on one's age group. We did not find any age cohort differences in the model where all minority stressors predict disclosure simultaneously. However, we found that everyday discrimination is linked to greater felt stigma which predicts less outness only among the middle-aged and older-aged cohorts, but did not find support for this relationship among the younger cohort. This suggests that younger people may be less affected by felt stigma in

their outness to family and straight friends, whereas older and middle-aged people may be more affected which may be due to longer exposure to societal prejudice.

Our results showed a negative linear relationship between outness and disclosure behavior, and that minority stressors generally relate to *more*, not less, disclosure behavior. At first glance, these results may seem counter-intuitive and inconsistent with past literature (Berman et al., 2023; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Herek et al., 2009; Jackson & Mohr, 2016; Rostosky & Riggle, 2002). However, we believe this is due to the way in which disclosure behavior was measured in the study. The disclosure behavior measure assessed whether someone came out to a straight friend or a family member in the past year for the first time. Therefore, the negative covariance path can be interpreted as the more out someone is, the fewer opportunities they have to disclose to people for the first time. This was backed up by the significant curvilinear relationship such that slightly and somewhat out people were more likely to disclose in the past year, whereas the extremely out or extremely closeted people were least likely to disclose (see Figure 5). An additional exploratory analysis found that the curvilinear relationship between outness and disclosure behavior was stronger among the younger cohort than the older cohort, which may be due to young people having more opportunities to meet new people and/or older people facing greater costs of coming out (McCormack et al., 2014). In terms of the positive association between everyday discrimination and disclosure behavior, some people may respond to discrimination by coming out in order to confront prejudice or as a form of activism. Orne (2013) has documented cases where some queer people intentionally come out when their community is being stigmatized as a way to educate the perpetrator. Due to the nature of the study, we are only able to document this pattern and infer the possibility, but are unable to confirm the context in which the disclosure happened. Future studies should further disentangle when and why someone might come out after experiencing discrimination.

The everyday discrimination measure in the study was a measure of general discrimination experience (e.g., being treated with less respect) rather than discrimination specifically about one's sexual orientation. While it is still considered a minority stressor, to test the robustness of our findings, we created a subset of data that consisted of only people who, on an additional question, attributed discrimination to their sexual orientation or gender. Although the subsample had less power and some paths became non-significant (e.g., the effect of felt stigma appears to be weaker), the data still supported both models and the model comparison result (see SFigure 1 and SFigure 2).

The two supported models in the study identified everyday discrimination as the key stressor in LGB adults' sexual orientation disclosure, which provides important implications for practitioners and advocates who want to promote

positive sexual identity development. Fostering an inclusive environment and a supportive context where LGB people do not feel compelled to come out due to discrimination can be essential to their mental health (Legate et al., 2012, 2017; Ryan et al., 2017). Although it would not be realistic to eliminate or anticipate all the prejudiced events that LGB people might be exposed to, there are actionable steps that people can take to reduce prejudice and discrimination that LGB people experience. For example, heterosexual allies can foster a safe environment for sexual minorities by confronting heterosexism or homophobia (Gans et al., 2024). In addition, they can be a good ally by giving LGB people the voice and space that they need (Chen et al., 2023).

### ***Limitations & future directions***

The present study has several limitations. First, we acknowledge the correlational nature of the study. These analyses do not provide causal evidence that minority stress can cause disclosure, but instead suggest patterns that can be tested in future research with experimental or sufficiently-powered longitudinal samples. Second, the study findings are generalizable to people in the United States, but may be less generalizable to people who live in other parts of the world. For example, these processes might be different for LGB people who live in an environment where being homosexual is criminalized. In these environments, minority stress might be a less influential factor than laws and social norms. Third, the study sample consists mostly of lesbian, gay, and bisexual participants. Therefore, these measures and findings might not accurately reflect the nuances in the experiences of people from other sexual minority backgrounds (Li et al., 2024). Fourth, the strength of standardized coefficients of minority stressors on both disclosure outcomes was small, suggesting that other crucial factors can help explain the outcomes. Finally, the disclosure targets in the analysis are limited only to straight friends and family members. Due to measurement constraints, we cannot examine whether the same stressors contribute to disclosure to other targets, such as LGBTQ+ friends. In addition, the disclosure behavior measure may not reflect the full complexity of disclosure in real life, and may be influenced by the availability of people they can come out to.

Future studies will benefit from measuring additional constructs. First, future research should continue to employ multiple distinct measures of disclosure. Most extant research measures outness (Cai et al., 2024; Legate et al., 2017; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Morris et al., 2001; Riggle et al., 2017; Solomon et al., 2015; Whitman & Nadal, 2015). As shown in the current study, outness and disclosure behavior can have different relationships with minority stressors and a negative relationship with each other. Continuing to measure them separately will allow future studies to further disentangle their distinct predictors and effects.

Second, measuring participants' goals and motives for disclosure can help us understand how LGB adults' motives interact with minority stress and jointly shape disclosure (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Schwartzman & Neel, 2025). For example, when a closeted LGB person observes a close heterosexual friend expressing homophobic views, the goal of educating the perpetrator can lead to disclosure, whereas prioritizing the goal of maintaining affiliation might not. Third, measuring the closeness between LGB people and the targets they disclose to can be useful in understanding the processes at play in these decisions. People may anticipate different reactions from close versus distant others, and may perceive disclosing to close others as more or less risky (Cai et al., 2024; Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). For methodological reasons, the current study focused on disclosure to people likely to be close others—family and straight friends—rather than to strangers or coworkers. Future work can more fully examine disclosure across a wider range of relationships and closeness. Finally, past experience such as receiving negative reactions to the sexual orientation disclosure or being exposed to discrimination directed at others (e.g., vicarious discrimination) can negatively impact well-being and possible future disclosure (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Cipollina et al., 2022; Pachankis & Jackson, 2023; Ryan et al., 2015; Saunders et al., 2025). Measuring these relevant experiences can help paint a fuller picture of the experiences that people bring to their current disclosure decisions.

## Conclusion

Understanding when and why sexual minority people disclose their sexual orientation is crucial for gaining insights into their identity formation and mental health (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Frost & Meyer, 2023; Hatzenbuehler, 2009, Meyer, 2003; Pachankis et al., 2018; Pachankis & Jackson, 2023). The present work contributes to such understanding by showing how different minority stressors play a distinct role in outness and disclosure behavior. We found that on average experiencing discrimination in their everyday lives is the strongest predictor of whether LGB people disclose their sexual orientation to a family member or a straight friend for the first time, whereas feeling negatively about their sexual orientation is the strongest predictor of how generally out they are. Furthermore, we find evidence of a better fitting model where on average frequently experiencing discriminatory events may affect outness and disclosure behavior because it elevates feelings of anticipating discriminatory events and negative self-views. These findings underscore the importance of considering multiple minority stressors in understanding sexual orientation disclosure and provide important implications for future interventions.

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