Microaggressions experienced by LGBTQ academics in Canada: “Just not fitting in... it does take a toll”

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Abstract
Given contemporary attention to diversity and inclusion on Canadian university campuses, and given human rights protections for sexual orientation and gender identity, it is tempting to believe that marginalization is a thing of the past for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) academics. Our qualitative study (n=8), focusing on everyday experiences rather than overt discrimination, documents numerous microaggressions, the often-unintended interactions that convey messages of marginality. With colleagues, students and administrators, participants reported isolation, tokenism, invisibility, hyper-visibility, dismissal, exoticization, and lack of institutional support. Maintaining constant vigilance and caution was taxing. The everyday microaggressions that lead to isolation and a sense of dis-ease in pervasively cisgender-normative and heteronormative institutions are very difficult to challenge, as they are not the kinds of experiences anti-discrimination policies and procedures are designed to address.

Keywords
Higher education; sexual orientation; gender identity; qualitative research; university faculty
**Introduction**

In Canada, human rights protection for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) people began in 1977 in one province, followed by federal protection in 1996, through an amendment to the Canadian Human Rights Act that included sexual orientation as prohibited grounds for discrimination (Government of Canada, 2017). Provincial human rights acts gradually followed suit. The provinces then led the way to protection for gender identity, and after more than a decade of legislative wrangling, federal Bill-16 passed all levels of approval in June 2017, adding gender identity and expression to the prohibited grounds of discrimination (Kirkness & Macmillan, 2017). While sexual orientation and gender identity/expression are not included among federal employment equity targets (Employment Equity Act, 1995), a statement by university presidents in 2017 included “LGBQT2 and non-binary people” among the “under-represented groups” targeted for recruitment, retention and support at all levels (Universities Canada, 2017). Officially, then, in Canadian universities LGBTQ rights are protected and there are intentions to improve representation.

The “it gets better” campaign has had resonance in Canadian and international contexts (www.itgetsbetter.org), hoping to convey to LGBTQ youth that things get better with time. It is tempting to believe that society, like individual experiences, moves steadily toward greater inclusion. In academic circles, we hope that universities would lead (or at least not lag behind) those trends. Yet the academic environment remains decidedly marginalizing for faculty members who identify as queer. (We use ‘LGBTQ’ and ‘queer’ interchangeably as umbrella terms for people who identify along this spectrum.)

This paper explores what are known as microaggressions – subtle interactions, experiences and conditions that cumulatively convey messages of not-quite-belonging. Part of a
Microaggressions experienced by LGBTQ academics

cross-Canada qualitative study of academics who self-identify as members of groups traditionally under-represented in academia, here we examine the narratives of the sub-sample (n=8) who identified as LGBTQ. While their stories included instances of overt hostility, what emerged as most pervasive were the often-unintended, commonplace experiences of marginality that shaped engagement with academic colleagues, students, and university administration.

Human rights protections safeguard against overt discrimination and abuses, providing avenues for grievance and redress, yet may do little to reduce microaggressions. The research question guiding the larger study was, How do members of social groups marginalized by race, ethnicity, Indigeneity, social class, disability or sexual /gender identity experience work life in the relatively privileged context of academia? The current analysis asks, How – in the context of significant human rights protections – do queer people experience belonging and not-belonging in academia?

**Background to the study**

The literature on LGBTQ academics is replete with discussions about disclosure (‘coming out’), a consistent workplace reality for queer faculty. Those who are read as cisgender and heteronormative are most heavily embroiled in navigating disclosures, while those who are read as LGBTQ trade the vexation of managing disclosures for loss of self-determination, privacy and safety (e.g., Clarke, 2016; Nielson & Alderson, 2014; Speciale, Gess & Speedlin, 2015). For those for whom disclosure is optional, decisions are more complex than ‘out’/not ‘out’; rather faculty engage in strategies for privacy management based on a risk-benefit calculation that includes context and cultural expectations (Buchanan, Munz & Rudnick, 2015). Faculty may always be out or disclose selectively; disclose reciprocally when students disclose; employ ambiguity; deflect, deliberately ignoring student inquiries; and avoid discussion of
anything personal, including queer identity. Strategies are affected by context, including the perceived climate for LGBTQ people in their own department, their broader institution, and the larger geographic region (Bilmoria & Stewart, 2009; Buchanan et al., 2015; Equality Challenge Unit, 2009), as well as academic discipline, course content, class size, and level of study (Buchanan et al., 2015; Nielson & Alderson 2014). Some research suggests ‘microclimates’ (e.g., department level) may matter more to queer faculty than ‘macroclimates’ (e.g., university level) (Dozier, 2015a; Vaccaro, 2012). It is possible that broader political climates (e.g., federal human rights) also shapes experiences of queer disclosures in academia, but evidence is lacking.

‘Coming out’ is frequently argued to facilitate ‘authenticity’ in the classroom (Branfman, 2015; Clarke, 2016; Nielson & Alderson, 2014; Orlov & Allen, 2014). In fact, Clarke has argued that “there is now a coming out imperative” (2016, p. 4). While we question the notion of authenticity, concealing an important aspect of one’s identity can be painful and energy consuming (Clarke, 2016; Simmons, 2017). When faculty do not have to engage in the “mental gymnastics” (Branfman, 2015, p. 77) of concealment and disclosure, considerable energy may be freed up for other work. Some argue that coming out enables instructors to interact without inhibition, teaching in ways they consider effective, free to draw on personal examples (Orlov & Allen, 2014). At the same time, they may provide students with positive role models, connect with students, and foster critical thinking (Branfman, 2015; Buchanan, Munz & Rudnick, 2015; Clarke, 2016; Johnson, 2009; Orlov & Allen, 2014).

Nonetheless, many LGBTQ faculty consider the professional risks too high to be out at work, especially in the classroom (Equality Challenge Unit, 2009; Irwin, 2002; Nokov & Barclay, 2010). In relation to students, faculty risk loss of credibility and respect, poor teaching evaluations, jokes, gossip, false accusations of relationships with students, or other hostility
(Buchanan, Munz & Rudnick, 2015; Equality Challenge Unit, 2009; Vaccaro, 2012). In a heteronormative context, coming out in the classroom is equated with discussing sex, placing LGBTQ teachers at risk for “being labeled inappropriate and unprofessional” (Orlov & Allen, 2014, p. 1026). Disclosing a stigmatized identity – especially if it intersects with other marginalized identities – may undermine authority in the classroom (Branfman, 2015; Misawa, 2015), leaving faculty “viewed as biased, politically coercive, inappropriate and non-academic” (Johnson, 2009, p. 186) or seen as pushing an agenda (Nielson & Alderson, 2014). Doan perceived “a distinct ‘prove it’ attitude on the part of the students” after gender transition, having to “work much harder to establish [her] credentials and maintain control of the classroom” (2010, p. 642).

Faculty may also face repercussions from colleagues and administrators such as bullying, diminishing of accomplishments and awards (Misawa, 2015), restricted interactions with colleagues, loss of opportunities, exclusion from social networks and mentoring, exclusion from hiring processes, and “generally not being viewed as part of ‘the group’” (Bilmoria & Stewart, 2009, p. 92). Openly queer faculty may face heightened visibility and scrutiny, as well as tokenism, fetishization and “role encapsulation”, in which expectations are constrained by stereotypes (LaSala et al., 2008; Pitcher, 2017). Transgender and gender non-binary faculty are especially likely to face hostility, patronizing and isolation (Doan, 2010; Irwin, 2002; Rankin et al, 2010; Pitcher, 2017). Career implications can include lost jobs and promotions and attempts to block tenure and/or research funding (Dozier, 2015a, 2015b; Equality Challenge Unit, 2009; LaSala, 2008; Misawa, 2015). In Pitcher’s study, one transwoman was put on indefinite research leave when she transitioned, paid but not allowed on campus (2017, p. 697).
Given the risks of revealing a stigmatized identity, queer faculty engage in impression management, or privacy management (Buchanan et al., 2015). While some “pass” as heterosexual or cisgender to avoid stigma, others engage in “covering,” acknowledging queer identity but downplaying its significance, rendering themselves less objectionable (Goffman, 1963; Yoshino, 2006). Pressure to look ‘less queer’ may increase with movement into higher ranks (Clarke, 2016, p. 4); presenting as ‘too queer’ challenges heteronormativity and binary gender expectations, increasing the vulnerability of those who transgress (Branfman, 2015). Some choose to “tone down the obviousness” (Bilmoria & Stewart, 2009, p. 90) of their non-normative gender or sexual identity, opting to appear “assimilatable”, not “in people’s faces” (Dozier, 2015a, p. 19). Yet, covering also upholds cisgender-heteronormativity, seeking safety or status at the expense of others less able or willing to conform (Branfman, 2015). Meanwhile, “Abandoning parts of the self for assimilation and acceptance takes a toll on the individual and leads to stress, reduced job satisfaction, and potential career change” (Reinart & Yakaboski, 2017, p. 3).

**Microaggressions and minority stress theory**

Large-scale surveys of campus climates for LGBTQ faculty document occasional experiences of overt hostility, harassment and discrimination, which are consistently more prevalent among transgender and gender non-binary faculty than cisgender queer faculty (Equality Challenge Unit, 2009; Irwin, 2002; Nokov & Barclay, 2010; Rankin et al., 2010). When – as in Canada – overt discrimination is no longer socially acceptable (or legal) ‘Othering’ may more often take the form of microaggressions, brief interactions or everyday conditions that (with or without intent) convey negative sentiments or messages of marginality to members of marginalized groups (Sue, 2010). The campus climate surveys document consistent experiences
of discomfort and not-belonging, feeling excluded, holding back and avoiding attention to deflect hostility.

This may be why many LGBTQ faculty assess their work environments as ‘fine’ yet describe a pervasive sense of being outsiders, feeling uncomfortable and unable to connect with heterosexual colleagues (Reinart & Yakaboski, 2017). Sexualizing comments or jokes, isolation, comments about dress or mannerisms, mis-gendering through names and pronouns, overly-familiar behaviour, being treated as interchangeable with other queer faculty, devaluation of work, invalidation through comments such as ‘we are all just people’, being treated as exotic, and use of exclusionary language are all examples of interpersonal microaggressions (Dozier, 2015b; Pitcher, 2017; Woodford et al., 2015). Exclusion at a more systemic, institutional level, such as dress codes, gender-segregated bathrooms or intolerant organizational cultures are considered ‘environmental’ microaggressions (Woodford et al., 2015).

Subtle incidents and experiences of microaggressions may impose a cumulative, wearying burden, causing LGBTQ faculty to feel self-conscious and constantly vigilant, gauging safety and risk (Dozier, 2015a, 2015b; Irwin, 2002; Pitcher, 2017). In one survey, faculty reported increased anxiety, depression, loss of confidence, illness, damage to personal relationships, medical treatment and counselling, increased substance use, lost productivity, and changed behavior at work; more than half had taken sick leave, changed careers, resigned or considered resigning (Irwin, 2002, p. 74-75). The toll of microaggressions may be best understood using Meyer’s (2003) ‘minority stress theory’, emphasizing chronic sociocultural stressors distinct from those faced by faculty in general (Nadal, Rivera & Corpus, 2010), and including both personal and vicarious experiences (Meyer, 2003). Stressors may be negative external events and conditions (chronic and acute), or more internal including expectations of
rejection or mistreatment, vigilance and desire to conceal identity, and the internalization of
social stigma (Dozier, 2015b; Nadal et al., 2010; Pitcher, 2017). External and internal stressors
are interdependent: “Internal processes such as heightened vigilance and monitoring behavior are
not without cause, but grounded in specific external threats—individuals assess situations and
choose appropriate actions based on the likelihood of discrimination and mistreatment” (Dozier,
2015b, p. 195). What may be considered ‘internalized homophobia’ (or transphobia) (e.g., Nadal
et al., 2010) can also be understood as a response to external stressors.

Research on microaggressions based on sexual orientation and gender identity remains
nascent. It is even more scarce in academic settings, particularly with a focus on faculty rather
than students. In the context of human rights protections, in an ostensibly liberal work
environment, where Canadian universities have expressly acknowledged queer faculty as an
equity-seeking group, it is valuable to examine how social exclusion and marginalization may
nonetheless continue to operate. This paper explores how a small number of queer faculty in
Canadian universities experience belonging and not-belonging in their everyday work lives.

Methodology

This analysis draws on data from a larger study of academics who self-identify as
members of groups traditionally under-represented due to race, ethnicity, Indigeneity, gender or
sexual identity, working class background and/or disability. The study was grounded in
hermeneutic phenomenology informed by critical inquiry, seeking rich personal reflections,
interpretations and meanings, especially concerning taken-for-granted aspects of everyday work
life (Ahmed, 2006; van Manen, 1990). We sought to detail the lived experience of belonging and
not-belonging in academia among queer faculty, evoking resonance and a sense of recognition
from others with similar lived experience. Our interest in belonging drew us to emphasize the
existential of lived relationships (van Manen, 1990), but we were also informed by our personal, political and theoretical commitments to equity and social justice. Those cannot be ‘bracketed’, set aside as if not influencing the very focus of our study, let alone data collection and analysis. The inherent research challenge is to engage with the tension between lived experiences on their own terms and the structural conditions that give rise to those experiences. Our open-ended interviews used numerous probes, but the central guiding questions were about how participants experienced belonging (or not) during their careers as academics, including graduate education.

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, starting from the professional contacts of team members, who occupy a wide range of positions within academia and on the queer spectrum. As a team we included students at three levels of study, instructors in precarious employment, tenured faculty at various ranks, and we come from six disciplines. Among us we identify as cisgender women, transmasculine, lesbian, queer and other. We include racialized and ethnic minority as well as Euro-Canadian members, some identify as disabled, and some from working class origins. We contacted possibly-eligible academics from as many fields as possible across Canada, inviting them to also forward study information widely. We sought diversity by region, field of study, gender, and university size. We included only people with tenure, to examine experiences of marginality among those with least risk to job security.

This paper draws on a sub-sample of eight participants who self-identified as LGBTQ, to allow depth of analysis regarding sexual and gender identities; elsewhere we examine other identities, and intersections. To optimize confidentiality we provide few demographics. (See Table 1). Participants had been on faculty 10-30 years. Only one identified as a man, despite recruitment efforts. One identified as lesbian/queer/transgender/butch and used feminine
Microaggressions experienced by LGBTQ academics

pronouns, often speaking simultaneously about gender and sexual identity. All others identified as cisgender, and as lesbian or queer.

The small sample reached saturation on some themes, but not on intersecting identities. Half the sample had working-class origins, but only Stephanie really spoke about class; despite efforts at intersectionality in the interviews, people tended to speak of the identity(ies) most salient to them. Matt was the only man and only racialized participant, hindering analysis of intersections with gender and race. Dee was the only transgender participant, and she generally spoke of sexuality and gender together. Lana identified as queer and working class yet spoke almost exclusively about the effect of disability – thus she does not appear much in this text.

All processes were approved by the university research ethics board. Following discussion of informed consent, semi-structured interviews explored everyday experiences of belonging and marginality, inclusion and exclusion. Each participant was interviewed once, for 60-120 minutes, face-to-face or by telephone, by one of three team members. When participants were known to any of us, they were invited to be interviewed by a known or unknown interviewer – both of which proved effective. It was made clear that de-identified transcripts would be read by the entire team.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and assigned pseudonyms. Transcripts were read repeatedly, attending to meaning passages, moving back and forth between individual transcripts and across transcripts. All project data were coded by two research assistants using AtlasTi software. During weekly team meetings in vivo codes emerged, and gradually discussions about the transcripts began to weave in theory to make sense of what we were hearing. Over time, a consensus code list was developed with definitions, though new codes continued to be added as needed. The current analysis started with the coded data, but returned to
the raw transcripts repeatedly. Themes were identified as discrete codes came together conceptually, such as ‘devaluing’, ‘exoticization’ and ‘tokenism’ linked by the theme ‘microaggressions’. In contrast, a broader theme like ‘disclosures’ was later broken down into finer codes such as ‘passing’, ‘covering’ and ‘self-protection’.

Weekly team meetings among four or more of us allowed us to challenge perceptions, interpretations and biases, enhancing rigor. We debated codes and themes in relation to specific passages, and collectively explored theoretical approaches to interpret the data. As a form of member-checking, each participant was sent a 4-6 page summary that attempted to distill their narrative; feedback raised no concerns except for enhancing confidentiality. Those narratives helped us stay true to the methodology, holding each person’s story intact.

Limitations

In qualitative research the claims that can be made are always limited and local. Constraints of our sample – mostly white cisgender lesbian women – further limit analyses, particularly of the effects of intersecting marginalities. Importantly, our sample included only people who had already earned tenure. It seems possible that academics who are least hetero/gender-conforming – thus most affected by normative expectations – are less likely to secure tenure-track jobs (Branfman, 2015). They would have been excluded from our sample. Future research should include the experiences of precarious and unemployed academics who may face even more challenging experiences.

There has never been a national survey of queer academics in Canada; such data would help to illuminate experiences more broadly. Instruments that capture microaggressions specific to higher education are being developed (e.g., Woodford, 2015), which would be valuable for a
national survey. While human rights protections may address the worst violations and discrimination, they do little to alleviate everyday unwelcoming climates.

Findings

While we could present our findings using a framework of types of microaggressions (microinsults, invalidations, and assaults e.g., Nadal et al, 2010), or types of minority stressors (distal, proximal, environmental e.g., Dozier, 2015b), we seek to retain a primary focus on lived experience. Four themes organize the analysis: disclosures and impression management, then impacts on relationships with colleagues, students and the university. We end with a brief mention of coping strategies. In the Discussion we return to the lens of microaggressions and minority stress theory.

Disclosures: “I just want to be neutral”

Only one person routinely disclosed gender/sexual identity to both colleagues and students. Other participants disclosed selectively, while one participant was not ‘out’ to anyone at the university. Participants hesitated to disclose for many reasons: Some felt their sexual orientation invited others to think about their sex lives, which they considered private; some thought it was irrelevant to their work lives; others thought their scholarship and teaching would be scrutinized through the lens of sexual/gender identity, that they would be reduced to their queerness and perceived as biased. As Stephanie said, “I just feel like I want to keep my sexuality light years away from my work… I just want to be neutral and be a scientist.” Matt sought to avoid being “judged”, “pigeon-holed” and “prejudiced against”, thus “only mention[ed] things when necessary” and avoided saying his partner’s name or gender pronoun.

Some participants saw disclosing as an opportunity to develop positive relationships with students who might need role models or support. However, even they anticipated potential
negative consequences, given stereotypes and assumptions as well as previous experiences. For example, despite being out at work, for years Dee self-censored her appearance to avoid negative career consequences from gender non-conformity: “[It] wasn’t until I actually got tenure that I started dressing at work the way I would like to dress at work.” She described her small university as having a “pervasive culture of closeted-ness” where being openly queer was like wearing a “target”.

**Relationships with colleagues: “I could hold a meeting of the ‘queer caucus’ in my car”**

A few participants felt welcomed by colleagues, receiving social invitations and support for their relationships. One person was strongly encouraged to take up a senior position, which she saw as an administrator “taking a risk” on her. More often, though, participants experienced isolation, tokenism, dismissal, and vicarious marginalization – microaggressions.

**Isolation.**

The caution employed by most participants around LGBTQ disclosures hampered collegial relationships in their departments, across the university, and in their disciplines. For example, Stephanie experienced considerable difficulty networking at conferences, which she considered part of her job:

I’m very apprehensive about walking up to strangers and putting myself out there.

A big part of it is being lesbian. Like, I don’t want to go out for drinks with people, when they’re talking about their children and their family, I feel like I do not belong at that table. And I don’t want to be in a situation where I have to come out. So, I avoid those situations, and those situations are really important.

The networking is really important.
Stephanie’s discomfort not only isolates her from a broader network of colleagues in her discipline but also affects potential opportunities and connections in her field: “I see it when I’m trying to publish, and I see it across the spectrum in science, that I’m just not connected enough.”

All of the participants described some degree of isolation. Those in sciences and engineering reported being the only one they knew: “I honestly don't know of any other openly gay [scientist]... I know one other person who is, but he lives in a marriage, to hide it” (Melissa). Melissa felt accepted by colleagues but did not consider them friends:

I don’t let people into my personal life. I do not hang out with people in this building in a personal situation, because I don’t really like a lot of them. They’re very, um, I would say conservative… So, I choose not to spend time with these people outside of the building.

Melissa noted that in her discipline, “We don’t know how to talk about it. But it’s still got to be an issue, it’s just an issue we don’t talk about. So, we need some way to do that.” Participants in the social sciences and cognate fields reported feeling more comfortable with colleagues, yet even some of them lacked any real connections: “I have a few colleagues who are also social justice activists and that makes it a little easier. But many of my colleagues are, I don’t, I don’t socialize with them (Dee).”

Whether participants were isolated by others, or isolated themselves, there is a sense of discomfort in a hetero- and gender-normative environment. As Reinart and Yakaboski (2017) suggest, queer faculty may have a sense of always being an outsider, simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible. Melissa described the vulnerability of being the only (out) gay person:

I’m the only openly gay person, I think, in this building. I literally don’t even know any grad students who are openly gay… I don’t know about anybody else in
science. So that makes me worry, ‘cause there’s got to be other people! So, are we all feeling by ourselves?

Charlotte described being at a large national conference entirely focused on issues faced by women in the sciences, yet no one mentioned LGBTQ issues: “I left that feeling really deflated.” At the next conference she offered a session on sexual and gender minorities: “If I don’t say something, nobody’s going to.” Most participants knew of very few queer academics locally. At a very large university, Karen knew no one else in her faculty of 50-60 full-time academics. Dee reported being “one of only two out queer faculty” at her university, saying, “I could hold a meeting of the ‘queer caucus’ in my car!”

Some participants felt fully accepted in their home departments, but disclosing sexual/gender identity elsewhere remained uncomfortable. Even with supportive colleagues the heteronormative context of the university was often tiresome: “Just not fitting in, just being different. And being different, you know, I guess you realize after years, that it does take a toll” (Charlotte). Had she anticipated the extent of the isolation, Melissa might have chosen a different career: “I would probably tell [my younger self] not to do it, not to go into being a professor. The culture is too isolating.”

**Tokenism.**

Participants who were ‘out’ reported instances of tokenization, such as when Matt was asked to guest edit a journal on queer issues, even though his research is unrelated to LGBTQ topics: “I feel like a token… It’s almost patronizing… slightly, mildly annoying.” Meryl sometimes thought her existence made colleagues feel self-satisfied:

They loved having their token lesbians on faculty (laugh). I say that not entirely tongue in cheek, even though it strikes me as funny. ‘Look at us, we have
lesbians! Aren’t we enlightened?’… It was much more subtle than what I’ve just said, but the effect of it is the same. You could feel it… [For] people there, we were exotic.

Participants were sought out to represent ‘diversity’ on committees, which added workload and felt tokenizing when it seemed they were expected to represent and advocate for queer diversity. As Meryl said, “There’s a lot of that kind of, ‘You be the poster child.’ You know? ‘It’s your job to advocate for this kind of thing. You be the person who takes that up.’” Equity work could feel tokenizing even when it was work they loved:

I do think it’s kind of part of our job too. Although, I think people who aren’t white, able bodied, heterosexual men do a lot more of that work. You know? So, it’s kind of a labour of love, but I can also be critical of it. (Lana)

While participants were asked to engage in equity work because of their LGBTQ identities, they were also dismissed for the same reason, perceived as biased or having a chip on their shoulder: “Sometimes when I open my mouth to speak, people turn their brains off because ‘Oh yeah, there goes the dyke again’” (Dee). Some engaged in invisible self-monitoring to avoid being perceived as going ‘too far’. Meryl suggested tolerance depends on not being too disruptive or demanding: “People unconsciously think they’re being quite nice and tolerant, to have us there to start with. So therefore, don’t get uppity”. Matt chose not to speak up about some equity concerns, to avoid being “pigeon-holed” as the equity guy: “These thoughts would cross my mind and cause me to self-censor, and not say it.” He avoided doing LGBTQ research, because he thought it would be perceived as too stereotypical. Dee chose not to develop a course on queer content, to avoid painful confrontations:
I deliberately didn’t develop courses that are about my particular areas of interest and expertise… even after I got tenure, because I didn’t have the energy to go through the fight. I didn’t want to have to justify the need for a course in queer stuff… I didn’t want to have to hear the other stuff… the stuff that was wounding.

Others reflected that discussing LGBTQ issues with colleagues as if they were matters of intellectual interest and not deeply personal realities was painful.

**Relationships with students: “Cautious, absolutely cautious”**

Relationships with students were also affected by the potential for microaggressions. Some participants faced anxiety with each new group of students, as they had to navigate disclosure and potential hostility. Melissa said, “I’m always worried at the beginning of the semester, if they’re working in my lab, what if they freak out? What if they’re super, super conservative?” Dee described similar anxiety each year wondering if her new students would be overtly hostile: “I know the anxiety I feel every September when I get up in front of a whole new set of students, because I never know.”

Karen suggested faculty face homophobia from students even when they choose not to disclose:

> I think I experienced some homophobic-informed student resistance in my teaching. Because even if you’re not coming out in the classroom, they know.

> Even if you think you’re being professional and not sharing your personal life or that dimension of your politics in the classroom, they know.

Consequently, though she is out as queer on campus and in the broader community, Karen rarely comes out to students, avoiding potential negative reactions.
Discipline, area of study, and size of classes affected how faculty navigated relationships with students. Some questioned the value of disclosing to classes of 500-1000 undergraduates with whom they have little personal contact. Those in the natural sciences tended to consider their sexual/gender identity irrelevant to course content and inappropriate to disclose. As Stephanie said, “I feel like I’m revealing personal stuff to them that I don’t really want to.” As noted above, Melissa commented in her field of science, “We don’t even know how to talk about it.” When disciplinary socialization implies hetero-cisgender-normativity is apolitical and neutral, breaching that ‘neutrality’ feels transgressive and biased. Matt initially said he was “pretty out” to graduate students, then later retracted: “No, let me backtrack. I don’t want to say ‘pretty out’. I only mention things when necessary. And I don’t say my partner’s name. I just say ‘Oh, we did this.’”

However, even in fields where queer content was directly relevant, participants struggled to weigh potential risks and benefits. Meryl described uncertainty regarding how to respond to student homophobia and heteronormativity, saying, “What do you do in those situations? Do you come out? Do you not come out? … You think, ‘Okay, do I want them to learn something or do I want to be who I am?’ And you go with ‘learn something’”. Meryl needed to assess whether disclosure would interfere with teaching and learning by undermining her credibility.

Most participants who were out to students reported some negative consequences. Karen, for example, had met several times during office hours with a lesbian student who was struggling academically. Soon she was made aware of department rumours that they were having an affair.

I was so devastated by that, I could hardly even form sentences. So I went to the Dean, and said ‘Look, this is what they’re – this is being said!’ Then she offended me, she said ‘Well, is it true?’ I said, (loudly) ‘No! Are you kidding? Are you–
I’m out of my mind!’ … That kind of poisoned my relationship with that group of students. She seriously contemplated leaving academia as a result: “It was bad. I almost quit teaching. And you know, I got hammered in the course evaluations.” (Melissa simply stopped reading course evaluations after she was tenured.)

Whether experienced first-hand or not, this kind of hostility directly impacts relationships with students. Meryl described various precautions she takes when meeting with students in her office because of the kinds of assumptions Karen experienced: “With students, [I’m] cautious, absolutely cautious.” She feels unable to fully connect with students because she is constantly monitoring her behaviour to avoid misinterpretation. Dee ensures her work with students is beyond reproach, that the “I’s and T’s [are] dotted and crossed appropriately… I’ve always been really careful about making sure that, with respect to my teaching, that my students would never have a thing to complain about”.

While all participants expressed some degree of hesitation around disclosing to students, some also discussed positive experiences and the value of drawing on their identities in teaching. Karen seeks to be a role model for select students and more senior classes:

I think what I try to do with students is to do what I wasn’t able to do when I was younger, which is just to inspire them with my comfort level, and the ease (I hope) with which I present myself.

For Dee, being out on campus meant colleagues “shepherd people [students] in my general direction” for support. Charlotte described having delighted students come out to her immediately after media attention for her work around LGBTQ rights: “[They] were just very, very grateful.” Most participants highlighted the importance of queer students “see[ing] any
reflection of themselves… who they can hold up as a role model” (Melissa). A former student who entered doctoral studies wrote to thank Meryl for being an LGBTQ role model, saying it helped her to survive and thrive.

**University governance: “I wouldn’t expect anybody in the upper administration… to have my back”**

Some participants suggested that the lack of understanding by university administrators about issues facing LGBTQ faculty felt violating. At one of Matt’s job interviews, he was asked if his wife would be joining him for dinner: “I was like, ‘That is an illegal question!’” When Karen told her Dean about false allegations of sexual impropriety with a student, she felt completely unsupported. Dee was stunned by institutional abandonment after she and a colleague supported a student pursuing a complaint about homophobia. Both faculty were threatened publicly by a colleague. Dee did not pursue the incident, but her colleague did:

> My other colleague, who did pursue stuff, was dissed at absolutely every level, both inside the institution and in the justice system at large. Eventually, she resigned. Because she didn’t get support from the union. She didn’t get support from the Dean. I didn’t get a whole lot of support from the Dean. Ah, I did get an air conditioner for the office, (laugh) because that was the only way I could keep the door closed!

At least four of the six lesbians had been sexually harassed, some several times, with no support:

> “I went to the sexual harassment officer, the ombudsperson and a third person, very, very difficult for me… I got up the nerve to go and talk to all three of these people. And nothing happened” (Stephanie). While our sample is too small for comparisons, there are indications of a decidedly gendered aspect to the institutional microaggressions experienced by queer faculty.
Melissa directly linked not disclosing her sexual orientation beyond her home department to perceived lack of support from the university: “I’d be willing to come out to everybody, because I don’t care, but I wouldn’t expect anybody in the upper administration to have my back, if I needed it, for this particular topic. It’s not an important topic to them.” Partly as a response, she had begun to get involved with university committees focused on equity issues: “Trying to make a difference on campus for people who are having a hard time.” In fact, all participants were involved in equity-oriented service work and union work, such as developing queer-friendly policies, advocacy, educating the university community, launching ‘safe spaces’ or ‘allies’ programs, and serving on hiring committees to ensure equitable processes. It is worth noting that this kind of service work is rarely highly valued in the university (Ahmed, 2012). Some participants were also involved in LGBTQ activism in the broader community.

Extra service work took a toll. Charlotte described the impact of years spent doing political advocacy work, on and off campus:

I’ve always worked really hard, politically, with human rights groups. And a friend of mine articulated this, ‘We’re kind of tired of it.’ That it’s time to not have to be sort of the token, ‘educating other people’ you know? It takes its toll. A lot of my first ten years here were about fighting for rights … it’s almost like having an extra job… Certainly the service work I do, some of it around human rights, but a lot just on campus, has definitely impacted the time I spend on research.

Participants placed tremendous value on equity work, yet struggled to fit it into their workloads, and some were clear it had cost them in terms of productivity.
One participant spoke positively about relationships with administration when the university President was openly queer. At all levels there were more signals of inclusion, such as gender-neutral language during job interviews. Another participant noted feeling more comfortable moving toward non-conforming gender expression after some LGBTQ Deans had been appointed.

**Coping Strategies**

The importance of institutional messaging and support was expressed by all participants. Melissa thought her university needed to have a “much more open and welcoming atmosphere, particularly for transgender people.” She wanted queer faculty to be visible, alongside multiple marginalized groups. Charlotte thought clear statements about sexual and gender diversity makes a difference, from “rainbow flags on the doors” to “equity statements in the job ads”, because “you know that you’re welcomed.” Connecting with and mentoring new queer faculty, “to know that there’s someone like you there already and you’re not going to be isolated, and you’re not going to be treated badly.” Some faculty had helped form queer faculty groups on campus.

Most coping strategies, however, were far more individual. Melissa described herself as “a guarded person.” Some mentioned therapists, exercise, medication, music. Some talked (or “ranted”) with a partner or friend. Some employed denial and blocking out pain: “I was largely oblivious to all of that stuff for a whole bunch of years, because I lived as… not vulnerable… I didn’t let myself feel that stuff… I wasn’t willing to be vulnerable to it” (Dee). Meryl described a particularly painful experience, which surprised her as she recalled it: “Huh. I don’t know whether I’ve blocked that out. ‘Cause that was horrible…. I’m sitting here thinking ‘Whoa, how did I forget that part?’” Stephanie said she was expert in compartmentalizing her life: “I can go
from work, drive home and by the time I get home, I’ve switched that side of me off… I’ve always had that capacity… I don’t know if that’s really coping but it works for me.”

Isolation was a coping strategy, as people distanced from university communities, preferring instead to connect with separate queer communities who provided emotional support. Some isolated through work. Asked how she coped with microaggressions, Stephanie said, “I isolate, I think, and just do my work, which is not, again, a great coping strategy probably. But, I just keep telling myself that it’s about the science.”

Impression management was also a direct form of coping. Some chose passing, either entirely or selectively and some used ‘covering’. As noted above, Matt frequently “self-censored” to avoid being type-cast as the gay academic. Dee described needing to pick her battles: “There are moments when (pause) I bite my tongue... I’ve come to a place of (pause) learning how to sit with stuff a little longer… I needed to learn to not react from where and who I am.” At other moments people took up the battles, often using their privilege from other social identities to safeguard activism around queer issues, both on and off campus. Just as some bit their tongues, Meryl said, “One of the ways I cope is by being blunt and by naming stuff… You know? ‘Let’s just get this out of the way.’” In terms of advice to other queer academics, the common refrain was courage. As Karen said:

Trust yourself… don’t live in the judgement of others. Be honest… Be willing to think critically. Live that as well as think it, sooner. (laugh) Even if there’s reason to be afraid, don’t be afraid… Courage means a lot to me, and I would hope that I have behaved in a way that was courageous.

**Discussion**
Academics in this study described myriad experiences of marginality, not-belonging, at multiple levels in the university. While there is no way to know how their experiences compare with those of cisgender and heterosexual colleagues, the findings suggest microaggressions are pervasive despite formal protections encoded in human rights in Canada, and the relatively privileged social status of tenured university professors. Microaggressions are subtle, typically unintended (Woodford, 2015), yet nonetheless may leave queer faculty feeling like outsiders (Pitcher, 2017). Participants navigated disclosures to manage stigma and risks, but the effects of discipline and university size were less apparent than in previous studies (Bilmoria & Stewart, 2009; Buchanan, Munz & Rudnick, 2015; Equality Challenge Unit, 2009; Reinart & Yakaboski, 2017; Vaccaro, 2012), though this may have been a result of sample and methodology.

Being ‘out’ did not necessarily lead to a sense of freedom and “authenticity” as suggested elsewhere (Branfman, 2015; Clarke, 2016; Nielson & Alderson, 2014). Rather, most participants adopted a stance of caution, monitoring themselves to avoid risks. Dozier terms this “vigilance”, a deeply-ingrained, almost unconscious stance adopted by queer faculty in her study (2015b, p. 194). Such caution was reinforced by experiences – personal or vicarious – of negative consequences. Untold energy was expended in vigilance and in decision-making, but also in living the “dialectical tension” or “double bind” for queer faculty (Buchanan, Munz & Rudnick, 2015, p. 295) in which every choice may carry risk (Johnson, 2009). As Meryl articulated, queer disclosure in the context of hetero- and gender normativity might hinder student learning, but ‘passing’ carried a painful cost to personal integrity.

Microaggressions and minority stress

Microaggressions faced by queer people cumulatively convey disrespect, negative perceptions, or hostility. These include use of derogatory language, assumptions and stereotypes,
discomfort, denial of heterosexism and transphobia, endorsement of hetero- and gender-normativity, and exoticization (Nadal et al, 2010). We could add isolation, sexualized jokes and overly-familiar behavior, hyper-visibility and invisibility (Dozier 2015a,b). All were evident among our participants. Being few in numbers left LGBTQ faculty open to tokenism and “role encapsulation”, such as being considered experts on queer issues regardless of area of research expertise (LaSala et al., 2008; Pitcher, 2017). Participants experienced both invisibility and hyper-visibility, expected to speak to equity issues yet dismissed as biased when they did (Dozier, 2015b; Pitcher, 2017; Speciale, Gess & Speedlin, 2015). Both exoticism and tokenism were evident. Some isolated themselves self-protectively, others felt isolated by colleagues, or simply chose not to participate in hetero- and gender-normative social contexts. Guardedness used as a coping strategy also enhanced distance from colleagues and students.

As Pitcher (2017) argued in their study with trans* academics, microaggressions take a toll, both mental and physical, resulting in exhaustion if not overt mental health consequences. Minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) stresses that both personal and vicarious experiences may be stressors; thus, not every queer academic need face accusations of sexual misconduct for the fear of such events to be a chronic stressor. Stressors may also be both external and internal. Interpersonal microaggressions clearly constitute external stressors, but they are compounded by ‘environmental microaggressions’ (Woodford et al, 2015), the organizational or institutional climates and commitments that enforce hetero- and cisgender normativity.

In our study, the lack of support from senior administrators for experiences of overt hostility constitutes a significant environmental microaggression, an external stressor. Consequently, participants distrusted that their institutions would ‘have their backs.’ This raises the stakes in risk-benefit calculations around identity management; if disclosure means risking
accusations of misconduct, and the university has not signalled support, non-disclosure is likely, coupled with vigilance. It is noteworthy that the one participant whose President identified as LGBTQ saw numerous signals of belonging and was ‘out’ in all contexts.

Internal (or proximal) stressors include expectations of negative responses and hyper-vigilance (Dozier, 2015b; Nadal et al., 2010), both of which were clear in our study. Echoing Dozier’s (2015b) results, queer faculty engaged in self-monitoring to manage their presentation of gender and sexuality. Frequent self-reflection sought to interpret how gender/sexuality may have affected events. They scrutinized environments to assess safety and risks. They balanced personal integrity and an expectation of lost credibility and authority. As Dozier (21015b) warns, classifying some stressors as internal may be misleading, given that internal expectations and reactions are in response to external realities.

Minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) links everyday stressors such as microaggressions to depression, anxiety and lost productivity (Irwin, 2002; Woodford, 2015). While most of our participants did not articulate mental health effects, they described negative impacts on productivity and collegiality, unacknowledged workload, an emotional toll from painful experiences, and the stress of constant vigilance and caution. Participants felt weary of unending hetero- and cisgender-normativity. As Charlotte said, “Just not fitting in, just being different… you realize after years, that it does take a toll.” Unfortunately, most coping strategies were individually focused, promoting survival but not necessarily institutional change.

**Persistence of microaggressions**

Everyday microaggressions are difficult to challenge; they are not the kinds of experiences anti-discrimination policies are designed to address. Each incident may be ‘trivial’; the power of microaggressions lies in their repetition and accumulation, in multiple ways and at
multiple sites (Sue, 2010). It takes time to ascertain if an incident is a microaggression, and energy to decide whether/how to respond. Incidents may be personal or vicarious, and they are rarely ‘actionable’ through formal procedures. Though queer-friendly policies and human rights protections may be helpful, they do not necessarily change the everyday workplace climate: “There is an awful [reality]—even if people can’t fire you for being gay, they can make your life difficult in less tangible ways” (Vaccaro, 2012, p. 439). While policies alone cannot bring about change, participants suggest they may serve an important “signalling” function (Dozier, 2015a), helping to effect cultural change.

But there is also an important role for allies to identify and confront microaggressions. There is initial research suggesting ‘microaffirmations’ – everyday acts and words of inclusion and belonging – may positively affect academic climate (Harrison & Tanner, 2018). Interpersonal strategies include acknowledging microaggressions and validating feelings, discussing them openly, and confronting aggressors respectfully, given most microaggressions are unintended. When allies take up such roles, the toll on queer faculty is reduced.

Conclusions

The experiences described by LGBTQ academics in this study, including participants from across Canada in various disciplines and various-sized institutions, are disappointingly replete with microaggressions. Despite diversity offices and anti-discrimination policies – plus human rights protections – participants continue have routine experiences leading to isolation and a sense of dis-ease in pervasively hetero- and cisgender-normative institutions. It is not insignificant that people now have ways to take action when they face overt discrimination and hostility, yet everyday messages still convey messages of not-belonging. While clearly queer faculty can (and do) take steps to guard against individual career harms, it is also clear that the
structural and interactional inequities which shape the everyday experiences of queer academics and foster minority stress must be addressed to achieve equity.

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References


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Microaggressions experienced by LGBTQ academics


### Table 1: Participant demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Sexual and gender identity</th>
<th>Intersecting identities</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Broad field</th>
<th>University size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meryl</td>
<td>Woman, lesbian</td>
<td>Working class European heritage, white</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Education/Law/Social Work</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dee</td>
<td>Queer, lesbian, transgender, butch</td>
<td>Middle class European heritage, white</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Social sciences, gender studies</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Woman, lesbian</td>
<td>Middle class European heritage, white</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Sciences/Engineering</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>Woman, lesbian</td>
<td>Working class, rural, European heritage, white</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Sciences/Engineering</td>
<td>Mid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lana</td>
<td>Woman, queer, bisexual</td>
<td>Working class European heritage, white, disabled</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Social sciences, gender studies</td>
<td>Mid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>Man, gay</td>
<td>Middle class, racialized, ethnic minority</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Business/Management/Economics</td>
<td>Mid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Woman, lesbian feminist</td>
<td>Lower middle class, rural, European heritage, white</td>
<td>60s</td>
<td>Education/Law/Social Work</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>Woman, lesbian</td>
<td>Working class European heritage, white</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Sciences/Engineering</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>