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Study suggests faculty members are disproportionately likely to be gay

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Academic work is often solitary, but succeeding in the professoriate arguably requires social acumen. So is that why gay men and women are disproportionately represented among academics? A new study investigating the phenomenon of “occupational segregation” argues that certain jobs -- including that of professor -- are particularly appealing to gay men and lesbians for these reasons.

“Concealable Stigma and Occupational Segregation: Toward a Theory of Gay and Lesbian Occupations” ^[1] originally was published by *Administrative Science Quarterly* and featured ^[2] recently in the London School of Economics and Political Science's Business Review blog. Written by András Tilcsik, an assistant professor of strategic management at the University of Toronto; Michael Anteby, an associate professor of organizational behavior at Boston University; and Carly R. Knight, a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at Harvard University, it seeks to build on largely idiosyncratic explanations for why gay men and women seem to be represented in some jobs more than others. (One notable exception to such haphazard theories is that gays and lesbians are more likely to cross traditional gender barriers in their careers relative to their straight peers.)

Building on their earlier study of gay and straight workers, as well as the existing literature on concealable stigmas and stigma management, the authors developed several hypotheses about why certain kinds of jobs -- including faculty positions -- reportedly employ a disproportionate number of gay men and women.

Task independence is likely to be particularly important for lesbian and gay workers, the authors predicted, because “they tend to see coworkers and supervisors as the most common source of potential mistreatment and discrimination in the workplace.” In particular, the authors said, task independence allows workers “more control over information about one’s stigmatized status and also [to] limit the negative consequences of disclosure.”

That premise was supported by survey results from gay and lesbian workers in the U.S., who placed significantly higher value on task independence at work than did heterosexual respondents. In their 2014 working paper on occupational skills and preferences relative to sexual orientation, Tilcsik, Anteby and Knight found that those survey respondents who identified as gay or lesbian indicated a stronger preference for jobs in which they would “work independently from coworkers” and “accomplish tasks without depending too much on other

people.” Another 2012 [study](#) [3] found that lesbian and gay college students were more likely than their heterosexual peers to express a preference for working in their own business.

Social perceptiveness -- defined as a capacity to anticipate and accurately perceive others' intentions and reactions -- is another reason gay men and women are disproportionately represented among professors, the authors presumed. Why? Because it's key to task accomplishment in jobs that involve lots of interaction, such as that between professor and student. Moreover, they said, their recent survey research suggests that gays and lesbians have significantly higher levels of social perceptiveness relative to their peers -- one half standard deviation's worth, even after controlling for age, gender and race. (Such findings were consistent with existing qualitative research on sexual orientation and management of concealable stigma, such as literature on adolescent development suggesting that lesbian and gay youths need to develop a high level of social sensitivity and diagnostic accuracy relatively early in life as an adaptation or coping skill.)

To test their hypotheses, the authors need a large and ideally nationally representative sample in which to identify gays and lesbians and their career choices. They found that in the American Community Survey, the U.S. Census Bureau's largest survey other than the decennial census. The authors also needed information on occupation characteristics, such as the level of task independence and social perceptiveness associated with various jobs. They found that in the Occupational Information Network, which replaced the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* as the primary source of information about occupations in the U.S. economy. It measures cognitive, creative, technical and social skills of a given occupation. An additional resource was the U.S. National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

All that yielded data on 452 occupations and 4.9 million individuals, 30,343 of whom were part of a same-sex couple-led household. (Although that number seems low, when comparing same-sex cohabiting couples with other cohabiting couples, the proportion of gay and lesbian workers is in line with expectations, or about 9.3 percent of households. The Add Health data also were representative with general figures on sexual orientation, in that about 2 percent identified as gay or lesbian, 7 percent reported same-sex attraction and 10 percent reported same-sex sexual contact.)

Controlling for such variables as education level, whether a sector tended to be politically liberal or conservative, and urban location (all of which could arguably skew the results), the authors conducted three types of regression analysis. They first used the American Community Survey Data at the occupational level to examine the relationship between the proportion of gay and lesbian workers in the occupation and the extent to which the occupation requires social perceptiveness and provides task independence. Next, they applied the community survey data at the individual level. And because the community survey data only contained that on same-sex couples, not individually identifiable gay or lesbian respondents, the authors conducted an individual-level analysis with the Add Health data.

The analysis yielded lists of occupations with the highest proportion of gay and lesbian workers. Here's a list of occupations, in descending order, in which both the proportion of gay men among male workers and the proportion of lesbians among female workers is disproportionately high. Most all of them are associated with above-average social perceptiveness and above-average task independence.

1. Psychologist

2. Training and development specialists and managers
3. Social and community service managers
4. Technical writers
5. Occupational therapists
6. Massage therapists
7. Urban and regional planners
8. Producers and directors
9. **Postsecondary teachers**
10. Probation officers and correctional treatment specialists
11. Morticians, undertakers and funeral directors
12. Physical therapists and exercise physiologists
13. Computer and information systems management
14. Lawyers, judges, magistrates and other judicial workers
15. Web developers

Psychologists show up again, along with sociologists (but not postsecondary faculty) in the analysis regarding jobs with high proportions of lesbians among female workers in female-majority occupations. The top five, in descending order, are:

1. Psychologists
2. Probation officers/correctional treatment specialists
3. Training and development specialists and managers
4. **Sociologists**
5. Social and community service managers

No academic-specific jobs show up in the top five lists concerning gay men in male- or female-dominated jobs, or for women in male-dominated jobs.

The authors note that their analysis begins to explain the seemingly heterogeneous kinds of jobs in which gays and lesbians have clustered over time -- from professor to probation officer -- and what kinds of unique skills these workers bring to the table. The study says that destigmatization might over time impact these patterns, but that they're likely to remain for the time being.

"Even if destigmatization took place rapidly, broad occupational patterns are slow to change because they continue to reflect earlier educational and career choices and because network-based mechanisms (such as homophily in job referrals) might help maintain segregation patterns that had initially emerged as a response to stigmatization," it says.

Eddy Ng, the F. C. Manning Chair in Economics and Business at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, helped write the 2012 study on college students' career expectations in relation to sexual orientation. He pointed out that the study was right to control for education level and political leanings in that professors are obviously highly educated and tend to be more socially liberal than workers in many other fields. But he also pointed out that higher education's tenure system and its guarantees of academic freedom might add "to the protection that [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] individuals may deem important."

Philip Cohen, a professor of sociology at the University of Maryland at College Park and author of *The Family: Diversity, Inequality and Social Change*, frequently [blogs](#) ^[4] about demographic issues with implications for LGBT populations. He urged caution regarding identifying people as just gay or straight, but said he recognized it was sometimes necessary in research.

Over all, Cohen said, he was impressed with the study and called its premise plausible. Like Ng, he also offered an additional possible explanation for the finding regarding professors in particular. Namely, as a result of their status in a marginalized group, gays and lesbians “may also be more likely to value careers that involve critical examination of social life, including jobs as sociologists or college teachers,” Cohen said.

Another possible interpretation of the results is that those gay men and lesbians who are attracted to jobs valuing social perception and allowing task independence are also more likely to identify their gay or lesbian sexual orientation, he added via email. “They are, in a way, more ‘out’ people. It may be that there are many more gay men and lesbians in jobs that don’t value these traits, but they are less likely to be out as gay or lesbian.”

Tilcsik, the lead author, said the paper tried to explain economic trends rather than provide useful data for any one sector. But he said a good next step might be to “replicate this type of analysis with more fine-grained data within a particular field,” such as college and university faculty. That could help reveal to a much greater degree how the trend plays out in higher education, he suggested.

Diversity ^[5]

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Links:

[1] <http://asq.sagepub.com/content/60/3/446.full.pdf>

[2] <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2016/01/18/there-may-be-some-truth-to-the-gay-jobs-stereotype/>

[3] <http://rop.sagepub.com/content/32/4/332.abstract>

[4] <https://familyinequality.wordpress.com/about/>

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