Lesbian and Queer Women Professors Disclosing in the Classroom: An Act of Authenticity

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Abstract
Lesbian and queer women professors are faced with the personal decision of whether to disclose their sexual identities in the classroom. The experiences of 10 participants in Calgary, Canada were explored through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. The analysis revealed one overarching category: enacting authenticity. The sub-themes within this major finding include fighting for one’s identity, modeling authenticity, and the freedom and connection felt by self-disclosing. Three supplementary findings and the sub-themes within are also expanded and discussed: classroom structure factors, self-disclosure timing, and negative impacts of disclosure. The findings imply that despite the potential negative impacts of disclosing in the classroom, this pedagogical technique can be used as a means of demonstrating genuineness and praxis toward social justice. The professors’ collective emphasis on the role of authenticity in disclosing in the classroom offers prospects for subsequent research efforts regarding the visibility of marginalized identities in academic settings.

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Lesbian and queer women professors face a choice in each class they teach: to disclose their identities or to keep them hidden. Disclosures for heterosexual professors, conversely, are less controversial because their sexual identities are not “other” (Stuck & Ware, 2005). Self-disclosures have been argued to be a necessary strategy by academics; however, their utility as a pedagogical tactic has also been questioned (Clarke & Braun, 2009). This research explores the process of negotiating a lesbian/queer educator’s identity within a Canadian context.

Is the Personal Pedagogical?

To what extent should university professors discuss “the personal” with their students? For university instructors teaching in the classroom, multiple factors, including the discipline and subject matter, come into play in determining whether personal matters are discussed. For example, educators who teach under a feminist framework may adopt a holistic teaching technique where both professor and student engage in “confessional narratives” (hooks, 1994). This interchange has been argued to be vital in education for members of the classroom setting to better understand differences along cultural, racial, ethnic, and class lines (Trubek, 2003). The concept of “appropriate disclosure” suggests that educators use their own personal experiences as a way to help cultivate students’ growth (McLean, 2003). However, a professor’s self-disclosure remains a careful enterprise in hopes to avoid embodying unequal power and/or breeding risky impressions of closeness between teacher and student (Clarke & Braun, 2009). For instance, the narcissistic tendency to seek student gratification by relishing the spotlight has been a voiced concern (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008). In short, it is commonly conceptualized that disclosures should be for the benefit of the student, not the instructor (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008).

In a similar vein, researchers have explored to what extent counselors should discuss “the personal” with their clients. Therapist self-disclosures have a long and controversial history (Hill & Knox, 2001; Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008). Although previously considered uncouth in psychoanalytic dictum, it is now estimated that 90% of practitioners self-disclose to clients (Henretty & Levitt, 2010); however, it is said that self-disclosures should ideally occur infrequently and be used judiciously (Henretty & Levitt, 2010).
Although a considerable challenge to standardize (Gibson, 2012), Barrett and Berman’s (2001) empirical results showed that clients whose therapists self-disclosed reported greater reductions in symptom distress and rated their therapists more favorably than participants with non-disclosing therapists. It is possible that students whose professors self-disclose feel similarly positive. Despite the fact that there is a rich and diverse literature on therapists’ uses of self-disclosures, the issue of instructors’ self-disclosures in the classroom has been paid little attention (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008).

The Classroom Context

Disclosing identities in the classroom is different from disclosing elsewhere, in part due to the inevitable intersubjectivity of the classroom space (Barker & Reavey, 2009). Due to the large diversity in student experiences, a professor disclosing an identity can be empowering for some students and threatening to others. Allowing discussions to involve the personal can render some students intimidated to voice their (opposing) moral beliefs (Gregory, 2004). Consequently, professors often balance voicing their concerns without having the voice that silences others (Sapon-Shevin, 2004). Moreover, Bacon (2009) opined that bringing in personal narratives is “both fetter and freedom” due to the fact that marginalized professors must express their experiences under the constraints of existing rigid categories of identity (p. 218). Progressive professors committed to transformative pedagogy must negotiate the risks of being vulnerable in the classroom and their commitment to “being wholly present in mind, body, and spirit” (hooks, 1994, p. 21).

Disclosing a Lesbian/Queer Identity

When it comes to questions of self-disclosure and pedagogical practice, no area is more controversial and revealing than sexuality. Sexual identity is a complex, often invisible, yet sensitive, subject that individuals manage in different ways. Professors and students alike might wish to reinforce the invisibility of a stigmatized sexual identity for fear of hostility and disregard from others sharing the classroom space. Others with a marginal sexual identity may remain silent due to safety factors and internalized oppression (Harbeck, 1992). Regarding Bacon’s (2009) previous point, there are also those professors who feel self-disclosures reinforce heteronormativity and binary categories used to marginalize people on the basis of their sexuality (Jennings, 2010). Yet others, within the context of a growing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) and supportive community, feel empowered to self-disclose for multiple reasons and in various ways.
One might think of a university’s culture, context, or location as a predictable factor regarding the ease with which professors disclose their identities (see Dankmeijer, 2004). That is, the more liberal leaning, large in size, and urban a university, the more “out” lesbian and queer women professors will be. However, in North America, this may be an oversimplification. It has been proposed, for example, that “some small religious schools received lesbian colleagues more warmly than . . . progressive institutions in liberal U.S. states” (Mintz & Rothblum, 2009, p. 221).

T. E. Smith and Yost (2009) suggested that classroom disclosures are shaped by specific subcultural lesbian identities (e.g., “butch,” “femme”). Professors who more closely resemble heterosexual professors (e.g., femmes) are faced with choices around when to disclose, and witness more homonegativity due to their students’ obliviousness of their identity. Professors whose presentation of self eschews a more traditional feminine gender role (e.g., butches), conversely, run the risk of becoming the token lesbian professor (T. E. Smith & Yost, 2009). Gender performance (Butler, 1990; Crawley, 2009) or dressing in a way that can be read as a “lesbian semiotic” (Wolfe, 2009, p. 181) is a way of acting out a disclosure in the classroom. From a feminist standpoint, it is also noteworthy that lesbian and queer women professors disclosing their sexuality face entrenched obstacles due to their minority status as women in academia (B. J. Liddle, 1997).

Borrowing from a more robust, yet related, literature once again, therapeutic self-disclosures, too, are further complicated by the involvement of sexual orientation (Satterly, 2006). Gibson (2012) aptly revealed that disclosures revolving around sexual practices and beliefs, including that of orientation, have been said (e.g., Hill & Knox, 2001) to be the least appropriate topics to self-disclose. This statement puts LGBTQ people in a bind, for in heterosexist culture, in the absence of communication about sexual orientation, therapists are automatically deemed to be heterosexual (Cole & Drescher, 2006), and thus their experiences and identities are nullified. Furthermore, when LGBTQ therapists do self-disclose, routine personal topics can quickly become “too much” information as these matters are unjustly seen as more “sexual” than similar details regarding heterosexual therapists (Gibson, 2012, p. 292).

**Coming Out in the Classroom Challenges**

Despite popular notions of progressivism in higher education, the classroom is still not a wholly safe place for gay and lesbian professors to come out. Entrenched hegemonic structures operate as barriers for queer professors and students alike. The reigning perspective in psychology until the 1970s was
that homosexuality was a mental illness (Stevenson, 2010). Unsurprisingly, accounts of working as a lesbian woman or gay man in academia in the late 1970s and early 1980s often focused on fear, silence, and the negative repercussions of the closet (Clarke & Braun, 2009). LGBTQ professors have historically felt an immense pressure from heterosexual colleagues to refrain from disclosing in the classroom (Gregory, 2004). Conversely, pressure to disclose might also be felt from openly queer colleagues to promote solidarity efforts on campus (Khayatt, 1998). Moreover, in line with the contact hypothesis, professors who are aware that knowing a gender or sexual minority person will reduce biases may feel an educational obligation to self-disclose (B. J. Liddle, 1997).

Disclosing in the classroom is not a mechanical, emotionless task, and for some gay and lesbian professors, it is constantly on their minds during teaching (Jennings, 2010; Khayatt, 1998). There have been findings (see Dankmeijer, 2004) indicating that the degree of a teacher’s openness in the classroom is an alterable, ever-changing process (Gregory, 2004; Kissen, 2004). The decision to disclose in class involves “hundreds of decisions, embedded, contextualized, and complex” (Sapon-Shevin, 2004, p. 73). Johnson (2008), who as a college student thought “closets were only for clothes” (p. 61), was rattled by how an “overwhelmingly homogenous environment and the quest for tenure” (p. 63) could challenge her once-stable lesbian identity.

In terms of quantitative research in this area, LGBTQ professors’ own accounts are overwhelmingly underrepresented. Instead, psychological studies from the positivist paradigm on professors’ disclosures in the classroom tend to focus on student response. Much of the research has used either teaching evaluations (e.g., Jennings, 2010; B. J. Liddle, 1997) or questionnaires administered to students (e.g., Waldo & Kemp, 1997) to compare the differences between queer professors’ disclosures and nondisclosures. Moreover, results from empirical studies (e.g., Jennings, 2010; B. J. Liddle, 1997; Waldo & Kemp, 1997; Wambach & Brothen, 1997) have been largely inconclusive, indicating there is little consensus on the positive or negative impacts of a LGBTQ professor’s classroom disclosure.

Recent research on the changing attitudes toward the queer community adds another complexity to the disclosing question. For example, some feel that a major shift has occurred throughout North America. Wolfe (2009) said that she can now “speak freely about lesbian authors and texts with lesbian content” because queer theory is “in” (p. 183). Evidently, issues pertaining to queer academics are at the forefront of contemporary debate.

The cost of disclosing in the classroom might be a considerable challenge that lesbian and queer women professors face, but to not come out might be
just as costly. According to the editors of a 2009 special feature of *Feminism & Psychology* on the topic, “The question of whether to come out, or not, and how, is still clearly not one that has an easy or definitive answer” (Clarke & Braun, 2009, p. 176). Additional research on lesbian and queer women professors’ experiences with outing themselves in the classroom is thus of timely importance.

**Bracketing the Phenomenon**

As researchers are unable to free themselves from “their theoretical and epistemological commitments” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 12), it is expected they will delineate their social location with respect to their research project. By explaining where a researcher stands on an issue, potential biases in analysis can be accounted for. This procedure is called “bracketing” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008).

The primary author, a heterosexual undergraduate student at the time of this research, was raised in a planned lesbian family. To wit, she has notable ties to the lesbian community and a nuanced understanding of lesbian culture and struggle. Moreover, as the child of a lesbian professor, the intersection of lesbian and academic is a deeply familiar one. Perhaps due to these familial influences, the primary author had an affirmative perspective on coming out in the classroom. The second author is a gay male professor who routinely comes out in all of his courses. He has written in the area of how to develop a positive LGBTQ identity and maintains a positive perspective on most aspects of LGBTQ life. He is consequently unashamed and unapologetic in outing himself in class.

Thus, due to strong connections to the LGBTQ spectrum, the current research was conducted under an affirmative perspective (Stevenson, 2010), and as such, the researchers’ worldviews may have had a bearing on the analysis. During the research process, efforts to remain reflexive were put into practice by bracketing perceptions, memories, judgments, and feelings on the topic (Groenewald, 2004; Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004).

It is important to mention, however, that a strong association to the community is not only a potential bias but also a benefit, because having no association to a phenomenon can make for an inauthentic or flat analysis (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002). Thus, the researchers’ insider/outsider social locations (i.e., neither researcher is a lesbian or queer woman professor) might make for a richer analysis than having no stake in the phenomenon, but not to the extent that the analysis becomes an introspective exercise. In short, both researchers were well situated for a deeper probing of the issue.
Research Question

The current study focuses on the topic of lesbian and queer women professors’ self-disclosures in the classroom space. As research on instructors’ self-disclosures in general is lacking (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008), this study is exploratory in nature and the primary research question is broad and flexible: Why and when do lesbian and queer women professors come out in the classroom?

Method

Participants

This study was approved by the ethics board of the University of Calgary. A total of 10 lesbian and queer women professors teaching in a postsecondary institution in Calgary, Alberta, Canada participated in the current study (age range = 35-55 years). The criteria for participating included the following: (a) self-identification as a lesbian or queer woman, (b) English speaking, and (c) had taught or was currently teaching at the university level in a classroom setting. Five participants taught within the Faculty of Arts, including English ($n=2$), Women’s Studies ($n=2$), and Philosophy ($n=1$). The remaining five were from Social Work ($n=2$), Nursing ($n=1$), Athletic Therapy ($n=1$), and Communications and Culture ($n=1$).

Nine participants were non-Latino White and one was Latina. All participants had been “out” for more than 5 years and were in a relationship with another woman (i.e., either married [$n=3$] or in a romantic partnership [$n=7$]). Although the identity label “lesbian” was most commonly invoked by participants, one participant preferred the term “queer” to describe her sexual identity and another “bisexual”; thus, these favored terms were used over the duration of the conversation to be sensitive to their identities. All participants were cisgender.

The majority of participants ($n=6$) were recruited by a third-party recruiter from the community (this recruiter was not used as a participant). The remaining participants were recruited by the primary researcher ($n=1$), the secondary researcher ($n=2$), and by snowballing ($n=1$). An invitation e-mail was sent by the primary researcher informing the potential participants about the study and requesting their participation. Each professor who was contacted promptly responded stating that she was willing to participate.

Qualitative Methodology

Transcendental phenomenology was chosen as the methodology for the current research. With intentionality at its core, the focus of phenomenology is on exploring how individuals “make sense of experience and transform
experience into consciousness” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Phenomenological research seeks to understand and get at the essence of a fairly homogenous sample of participants’ lived experience (Groenewald, 2004). As “persons’ awarenesses are concomitant with these lived experiences” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008, p. 28), an analysis of these meanings from a psychological perspective can be highly revealing.

Based on the principles of German philosopher Edmund Husserl, transcendent phenomenology has been refined as a research science by psychologists such as Clark Moustakas (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). This methodological process is referred to as transcendental because researchers view the phenomenon at hand freshly, as if for the first time, by remaining open to its totality (Moustakas, 1994). Compared with more interpretative approaches, then, the emphasis of transcendental phenomenology is on the description of a phenomenon. Through this method, researchers are able to move beyond problems of the Cartesian dualism—between objectivity and subjectivity—by developing an objective “essence” through describing the subjective experiences of a number of individuals (Rapport & Wainright, 2006). This approach is particularly useful when researchers have identified a phenomenon to understand and have articulate individuals who can provide a thick description of what they have experienced.

**Procedure**

The majority of one-on-one interviews occurred in the professors’ offices ($n = 8$), whereas the remaining two took place in private rooms on a university campus. Once the participant and the researcher met, the participant read and signed the informed consent form and the option to choose a pseudonym was given.

The questioning by the primary researcher followed a semi-structured interview guide (see the appendix) that was built using J. A. Smith and Osborn’s (2008) guide to question construction and ordering of questions. The interview schedule included open-ended questions attempting to get at the participant’s lived experience of disclosing in the classroom. There were three sections of questions on the guide: teaching, identity, and coming out. The questioning was open ended to avoid leading participants to particular answers. To help the participant become more comfortable, a funneling technique (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008) was used; that is, earlier questioning was fairly general and focused on teaching history and classroom safety and later questioning included more specific and sensitive issues, regarding sexuality and coming out in the classroom.
The tape recorded interviews lasted from 44 to 59 min ($M = 53$). The interviews were subsequently uploaded onto a computer and transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher. To maintain confidentiality, any information in the transcript that could potentially identify participants (e.g., their discipline or partner’s name) was removed or given a pseudonym.

**Analysis**

The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) flexible approach to extracting themes. These authors maintained that thematic analysis is not wedded to any preexisting theoretical framework and provides a rich, detailed, and complex account of the data. Although researcher judgment is necessary to determine a theme, a convincing theme should occur in a number of instances across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke offered six steps for conducting a thematic analysis: (a) becoming familiar with the data, (b) creating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing the derived themes, (e) defining the themes and giving each a name, and (f) writing up the results.

Using the Braun and Clarke (2006) approach as a guide, the analysis was done as follows: All the transcribed interviews were manually coded by the primary researcher with initial comments made in the margins under a “content” column (i.e., Step 1). Upon additional readings of the transcript, an “issues” column was used to note any issues brought up or contradictions made by the participants (i.e., Step 2). A third column, the “themes,” was reserved for later, and thus a more precise, psychological, and abstract coding of the data (i.e., Step 3). Using this same thematic technique, one of the 10 transcripts was coded independently by both the primary and the secondary researchers, and their codes were then compared (i.e., Step 4). There was a high degree of consensus between the researchers’ codes. The ones that differed were discussed and modified slightly, and the theme names were jointly agreed upon (i.e., Step 5). Step 6 is the write-up of the results.

The precise codes in the “themes” columns from the 10 transcripts became the data used in the next step of analysis—theme organization. During theme organization, the themes were clustered into sections based on relevancy and connectedness until a categorical structure emerged to display the lived experience of the lesbian and queer women professors interviewed. Triangulation of the research was performed in two ways. First, a third researcher—who was educated in qualitative methods but unfamiliar with the particulars of the study—met with the primary and secondary researchers to assist in arranging the themes in a way that created the best fit. Second, member checking (Creswell, 1998) was used; that is, the categorization of themes was sent to
each of the participants to receive “respondent validation” (Yardley, 2008, p. 242) of what was found. The professors who responded \((n = 8)\) agreed with the findings, establishing further validity of the account. Any findings that puzzled the participants were explained or slightly altered to ground the results.

**Results**

The categorical structure that was created to depict the lesbian and queer women professors’ experiences with disclosing in the classroom includes one overarching category and three supplementary core findings. *Enacting authenticity*, the label for the overarching category derived from the analysis, as well as other core findings, will be explained and discussed.

**Enacting Authenticity**

One theme repeatedly emerged during the analysis. This overarching theme was named *enacting authenticity*. Using both similar and divergent language, each participant interviewed brought up the desire or impetus to be authentic in the classroom. This theme was often raised in response to an inquiry about the advantages of being out in the classroom. However, in various ways, the concept of being true to oneself was repeated throughout the dialogue. Sub-themes within the overarching theme include fighting for one’s identity, modeling authenticity, freedom, and connection.

*Fighting for one’s identity.* As an inevitable outcome of existing in a heteronormative society, some participants aptly brought up their identity struggles as lesbian and queer women in regard to acting authentically. One participant, Margaret, in referring to her struggles with coming out, described the impulse toward authenticity in this way:

> It would be the desire and the need to be authentic because I never really have been good at pretending anything. You know, like I am who I am. I have, you know, fought nearly to the death to be who I am so I’m not—certainly, my concern is never to shield people, do you know what I mean? (Margaret)

Margaret’s refusal to “shield people” reveals that coming out may be a powerful strategy of self-affirmation in which the students benefit from her years of experience maintaining dignity. This situation was shared by the participants in the study, with an overall consensus that avoiding self-disclosure is detrimental, pedagogically speaking, because a professor’s avoidance can impede the students’ deep learning and critical thinking.
**Modeling authenticity.** Many of the participants expressed the view that if they restrain themselves from expressing their identity, they will be reflecting a lack of authenticity to their students. Simone described how she models authenticity: “I think the more you are authentic in your classroom the more you’re opening up a space for other people to be authentic” (Simone).

This vigilance toward authenticity stretched beyond the classroom for the professors interviewed. As Marlene explained,

> I really believe that whether I’m teaching or in a meeting or wherever I’m going, that I have to be myself. You have to bring that authenticity to whatever it is you’re doing, because it makes a difference, I think, in your ability to engage with other people and your ability to be effective in whatever kind of work that you’re doing. (Marlene)

**Freedom.** According to the participants, being authentic in the classroom is also a way of being real and honest. As many of the women interviewed used various discourses to indicate that they disliked hierarchical structures between student and teacher, being authentic made for a classroom that served to challenge and minimize these barriers. Leslie articulated how this dismantling process toward freedom may work:

> Well the freedom, the honesty, the kind of the levelling—it’s a kind of levelling of that professional distance between professor and student I think is minimized by that kind of honesty. And there’s a kind of level playing ground there that makes for, I think, really authentic teaching and really authentic learning. (Leslie)

**Connection.** As Leslie noted previously, being out has the pedagogical advantage of making room for authentic connections in the classroom. In describing the leveling between professor and student, it is as if a hierarchy has been broken down and there is room for real discussion to open up, as if remaining closeted might actually hinder building relationships with people. Marlene pointed to this idea: “Like I think if you’re not authentic, it negatively impacts your ability to build relationships so I try to be authentic, to be myself, and to be open” (Marlene).

Another participant, Rita, described being out and therefore authentic in the classroom as a way of reducing the discomfort that often comes with remaining closeted: “Well I think the advantages are that you get to feel authentic and real and kind of relaxed about who you are in the classroom” (Rita). Rita’s quotation speaks to the amount of energy it takes to conceal a marginal identity, sexual or otherwise. To conclude this overarching theme, Simone sends a concise message to other professors who are having trouble
revealing their identities in the classroom: “So I’m thinking just bring your authentic self and bring all of it there” (Simone).

Enacting authenticity as a theme seemed to encompass a model of the lived experience of lesbian and queer women professors, influencing other key findings that were created through the analysis procedure. These findings include classroom structure factors, self-disclosure timing, and negative impacts of disclosure.

**Classroom Structure Factors**

The attributes of a course, such as the size (i.e., number of students) or the level of study (i.e., introductory course vs. a fourth-year undergraduate or “senior”/graduate course), affected how and when the professors chose to disclose. These inherent factors of a course pose difficult aspects for professors to alter or manipulate, and thus, had a significant influence on their disclosures. The key findings from the analysis were the professors feeling a greater sense of safety in either smaller or senior-level courses.

**Class size.** During the interview, professors compared small and large classroom disclosures. Simone, in one example, drew attention to the authentic, open, and small classroom with respect to her decision to come out: “With my students that are in smaller classes I would talk about my life in the way that they talk about their lives” (Simone). This statement reflects Leslie’s quotation about the leveling of professional distance between student and teacher, because Simone humbly likens her level of exposure to her students’ level. However, in larger classes, Rita firmly stated that she withholds from disclosing her sexuality: “Certainly not with 400 [discipline name] students, no way” (Rita). Sheila sheds light on why class size might produce disclosures by pointing to the closer relationships that are formed in smaller classes: “I sort of feel like in a smaller class you develop relationships and in a class of 300 I develop very few” (Sheila).

**Class level.** A smaller class size is often related to upper-level undergraduate or graduate-level courses. Senior courses changed the classroom dynamic and the coming out question for the professors. Judith, for instance, discussed her authentic way of being in these courses: “I’m way more personal and real and vulnerable in the upper division classes and often those kids have taken me before” (Judith). Judith’s open vulnerability, again, hints to the humble step toward a more equal leveling of professor and student, as Leslie and Sheila supported previously. Judith also refers to the familiar relationships she has built with her students and the justifiable grounds to disclose.
Margaret agreed intently: “In the senior course, my feeling is ‘I don’t care!’ So it’s not a matter of my safety, although I do feel much safer because in the senior course these are [discipline name] majors” (Margaret). In a final exemplary quotation for this theme, Leslie highlighted her full exposure with higher course levels:

Well, I think that makes a difference when you teach senior courses too. Getting back to your question about feeling safe, I think that depends on the level of the course too. When I was teaching higher level courses, I was more able to be fully out with my students. (Leslie)

Self-Disclosure Timing

Coming out when relevant. The previous findings remark on where the professors would choose to disclose (i.e., upper-level, small courses); however, when disclosures occur is still in need of reflection. Participants commonly said they would come out only when it was relevant to do so. Therefore, contrary to homonegative stereotypes, the lesbian and queer women professors did not relate their disclosures to a political agenda. A few of the professors taught courses in which sexual orientation was largely irrelevant and, in fact, in these courses they often chose not to come out. Extracts from Sheila, Simone, and Rita’s interviews transparently denote this theme: “My personal life, when relevant, sure might have a place in the way that I teach, but when it’s not relevant, it’s not relevant” (Sheila); “I struggle with saying ‘Okay, I’m a lesbian professor blah, blah, blah,’ because I think it’s not really all that relevant” (Simone); “I mean, it might just be that I can see it as a moment that feels like it’s going to feel safe for me and it’s going to be relevant in the context of the class” (Rita).

In the third extract presented, Rita brought up the crucial need for safety as well as a relevant context to disclose. Although Alice does not use the term “relevant” explicitly, she does refer to her relevant course content, which aids her disclosure: “I’ll often have gay [professionals in the field] on my syllabus or I’ll have the opportunity to teach some content that brings us into this terrain, so it sort of happens organically” (Alice). Alice is illustrative in her use of the word “organically,” and importantly, this statement highlights her heightened awareness of how and when she discloses in class. Marlene, likewise, is astutely aware of her timing of disclosure and she simultaneously traces this theme back to the overarching category:

But then you think “what is the purpose?” right? Because you wouldn’t think of it as relevant necessarily to what we’re talking about—like I wouldn’t tell
them about other stuff in my life. So I think when it’s relevant and when there’s opportunity to do so, I feel the need to, yes, to be open and to be authentic. But at the same time if it’s totally irrelevant and kind of uncalled for, then I don’t necessarily. (Marlene)

**Negative Impacts of Disclosure**

**Agenda pushing.** A commonly detected theme across transcripts was the professors’ fear they would be judged as pushing a lesbian agenda if they were to disclose their sexual orientation. The professors’ experiences of being read as agenda pushing, whether by students or colleagues, were often in a tacit or subtle fashion. To elucidate this hushed homonegativity, the participants’ words are exemplary: “I think that a lesbian instructor could feel like, ‘Yeah, I’m pushing the lesbian agenda too much’ and shut down” (Margaret); “So it’s not, ‘Oh, this is some dyke on an agenda, right?’” (Rita); “‘It’s not really relevant, you can just teach the core text and they don’t have to be gay or lesbian, so why are you pushing your agenda?’ I mean, I still get people saying that” (Leslie). Leslie’s experience with overt homonegativity by being labeled as agenda pushing is telling as to the oppression she has felt in an academic setting. Audre has had similar experiences, but she sheds light on how she redresses direct homonegativity by fostering class discussion:

> Because what I don’t think is fair is that it’s always the person who is gay, who is transgendered, who puts it forward, it always seems like an agenda. And so, I think it’s harder to change a cultural idea if people always perceive you as having an agenda. Whereas, if it’s just coming out from all different places, then it just becomes part of a discussion. (Audre)

**Appearing biased.** Related to the fear of appearing agenda pushing is the fear that students will receive a self-disclosure and related topic discussion in the class as biased, irrelevant, and unnecessary. Some professors even noted if they chose not to disclose their sexual identity and then taught a lesbian or queer text or topic, they were received better by the class. Simone remarked on this negative experience of a disclosure: “Because I think in some ways as a lesbian they can just write that off, ‘Well you’re just a lesbian, of course you would think it’s important to support same sex rights’” (Simone).

This homonegative experience of the professors was quite disconcerting, reinforcing the closet in the classroom. Interestingly, to articulate their adversity, a number of professors used an analogy of race to explain that it is easier for non-Latino White professors to speak with authority on racial inequality:
It was very interesting to watch the thing that could happen in the students’ minds if they thought, oh she’s a feminist, and then everything I was saying was interpreted as if it was biased. And I remember at the time talking to a friend of mine who was also in grad school and who was also teaching Intro, and she was from Ghana, and she was saying that she cannot, in the Intro course, do the chapter on race and racism because they just assume that she’s coming from this biased place. (Margaret)

It’s interesting because when I’m talking about homophobia and heterosexism, it always makes me think a little bit about White people talking about racism. You know, that if I’m not out, I carry a lot of weight in that discussion, it’s really interesting, it’s sick, but it’s the facts. I know it is. (Rita)

I think that some students sort of shut down and stop seeing why this would be a relevant issue to them; like sometimes it’s almost more useful to—if I were to take a kind of parallel example, sometimes it would be useful for White students to hear a White professor talking about why racism is an issue. (Sheila)

Discussion

Heterosexual professors’ identities are assumed, and thus, disclosures of their sexuality in the classroom are less controversial than disclosures made by LGBTQ professors (Endo, Reece-Miller, & Santavicca, 2009). If lesbian and queer women professors choose to disclose, the open door cannot later be shut, thus allowing the possibility that they will become further marginalized and rendered “other.” The results of this study indicate that there are practicing lesbian and queer women professors who are willing to take the risk.

The importance of enacting authenticity in the current study was front and center for the participants. It became their modus operandi for a self-disclosure in the classroom. Whereas other published literature has discussed authenticity as an important aspect of disclosing one’s sexual identity, this work has been largely theoretical (e.g., Lipkin, 2004; McLean, 2003; Sapon-Shevin, 2004), anecdotal (e.g., Johnson, 2008; T. E. Smith & Yost, 2009), or focused on disclosures made outside of the university classroom setting (e.g., Stevenson, 2010).

For example, Stevenson (2010) used an ethnographic approach to examine lesbian counselors’ self-disclosures to clients and coworkers. Although negative impacts were found, many participants stated that the positive impacts of living “a genuine and authentic life” (p. 91) outweighed staying in the closet. Similarly, McLean (2003, p. 162) argued that coming out “encourages authentic student–teacher relationships.” Essentially, theorists argue that authenticity begets authenticity in the classroom space (Lipkin, 2004;
Sapon-Shevin, 2004). The more open and authentic a professor, the more students are allowed to become authentic in their learning and disclosures. Thus, the synthesis of preexisting and the current research in the area indicate that enacting authenticity in the classroom is an act toward increasing the visibility of minority identities in academic institutions and reflects the classroom as a space to foster social justice.

The strength of the findings on authenticity in the current study calls for further investigations into this experience, not only for lesbian and queer women professors but also for others with marginalized identities. What impact does naming different marginalized identities have on classroom dynamics? How does the impact of doing so vary across cultures and across various marginalized identities? These questions call for empirical inquiry.

The results related to classroom structure with respect to disclosures are underrepresented in extant literature. Although small class sizes have been argued to be more intimate (Willman, 2009), class structure variations have not been commonly discussed in relation to disclosing a sexual identity in the classroom. More often, theorists have drawn attention to the geographical or historical location of the classroom. For example, K. Liddle (2009) referred to the homophobia she experienced in the Deep South of the United States, and Johnson (2009) discussed the strain on gay rights in the year 2000 with the U.S. right-wing backlash.

The theme of senior class safety was particularly absent in the preexisting research. When discussing issues regarding sexual orientation in her graduate-level counseling courses, B. J. Liddle (1997) has disclosed her lesbian identity; however, her reasoning was not shared and she made no comparison with lower level courses like the present sample. The lack of previous anecdotes about course level affecting disclosures may be the result of LGBTQ professors teaching similarly sized courses or, alternatively, scholars are simply yet to make note of this relations. In either case, feeling a greater sense of safety to come out in more advanced or in smaller courses—common themes of the current analysis—adds illuminating information to past scholarly works.

Coming out when relevant is a particularly germane theme and is an experience that is by no means limited to the current sample of participants. Wolfe (2009), for example, assessed the relevance of her sexuality to the subject matter she teaches. Johnson (2008) used the clever metaphor of a “revolving closet door” to describe how she “constantly rotates through varying degrees of revelation and exposure” (p. 66) because her task is to educate students on topics related to the course and not on her.

However, it is worth noting that the current sample of professors mentioned coming out when relevant with much enthusiasm. Thus, it is worth
scrutinizing how the relevancy of the personal operates for heterosexual professors. Are heterosexual professors adamant about discussing their personal matters only when it is relevant? If the answer is “no,” then it appears there is a double standard on personal disclosures and relevancy that exists between lesbian/queer and heterosexual professors. The professors’ collective response suggests a heightened consciousness is involved with regard to choosing when to disclose.

Although positive aspects of disclosing were discussed by the participants, there were negative impacts voiced as well. For example, participants talked about their disclosures being read as “lesbian agenda pushing.” Although Johnson (2009) did not use the phrase “agenda pushing,” she has been euphemistically warned not to be “too political” in her courses. Indeed, research (see Anderson & Kanner, 2011) has found students to perceive lesbian and gay professors as having a political agenda, a finding that confirms the current participants’ experiences. Thus, the current findings nourish previous research but focus on the oft-overlooked professors’ perceptions. This theme requires greater focus from the point of view of the professor in future studies to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the stigmas lesbian and queer women face in an educational setting.

Literature is lacking on queer professors’ concerns about appearing biased by raising LGBTQ issues and how this phenomenon may closely mirror professors of color discussing issues of racism. Although self-disclosures for some racial minorities are not a choice, and thus the experience may take on quite different meanings, a number of the professors from the current study chose to bring attention to this parallel example of oppression. Further research is needed to see how individuals from different minority groups are similarly fraught with concerns of appearing biased as well as the solidarity marginalized professors feel by way of the challenges they face in academic institutions.

A general aim of future research should be to generate new insights into academic life for lesbian and queer women professors to create innovative policy and solidarity efforts on university campuses. How do lesbian and queer women professors conceptualize their experiences on campus more broadly? If notions of authenticity are central to the coming out process in the classroom, do these experiences apply to other areas on campus, for example, in meetings, on committees, and in office hours? Or is this act of authenticity solely a classroom process?

**Implications for Classroom Instruction**

There are many advantages to disclosing one’s sexual identity in the classroom, particularly from the perspective of all participants in this study
who voiced the importance of being authentic. Alderson (2012) recommended that LGBTQ individuals disclose their identities whenever it was not considered highly disadvantageous to do so. However, although great progress has been made in society’s increased acceptance of LGBTQ individuals, researchers today still write about modern prejudice (Morrison & Morrison, 2008) and modern homonegativity (Morrison, Morrison, & Franklin, 2009), both related to those in society who espouse positive views on diversity while continuing to harbor deeply prejudicial views. Advancements in these modern areas of research will continue to be significant for the professor disclosing in a highly intersubjective classroom context.

With that being said, Waldo and Kemp (1997) posited that universities are sites for profound political and social change for LGBTQ people. The current research indicates the classroom environment is no exception to this argument. Disclosing a lesbian or queer woman identity in the classroom has educational value for students (B. J. Liddle, 1997), authenticity value for the professor, and social justice value for all.

Limitations

This study was conducted in Calgary, Canada with a sample of 10 participants who were situated inside academia and “out” in the classroom. Although various academic fields were represented in this study, the sample was by no means comprehensive. Lesbian or queer women professors from the sciences and math, for example, were not represented in the study. Thus, the current participants perhaps shared a certain academic standpoint, having potentially greater knowledge of queer life in academia and greater opportunity to self-disclose (e.g., by bridging relevant topics). Therefore, the professors’ experiences may not extend across the entire campus. Indeed, Bilimoria and Stewart (2009) saw the academic climate for LGBTQ faculty in science and engineering to operate on an oppressive “don’t ask, don’t tell” basis. It is also possible that this sample of professors who teach in this area of the world may have a benefit when disclosing in a postsecondary classroom. There is reason to believe that Canada’s more liberal milieu in comparison with that of the United States (Andersen & Fetner, 2008) could pave the way for professors who are queer to be noticeably out in their workplace.

A limitation that is inherent of phenomenological research is that the participants’ accounts are retrospective descriptions of their lived experience (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). When asking the participants specific self-disclosure questions (e.g., what prompts them to come out in the classroom),
accessing this information was difficult for some participants. However, the majority of the participants, when interviewed, were teaching that same week so their descriptions were relatively crystallized and fresh. Consequently, the majority of responses were insightful, detailed, and often recent. Self-disclosures are emotion-filled events that are likely intricately encoded into the professors’ consciousness. Retrospective accounts, then, are only seen as a minor impediment to the current study.

A final limitation to discuss is a complication of phenomenological research studies in general. Whereas participants are trying to make sense of their lifeworld during the interview, researchers are trying to make sense of participants’ making sense of their lifeworld during the analysis. This is a complicated process that creates some degree of interpretation. This two-stage interpretation process is sometimes called a “double hermeneutic” (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 53). However, this exploratory study followed guidelines of transcendental phenomenology; therefore, little interpretation occurred and description was emphasized. Furthermore, various practices (e.g., triangulation) were carried out during the analysis to minimize interpretative aspects.

**Conclusion**

This qualitative inquiry focused on the phenomenon of lesbian and queer women professors disclosing their sexual identities in the classroom. The in-depth nature of the interviews afforded a level of understanding beyond anecdotal data (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008), which comprises the majority of information on this topic. The analysis revealed that disclosing a lesbian or queer identity in the classroom is not a routine undertaking. Instead, coming out requires careful negotiation and consideration of multiple variables. Ultimately, despite the risks and efforts involved, the professors in this study expressed the unmitigated connections between the act of disclosing and the development of an authentic sense of self.

The findings suggest that despite the potential negative impacts of disclosing in the classroom, lesbian and queer women professors will self-disclose their identities as a means of demonstrating genuineness and praxis toward social justice. The professors stated that their lesbian or queer identity—as an integral part of their life—is naturally integral to their pedagogical process. Thus, disclosing is not merely about being truthful about their personal lives; it also about creating a higher level of sharing in the classroom. For lesbian and queer women professors, in a world where disclosing still holds much relevance, the personal is pedagogical.
Appendix

Interview Schedule

Professor’s experience with coming out in the classroom.

A. Teaching
1. Could you give me a brief history of your teaching experiences in university classrooms?
   Prompts: What is the area do you teach in? How big are the classes? What is your teaching style?
2. Could you describe what happens in the classroom, while you teach, in your own words?
3. How do you feel when you are teaching?
   Prompts: physically, emotionally, and mentally.
4. If you had to describe what teaching means to you, what would you say?
5. How would you describe a safe/open classroom environment?
6. Are you able to discuss your experiences with safe classroom environments?
7. What about non-safe classrooms?

B. Identity
1. How has being a professor and a teacher made a difference on how you see yourself?
2. How does your sexual identity factor into this vision of yourself as a teacher?
   Prompts: What make you unique as a lesbian professor?
3. What about the way that your students see you? Does this have any bearing on how you see yourself as an educator?

C. Coming out
1. How does the visibility or invisibility of being a lesbian bear on your decision to come out in the classroom?
   Prompts: style, dress, and presence.
2. How do you, if you do, come out in the classroom?
3. Can you provide any specific thoughts or feelings that accompany this decision?
4. What, if anything, prompts you to come out or not to come out?
5. What are advantages, if any, of coming out in the classroom?
6. What are the disadvantages, if any, of coming out?
   Prompts: Can you describe any experiences with homophobia?
7. What is the classroom like after coming out?
   Prompts: Are there a lot of questions from the students to follow?
8. Do you feel you need to come out in the classroom for any reason?
   Prompts: Do you feel a dedication to sisterhood?
9. How does being out in everyday life differ from being out in the classroom?
10. How do you deal with assumptions that you are heterosexual in the classroom?
11. How do you, as the authority and provider of knowledge in the classroom, deal with any ignorance or homophobia?
12. How would you change the classroom and your coming out experiences?
13. What would you keep the same?
14. What advice would you give to a lesbian professor who was facing convergences about coming out to her students?

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**Kevin Alderson** is an associate professor of counseling psychology at the University of Calgary. His areas of research interest include human sexuality and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, and intersexed (LGBTI) studies. Throughout his 27 years as a practicing psychologist, he has counseled hundreds of clients with LGBTI identities. He is currently an elected council member with the College of Alberta Psychologists, and he serves as a member of the University of Calgary Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board. He is also the Editor-in-Chief of the Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy, the national Canadian peer-reviewed journal in the counseling field.