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Perceived Career Barriers for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Individuals

Martha Keeton Parnell¹, Suzanne H. Lease¹, and Michael L. Green¹

Abstract
This study examined career-related barriers that gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) individuals had encountered in the past and anticipated in the future and the degree of hindrance associated with future barriers. Two hundred forty-one GLB participants (126 women and 115 men) completed the Career Barriers Inventory–Revised and 11 additional items developed to address sexual orientation–related career barriers. Sexual orientation barriers were the third most highly anticipated future barriers and the second most hindering. Lesbian and bisexual women had encountered significantly more barriers related to sex discrimination, career–child conflict, and choosing non-traditional careers. They also anticipated more gender-role–related future barriers and expected more hindrance from gender and multiple role career barriers. There were no gender differences on sexual orientation barriers. GLB individuals encountered and anticipated career barriers similar to those encountered by heterosexual individuals while also anticipating barriers unique to their sexual orientation.

Keywords
career barriers, gay, lesbian, bisexual

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The field of vocational psychology has made strides in identifying and understanding issues specific to the vocational development of racial and ethnic minority groups (Cardoso & Marques, 2008; Flores et al., 2006; Luzzo, 1993, 1996b; McWhirter, 1997) and women (Cardoso & Marques, 2008; Flores, 2008; Hackett & Betz, 1981; Luzzo, 1995; Luzzo & Hutcheson, 1996; McWhirter, 1997). Although slower to develop, there is a growing literature base about vocational issues faced by gay, lesbian, or bisexual (GLB) individuals (e.g., Croteau, 1996; Croteau, Anderson, Distefano, & Kampa-Kokesch, 2000; Datti, 2009; Fassinger, 1996; Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006). Many of the variables (e.g., abilities and interests) that influence career choice and behavior do not differ by sexual orientation; however, some experiences that impact career behaviors are based in societal heterosexist attitudes and are exclusive to being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Heterosexism, or the assumption that heterosexuality is the natural order of relational pairings, pervades our social structure and directly leads to homophobia, which can be described as a fear or hatred of homosexuality (Herek, 1993). Heterosexism and homophobia may result in GLB individuals experiencing institutional and individual prejudice and discrimination. Because of this group-based oppression, some have argued that GLB individuals comprise a “non-ethnic cultural minority” (Elliott, 1993, p. 211). Similar to other minority group members, GLB individuals face prejudice and discrimination in work situations.

Croteau (1996) identified several basic themes related to discrimination at work for GLB individuals: higher rates of discrimination for workers who were more open about their sexual orientation at work, a distinction between formal and informal types of discrimination, and high levels of anticipated discrimination. Between 15% and 43% of GLB workers report experiencing discrimination in the workplace (Badgett, Lau, Sears, & Ho, 2007). Formal discrimination includes actions such as not being hired or promoted because of one’s orientation and discriminatory institutional policies. There is no federal law protecting GLB individuals from employment discrimination and only 20 states and the District of Columbia have laws prohibiting employment discrimination based on sexual orientation (Luther, 2009). Informal discrimination includes actions that are more personal in nature, such as harassment from coworkers. Not every participant in the reviewed studies had experienced discrimination. However, the majority of participants assumed that discrimination would occur if their sexual orientation were revealed. For many, this anticipated discrimination played a significant role in the decision about coming out at work, perhaps as important a role as actual discrimination (Chung, 2001). Despite employment protection policy changes and increasingly progressive attitudes from coworkers, GLB individuals are still reporting discrimination in the workplace. Guiffre, Dellinger, and Williams (2008) found that these persisting difficulties were in three domains: stereotyping, gender discrimination, and sexual harassment. The experienced and anticipated encounters with discrimination may be viewed as barriers to obtaining and progressing in careers.

In the past 15 years, researchers have begun to address the phenomenon of career barriers. Barriers to career development are defined as “external conditions or internal states that make career progress difficult” (Swanson, Daniels, & Tokar, 1996,
This definition does not conceive of barriers as “impenetrable,” but rather obstacles that “are capable of being overcome, although with varying degrees of difficulty according to the specific barrier and the particular individual” (p. 236). A review of the literature suggests career-related barriers to be an important area of inquiry for the career development of oppressed persons.

Career barriers have been studied in the context of socioeconomic, racial or ethnic, and gender differences (Cardoso & Marques, 2008). Research has consistently shown that women and minority group members are differentially affected by career-related barriers with these groups reporting either greater numbers of past and anticipated future barriers (Cardoso & Marques, 2008; Luzzo, 1993; McWhirter, 1997), different types of barriers (Flores et al., 2006; Swanson & Tokar, 1991), or a lowered self-efficacy to overcome barriers (Luzzo, 1996a, 1996b; McWhirter, 1997). Many of the documented concerns for GLB individuals around supervisor and coworker prejudice and employment discrimination (Badgett et al., 2007) can be thought of as barriers to accessing and succeeding in careers. As with racial or ethnic minority group members, it is important to understand the career-related barriers that GLB individuals experience because of prejudicial attitudes and behaviors (Hetherington, Hillerbrand, & Etringer, 1989). Previous research on barriers has not assessed perceived career barriers attributed to sexual orientation.

Career barriers can be situated in Lent, Brown, and Hackett’s (1994) sociocognitive career theory (SCCT). The SCCT model suggests that self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goal representations reciprocally influence the development of career-related interests, the selection of career-related choices, and engagement in career-related endeavors. SCCT is unique in its incorporation of the influence of personal background and environmental factors on the career development process. These factors include gender and race/ethnicity as well as contextual affordances, such as opportunities and barriers.

SCCT has been applied to a number of oppressed groups to facilitate understanding of the unique career barriers encountered by these individuals (Au, 2008; Corrigan, 2008; Dickinson, 2008; Flores, Navarro, & DeWitz, 2008; Flores & O’Brien, 2002; Gushue & Whitson, 2006; Mancuso, 2005; Williams & Subich, 2006). Morrow, Gore, and Campbell (1996) suggested the utility of this theory for lesbian and gay individuals. Morrow et al. summarized SCCT stating that vocational interests are generally formed around activities and skills for which a person anticipates success. Because of prejudices against gay and lesbian individuals in some fields, they may not anticipate positive outcomes or maintain interests even when they are competent to perform the job. Therefore, anticipated barriers to career progress based on sexual orientation may cause a foreclosure of career options.

The current study uses the SCCT theoretical framework to situate career-related barriers for GLB individuals and significantly contributes to the knowledge of GLB vocational issues through an exploration of career-related barriers. While previous authors have reported that GLB individuals encounter prejudicial and discriminatory acts at work or anticipate such experiences, no studies have specifically identified
these experiences as career barriers and examined their prevalence, anticipated occurrence, and anticipated levels of hindrance. Additionally, no studies have examined barriers specific to sexual orientation in relation to other career barriers (e.g., economic, work–family conflict, and decision-making difficulty) that might occur for any individual, regardless of orientation.

While the career experiences of GLB individuals are often grouped together, gay and lesbian individuals are a heterogeneous group (Elliott, 1993). Fassinger (1996) and Elliott observed that gender differences exist between gay men and lesbians with the most prominent being the greater probability of children in the homes of lesbians, the decreased earning potential for women, and differing socialization for men and women. Elliott (1993) observed that in addition to heterosexism, lesbians and bisexual women have the added disadvantage of sexism. Previous examinations of barriers have reported that women (presumably heterosexual) experienced more career barriers compared to men. It is expected that lesbian and bisexual women will also experience and anticipate more barriers related to sex discrimination and multiple roles compared to gay and bisexual men, confirming previous assumptions that they experience career barriers related to both gender and sexual orientation. In light of these expectations, the current study examined differences in barriers by gender.

**Research Questions**

The study was primarily descriptive in nature, attempting to determine which career-related barriers had already been encountered by participants, which barriers were anticipated in the future, and to what degree GLB participants anticipated being hindered by these barriers. We asked the following research questions:

1. What career-related barriers have GLB participants experienced?
2. To what degree do GLB participants anticipate experiencing a range of career-related barriers?
3. To what degree do GLB participants expect to be hindered by a range of career-related barriers?
4. Are there differences in the types of barriers encountered by lesbian/bisexual women and gay/bisexual men and in the degree to which they anticipate encountering and being hindered by the career-related barriers? As noted earlier, we anticipated that lesbian and bisexual women would encounter and anticipate encountering more barriers and experience more hindrance compared to gay and bisexual men.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants in the study were 241 GLB individuals. The sample consisted of 126 women and 115 men. Four of the men and 21 of the women identified as bisexual.
Two individuals who identified as transgender were removed from the original sample because we believed they may experience a unique set of career barriers that should be studied separately. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 58 with a mean of 37.01 (SD = 8.85) years. The majority (n = 220) identified as European American or White. Six identified as Bi/Multiracial, 5 as African American/Black, 4 as Hispanic/Latino/a, and 3 as Asian American/Pacific Islander. Five participants identified their ethnicity as “other,” but did not provide additional information. “Outness” was measured by inquiring whether participants were out to the following groups of people: close friends, siblings, parents, extended family, coworkers, supervisors, and casual acquaintances. One point was received for each category that a participant reporting being out to and then summed, with possible scores ranging from 0 to 7. Out of seven possible categories, participants were out to a mean of 5.34 categories of people.

While many of the participants were from the Southern region of the United States (116), surveys were collected from around the United States including the West (50), Midwest (41), Northeast (26), and Hawaii (3). Five participants reported being from the United States but did not specify a state or region of the country. Two hundred and fifteen participants reported working outside of the home, while 19 reported working inside of the home. Two were self-employed, four were unemployed, and one noted being disabled. The majority reported working full-time (82.5%, defined as 40 or more hours per week). Participants had worked for a range of 1–40 years with a mean of 14.32 years.

Instruments

The Career Barriers Inventory–Revised (CBI-R; Swanson & Tokar, 1991) is a 70-item instrument measuring 13 types of career-related barrier domains. Participants responded on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all likely to occur) to 7 (very likely to occur) to rate the likelihood of facing each career-related barrier (anticipation). Participants also responded on a 7-point Likert-type scale to rate the degree to which they believe each barrier would hinder their career progress if encountered (1 = would not hinder at all, 7 = would completely hinder). There were 13 barrier domains: sex discrimination, lack of confidence, multiple-role conflict, conflict between children and career demands, racial discrimination, inadequate preparation, disapproval by significant others, decision-making difficulties, dissatisfaction with career, discouraged from choosing nontraditional careers, disability/health concerns, job market constraints, and difficulties with networking/socialization (Swanson et al., 1996). Subscale scores were obtained by averaging the responses to items assigned to each of the 13 barriers with higher scores indicating greater anticipated likelihood of occurrence and greater degree of hindrance for each career-related barrier. For each item, participants were also asked to indicate if they had experienced this barrier in the past (0 = no, 1 = yes). These items were averaged to result in an encountered barrier score for the respective scales. Thus, three scores (encountered, anticipated, and hindrance) were computed for each barrier domain.
Although career barriers related specifically to sexual orientation are discussed in the literature, there are no instruments designed to measure these barriers. In order to assess barriers attributed to sexual orientation, 11 items related to sexual orientation were added to the CBI-R to create a separate sexual orientation barriers subscale. We created this subscale by rewording CBI-R items addressing racial/ethnic, gender, and ability status to reflect career issues (i.e., choice of careers, discrimination, harassment, promotions, and pay inequity) associated with sexual orientation (see Appendix). As with the other CBI-R items, participants rated the likelihood of occurrence, the degree of hindrance anticipated for each item, and whether they had encountered the barrier in the past.

The internal consistency coefficients for the original 13 subscales have been reported to range from .64 to .86 (Swanson et al., 1996). In the current study, the internal consistency coefficients for all 14 subscales, including the additional sexual orientation subscale, ranged from .53 to .88 for both anticipation and hindrance. The disapproval by significant others anticipation and hindrance subscales had low reliabilities (.53 and .59, respectively) and were not included in the analyses. Alpha coefficients for the remaining 13 subscales ranged between .70 and .88. An open-ended item asked participants to list any additional barriers they had experienced or anticipated experiencing in their future career. This allowed participants the opportunity to add barriers that were not addressed on the CBI-R.

Procedures

Following approval by the institutional research review board, two methods of data collection were utilized. First, a friendship network was used to reach members of the GLB communities. The first author sent an electronic mail message to approximately 50 colleagues, friends, and family members containing a link to the first of four webpages devoted to “The GLB Career Project.” The message requested participation from eligible individuals and asked that each recipient send the message to friends and acquaintances connected with the GLB communities. Additionally, an electronic mail message was sent to the administrators of 160 listservs related to GLB issues.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary analyses were conducted to examine whether bisexual participants were significantly different from their gay and lesbian counterparts in terms of the degree to which they had encountered or anticipated encountering and being hindered by career-related barriers. A subsample of 26 lesbian and gay participants was randomly selected from the full sample and their responses were compared to those of bisexual participants. There were significant multivariate differences between participants identifying as gay or lesbian and those identifying as
bisexual on the encountered and anticipated barriers scales. In light of the small sample size, we chose to examine effect sizes for the univariate tests. There was a significant finding on the anticipation of sexual discrimination barriers, $F = 6.60, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .12$, with bisexual participants anticipating more barriers. There were no statistically significant differences on encountered barriers, but there was a moderate effect size for barriers related to sex discrimination ($\eta^2_p = .04$) with bisexual participants experiencing more sex discrimination barriers. Since there were more women in the sample of bisexual participants, these findings on the sex discrimination barriers are likely to be an artifact of the gender composition of the subsample. Post hoc analysis confirmed that bisexual participants did not differ from a random subsample of 25 lesbian participants on sexual discrimination barriers but did differ from a random subsample of 25 gay participants. There were no other differences between the groups and the other effect sizes were in the small to low-moderate range so we chose to combine participants of all sexual orientations in subsequent analyses.

Similar analyses were utilized to compare ethnic minority participants to European American participants. Data from 24 European Americans were randomly selected from the full sample. There were no significant multivariate effects between the two groups. Given the small sample size, we chose to examine effect sizes in order to detect possible differences. As expected, examination of the univariate analyses revealed significant differences for encountering past racial discrimination ($\eta^2_p = .14$) and anticipation of future racial discrimination barriers, $F = 12.11, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .21$. There were no significant differences on measures of expected hindrance. Because significance was found on only the expected racial discrimination barrier, and effect sizes for the other barriers were in the small to low-moderate range, data for all participants were combined in subsequent analyses.

**Encountered Career-Related Barriers**

The first research question examined the career-related barriers that participants had already experienced and whether there were gender differences in the number of barriers experienced. Both female and male participants reported that they had encountered barriers in all 13 categories. The three most frequently experienced barrier categories for women were dissatisfaction with career, multiple-role conflict, and lack of confidence. The three most frequently experienced barrier categories for men were dissatisfaction with career, lack of confidence, and decision-making difficulties. Sexual orientation barriers ranked as the seventh most frequently encountered barrier domain for both men and women. Table 1 lists the means, standard deviations, and results of the multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) for the encountered barriers subscales. There was a significant gender effect on encountered barriers, $F(13, 227) = 7.27, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .29$. Follow-up analyses indicated that lesbian and bisexual women had encountered significantly more barriers related
to sex discrimination, multiple-role conflict, and being discouraged from choosing nontraditional careers.

Anticipation of Career-Related Barriers

Next, we examined the barrier domains that gay and bisexual men and lesbian and bisexual women anticipated encountering. The three highest scores for women were on the following barriers: dissatisfaction with career, sex discrimination, and sexual orientation discrimination. For men, the three barriers with the highest anticipated scores were dissatisfaction with career, difficulty with networking/socialization, and sexual orientation discrimination. Scores for these subscales indicated a moderate level of anticipation of encountering these barriers in the future.

To investigate whether there were gender differences in the degree to which participants anticipated encountering career-related barriers, we calculated a one-way MANOVA by gender on the 13 anticipation scales. Means, standard deviations, and the results of the univariate analyses are displayed in Table 2. There was a significant effect for gender found in the anticipation of barriers, Wilks’ $\lambda = .54$, $F(13, 227) = 15.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .47$. Follow-up univariate analysis indicated that

### Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Univariate F Results for Encountered Barriers Subscales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Women $(n = 126)$</th>
<th>Men $(n = 115)$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex Discrimination</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Confidence</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple-Role Conflict</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict between Children and Career Demands</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Discrimination</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate Preparation</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-Making Difficulties</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfaction with Career</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discouraged from Choosing</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional Careers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability/Health Concerns</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Market Constraints</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty with Networking/Socialization</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation Discrimination</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Individual barrier items were scored $0 = \text{No}$ and $1 = \text{Yes}$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.
female participants were significantly more likely to anticipate barriers related to sex discrimination, $F(1, 239) = 114.90, p < .001$, conflict between children and career demands, $F(1, 239) = 14.69, p < .001$, being discouraged from choosing nontraditional careers, $F(1, 239) = 14.95, p < .001$, and multiple-role conflict, $F(1, 239) = 4.28, p < .05$. Partial $\eta^2$ effects were .33, .06, .06, and .02, respectively.

### Hindrance of Career-Related Barriers

We calculated levels of hindrance associated with each of the 13 barriers. Scores tended to be higher for both male and female participants on this dimension than on the anticipation dimension and fell more often above the median. Women reported the highest degrees of hindrance on barriers related to dissatisfaction with career, sexual orientation discrimination, lack of confidence, multiple role conflict, and sex discrimination. Men reported the highest degrees of hindrance on barriers related to dissatisfaction with career, sexual orientation discrimination, inadequate preparation, lack of confidence, and difficulty with networking/socialization.

To investigate whether there were gender differences in the degree to which participants expected to be hindered by career-related barriers, we calculated a one-way MANOVA by gender on the 13 hindrance scales. Means, standard

### Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Univariate F Results for Anticipated Barriers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Women $(n = 126)$</th>
<th>Men $(n = 115)$</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex Discrimination</td>
<td>3.67 1.30</td>
<td>2.08 0.96</td>
<td>114.90**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Confidence</td>
<td>3.19 1.44</td>
<td>3.07 1.34</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple-Role Conflict</td>
<td>3.61 1.13</td>
<td>3.30 1.24</td>
<td>4.28*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict between Children and Career Demands</td>
<td>2.13 1.22</td>
<td>1.62 0.77</td>
<td>14.69**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Discrimination</td>
<td>2.10 1.09</td>
<td>1.86 1.05</td>
<td>3.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate Preparation</td>
<td>2.79 1.24</td>
<td>2.98 1.44</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-Making Difficulties</td>
<td>3.16 1.35</td>
<td>3.18 1.38</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfaction with Career</td>
<td>4.01 1.42</td>
<td>3.98 1.40</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discouraged from Choosing Nontraditional Careers</td>
<td>2.73 1.21</td>
<td>2.13 1.22</td>
<td>14.95**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability/Health Concerns</td>
<td>2.72 1.47</td>
<td>2.61 1.56</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Market Constraints</td>
<td>3.18 1.46</td>
<td>2.99 1.39</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty with Networking/Socialization</td>
<td>3.53 1.38</td>
<td>3.42 1.49</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation Discrimination</td>
<td>3.62 1.22</td>
<td>3.41 1.28</td>
<td>1.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Possible range for all means was 1–7. Higher scores indicated greater anticipation of the barrier.*
*\*p < .05.
**p < .01.
There was a significant effect for gender found in the degree of hindrance, Wilks’ $\lambda = 0.69, F(13, 227) = 7.72, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .31$. Follow-up univariate analysis again indicated that women reported significantly higher degrees of hindrance related to sex discrimination, $F(1, 239) = 37.61, p < .001$, conflict between children and career demands, $F(1, 239) = 9.54, p < .01$, and being discouraged from choosing nontraditional careers, $F(1, 239) = 5.47, p < .05$. Effect sizes were .14, .04, and .02, respectively.

### Additional Barriers Related to Sexual Orientation

There were 84 responses to the open-ended question asking about additional barriers. Barriers related to sexual orientation included a lack of domestic partnership benefits (6 responses), difficulty with partner and work-related social functions (4 responses), coming out issues (11 responses), negative attitudes of coworkers/public (8 responses), job discrimination/loss (8 responses), negative reactions from other GLB individuals and internalized homophobia (6 responses), working with children/“unsuitable” career (8 responses), and making greater efforts to compensate for the negative views of others (2 responses).
Discussion

Previous research on career-related barriers has revealed differences in encountered and anticipated barriers for different demographic groups (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1993; Cardoso, & Marques, 2008; Flores, 2008; Flores et al., 2006; Hackett & Betz, 1981; Luzzo, 1993, 1995, 1996b; Luzzo & Hutcheson, 1996; McWhirter, 1997; Swanson & Tokar, 1991). The current study examined career-related barriers that GLB participants had encountered in the past or anticipated encountering in the future. Furthermore, the current study examined the degree of hindrance participants expected if they encountered the barriers. As a “nonethnic cultural minority” (Elliott, 1993), GLB individuals could be expected to encounter career-related barriers specific to their sexual orientation in addition to career barriers that all individuals might encounter.

Sexual Orientation Barriers

Croteau (1996) reported that studies examining career issues for GLB individuals found that while not all participants had experienced sexual orientation discrimination, most expected it to occur in their career lives, if their sexual orientation were known. Similarly, the current study found that not all participants had experienced barriers related to sexual orientation in the past and that they had experienced six other categories of barriers more frequently. Despite having experienced other barrier domains more frequently, both men and women rated sexual orientation barriers as the third most highly anticipated future barrier domain. Participants also expected barriers related to sexual orientation to have a moderate degree of hindrance for them. Participants had a mean age of 37 and had been working for a mean of 14 years. Post hoc analyses showed that length of employment was significantly related to number of encountered sexual orientation barriers but not to anticipation or expected hindrance of sexual orientation barriers. This suggests that while participants with considerable experience in the workplace have already encountered numerous barriers related to their orientation, they were no less likely than younger workers to anticipate additional, difficult barriers related to their orientation as they progressed through the middle and later stages of their careers. Barriers at these stages could limit participants’ abilities to establish themselves and advance in their careers or feel satisfied in their occupations (House, 2004; Super, 1990).

In the social cognitive framework, the likelihood or anticipation of barriers could be seen as an outcome expectation and the degree of hindrance seen as self-efficacy for coping with the barrier (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000; Swanson et al., 1996). Based on this framework, it is important to assess both aspects of barriers to better understand how individuals’ perceptions of barriers affect interest in and pursuit of career paths. Special attention should be paid to those barriers with higher levels of perceived likelihood and hindrance since they could powerfully affect career planning. Lent et al. (2000) also suggested the need to consider the time frame for the
anticipated barrier as proximal barriers may be tolerated in the presence of positive
distal expectations.

While lesbian and bisexual women rated sex discrimination barriers as more likely than sexual orientation barriers to occur in their future careers, they expected a higher level of hindrance stemming from sexual orientation discrimination than sex discrimination. This could be explained by the fact that individuals can opt to hide their sexual orientation but cannot typically do the same for gender. Some women may plan to pass as heterosexual and might therefore not anticipate as many barriers related to sexual orientation as they would to sex discrimination. However, the world of work in general is more accepting of gender diversity than sexual orientation diversity. While women maintain a second-class status in the career world as evidenced by pay inequity or the glass ceiling, there are federal laws against sex and sex-based wage discrimination (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2002). Prejudice and discrimination toward sexual minorities remains largely acceptable. As noted earlier, the majority of states have no law prohibiting employment discrimination based on sexual orientation (Luther, 2009).

Gay and bisexual men anticipated encountering sexual orientation discrimination and it had the second highest hindrance score. In some cases, the consequences for discovery of sexual orientation could be even more severe for gay and bisexual men than for lesbian and bisexual women, since gay and bisexual male employees may be preferred over female workers until their sexual orientation is known (Heilman, 2001). While there was a gender wage gap of 22.9% in women’s and men’s median annual earnings in 2008 (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2009), both Badgett (1995) and Black, Makar, Sanders, and Taylor (2003) reported that gay and bisexual men earned less than heterosexual men after controlling for education and occupation.

Other Career Barriers

Similar to previous studies (McWhirter, 1997; Swanson et al., 1996), lesbian and bisexual women were significantly more likely to have encountered and anticipate encountering and being hindered by barriers related to sex discrimination compared to gay men. Female participants were significantly more likely to anticipate facing and being hindered by barriers related to conflict between children and career demands. Lesbian and bisexual women are more likely than gay men to have children in the home (Elliott, 1993) and also to be working outside the home (Fassinger, 1996). Women had experienced more barriers related to multiple-role conflict and it was among the top five in hindrance. Past studies have shown role conflict to be a consistent concern to female participants (Luzzo, 1995; Luzzo & Hutcheson, 1996; Swanson et al., 1996; Swanson & Tokar, 1991). Therefore, women, regardless of sexual orientation, appear to be affected by barriers related to sex discrimination and role conflict, and career counselors should consider the possibility of these barriers for their lesbian and bisexual female clients.
Dissatisfaction with career was the most highly anticipated barrier for GLB men and women. While individuals might anticipate career dissatisfaction for many reasons, it is possible that the GLB participants anticipated poorer career progress or dissatisfaction with their jobs for reasons related specifically to the discrimination they may experience at work. They may also be dissatisfied if they chose careers based on beliefs about what would be safe work environments rather than choosing careers based on their interests. Post hoc examination of correlations indicated that anticipated sexual orientation barriers scores were significantly correlated with anticipation of barriers related to career dissatisfaction ($r = .47$), networking ($r = .60$), and being discouraged from choosing nontraditional careers ($r = .59$).

Following dissatisfaction with career, men ranked difficulty with networking/socialization as the second most anticipated barrier and among the top five for predicted hindrance. This result has not been reported in previous research, which either did not incorporate this specific barrier or did not find this result for male participants (Luzzo, 1995; Luzzo & Hutcheson, 1996; Swanson & Tokar, 1991; Swanson et al., 1996). It can be hypothesized that this result would not typically be expected in a sample of mostly European American men, who have greater access to “the good ole’ boy network” than other demographic groups. It is quite possible that being a member of a sexual minority affected these results. Colvin (2004) reported that GLB participants reported teasing, harassment, and being overlooked for additional responsibilities or promotions. These experiences reduce one’s ability to network and socialize with work peers and mentors. Male participants also listed multiple-role conflict, decision-making difficulties, and lack of confidence as barriers that were most anticipated and predicted to somewhat hinder career progress. Again, one would not expect multiple-role conflict to be a highly anticipated barrier among men, and past research has not indicated it as a career barrier for men. However, gay men who have children are less likely to have a stay-at-home partner than are heterosexual fathers and may anticipate more multiple-role conflict.

**Qualitative Responses Regarding Barriers Related to Sexual Orientation**

Some participants provided additional detail in the open-ended response section on other barriers related to sexual orientation. While many participants commented on discrimination, one shared a narrative of extreme harassment and discrimination while working in a “state university which offers no nondiscrimination policy based on sexual orientation.” Thus, while the number of companies and universities including sexual orientation and gender identity into Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) policy statements has increased (Luther, 2009), there are still workplaces that do not include sexual orientation in EEOC policies. Additionally, the existence of such policies does not guarantee that discrimination will not occur (Embrick, Walther, & Wickens, 2007; Guiffre et al., 2008; Ragins, 2004; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001).
Participants spoke of the emotional toll associated with being in the closet, one referring to it as “subtle stress.” The difficulties of working under stressful circumstances were articulated by a Caucasian 27-year-old lesbian who listed depression due to her ongoing discomfort in a conservative work environment as an additional barrier. One participant (a Jewish, Caucasian, bisexual woman) discussed the hazard of being “out” on her resume, not knowing “how that affects me even getting a first interview.” Future versions of inventories could include barriers related to psychological distress as a result of heterosexist attitudes and decisions about presenting oneself in application materials.

Several items addressed the issue of certain careers not being appropriate for GLB individuals, and some participants spoke in more detail of leaving careers in the ministry, the military, law enforcement, and education due to an inability to be out in these fields. On the other hand, one 36-year-old Caucasian gay man noted that “I would not want to have a job where I could not be open about being gay. This severely limits one’s choices.”

Participants also spoke of the barrier of internalized homophobia and making extra efforts to prevent or reduce the occurrence of barriers, which becomes a barrier itself. As stated by a Hispanic 26-year-old bisexual woman,

> What is not captured by this survey is the extent to which people do things to prevent these barriers from occurring. I work very hard, probably harder than I need to, to achieve in my career so that it will be impossible for people to discriminate against me or deny me promotions, etc. However, the weight of the pressure I put on myself takes its toll.

These quotes from participants suggest the systemic discrimination and stress that is consistent with membership in groups that do not fit into the dominant norms. McIntosh first discussed this in the context of White privilege (McIntosh, 1988) where she related the unearned and unknown benefits she experienced as a result of being White in U.S. society. Similarly, heterosexual privilege is based in heteronormative assumptions and is the set of everyday experiences that heterosexuals benefit from simply by being heterosexual. GLB individuals who do not fit heteronormative assumptions are socially, legally, or occupationally disadvantaged (Black & Stone, 2005) and must make greater efforts to achieve some of the same benefits that are automatically granted to heterosexual individuals.

**Clinical Implications**

Researchers are increasingly aware of the career issues that may be present for GLB individuals. GLB individuals face career barriers similar to those experienced by heterosexual individuals as well as unique career-related barriers. When working with lesbian, bisexual, or gay clients, counselors should inquire about career barriers specifically related to sexual orientation without pathologizing the clients or assuming all
problems stem from minority sexual orientation. Nor should some barriers (e.g., conflict between children and career demands or multiple role-conflict) be assumed to exist only for heterosexual individuals. Lesbian and bisexual women are likely to experience barriers related to their gender in addition to sexual orientation barriers.

Counselors must be familiar with the concept of experienced and anticipated (or encountered and potential) discrimination (Chung, 2001) and the impact that this can have on career choice, coming out, and adjusting to work environment. Counselors also must help clients to carefully examine coping strategies related to vocational choice and work adjustment, including the pros and cons associated with coming out at work. This major decision is likely to have a significant and lasting impact in the workplace and clients must weigh the options of the stress associated with staying in the closet versus the risk of coming out in an unsafe environment (Elliott, 1993). This study has shown that fear (of discovery, the attitudes of others, and discrimination) continues to be an important career issue for many GLB individuals.

Limitations and Future Research

Current literature suggests that bisexual individuals may have different concerns than gay and lesbian individuals (Knous, 2005; Matteson, 1995) and that GLB people of color encounter different obstacles than their European American counterparts (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000; Greene, 1997). Due to small numbers of bisexual and racial or ethnic minority participants, this study did not allow for a more in-depth examination of these potential differences. All ethnic minority and bisexual participants were included in the final sample, although certain risks are associated with this decision. Bisexual individuals with a different-sex partner may be able to more easily pass as straight, which might exempt them from direct discrimination. On the other hand, passing comes with serious psychological consequences (Elliott, 1993), and given the negative attitudes toward bisexuality, fears of being outed may be more extreme than for a gay or lesbian individual. Likewise, people of color who are also GLB face many unique concerns. Multiple minority status introduces additional issues, including conflict in allegiances to the multiple “minority” groups (Morales, 1989). This study does not begin to give voice to this unique struggle.

The current study consisted of a largely Caucasian, employed, GLB sample that had computer access. Such individuals may be more likely to have higher levels of education, training, and socioeconomic status. The participants also may have been more likely to be invested in a career or career process. All of these factors potentially contribute to the types of barriers encountered. While we gained important information regarding the career barriers experienced by our sample, the results may not be generalizable to other GLB groups. Future research must incorporate increased numbers of GLB people of color, bisexual individuals, and those from lower socioeconomic groups.

Internalized homophobia is a central concept in the life of some GLB individuals and has a potentially crucial impact on self-efficacy, goal formation, self-esteem,
social connectedness, anticipation of discrimination, and attributions about others’ behaviors. Level of internalized homophobia was not assessed in the current study but was mentioned by some participants and may have had a significant effect on some of the barrier domains.

Stage of GLB identity development may also have a substantial impact on how an individual makes a career or job choice, the degree of outness in general and on the job, the manner in which one interacts with coworkers, interprets work-related interactions, perceptions of discrimination, and involvement in the GLB communities. GLB identity stage was not assessed in the current study but could have a significant impact on experiences and anticipation of career-related barriers as well as the degree of hindrance stemming from barriers. Future research should study the interaction of career-related barriers with level of internalized homophobia and stage of identity development.

Summary

This study examined the career barriers encountered by lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. We assessed barriers that were specific to sexual orientation as well as general career barriers. GLB people face many of the same career barriers faced by heterosexual individuals—dissatisfaction with career, difficulty with networking, multiple-role conflict—as well as additional barriers related to sexual orientation. Open-ended responses indicated that dealing with barriers related to sexual orientation was emotionally difficult. Counselors working with GLB populations should be aware of and prepared to address the totality of a client’s vocational experiences.

Appendix

Additional Sexual Orientation Barriers Items

1. Experiencing discrimination in hiring for a job due to my sexual orientation (2)
2. Feeling my choices of careers are limited because of my sexual orientation (9)
3. Having a boss or supervisor who is biased against people of my sexual orientation (17)
4. Experiencing harassment on the job because of my sexual orientation (19)
5. Living in an area that is not tolerant of my sexual orientation (24)
6. Not being paid as much as coworkers of a different sexual orientation (34)
7. Experiencing sexual orientation discrimination in promotions in job/career (40)
8. Other peoples’ beliefs that certain careers are not appropriate for people of my sexual orientation (48)
9. Lack of opportunities for people with my sexual orientation in traditional fields (e.g., teaching for women, engineering for men) (59)
10. My belief that certain careers are not appropriate for me because of my sexual orientation (67)

11. Living in a community or geographic region that is politically conservative (81)

Numbers in parentheses indicate item number on CBI-R questionnaire.

Authors’ Note
This research was based on data from Martha Keeton’s doctoral dissertation. Martha Keeton Parnell is now in private practice in Atlanta, GA.

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References


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