“I Didn’t Think I’d Be Supported”: LGBTQ Students’ Non-Reporting of Bias Incidents at
Southeastern Colleges and Universities

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Abstract

Colleges and universities are complex spaces of both LGBTQ+ liberation and oppression. College students experience LGBTQ+ bias-motivated incidents of harassment, assault, or other violence. Previous researchers have found that these incidents are severely under-reported, which may be related to a range of factors, including campus policies, campus climates, and administrator incompetence. These campus characteristics are upheld through systems of anti-LGBTQ+ surveillance and oppression, including compulsory heterogenderism, which normalize anti-LGBTQ+ violence. In this study, we used a survey of 143 LGBTQ+ college students in the Southeastern U.S. to examine their experiences of violence on campus. Using queer theory, we analyzed student responses about bias-motivated incidents and whether they chose to report the incidents to campus or legal authorities via convergent mixed methods. In this analysis, LGBTQ+ students' decisions to report a bias incident are moderated by considerations of the significance of the incidents, unclear and prohibitive reporting options, and the risks associated with reporting. Additionally, students regularly minimized the seriousness of violence against themselves even when describing incidents that commonly meet college and university definitions of harassment and/or assault. This study shows LGBTQ+ students' experiences of bias-motivated violence and (non)reporting are complex and affected by many facets of college life. Therefore, colleges and universities looking to address violence on campus need to improve not only policy but also communication and other efforts that demonstrate students experiencing violence will be heard, supported, and affirmed.

Keywords: *LGBTQ+ Students; Queer Studies; Campus Climate; Reporting*

"I Didn't Think I'd Be Supported": LGBTQ+ Students' Non-Reporting of Bias Incidents at Southeastern Colleges and Universities

Colleges and universities are spaces of both LGBTQ+ liberation and oppression and remain spaces of much LGBTQ+ related research (Lange et al., 2019, Renn, 2010). Campus climate scholars and researchers studying the experiences of LGBTQ+ students on campus have focused on increasing the visibility and normalization of LGBTQ+ people on campus (Miller et al., 2019, Renn, 2010). Researchers suggest that campus climates have improved over time (Garvey et al., 2017). However, polling by GLAAD (2019) indicates that tolerance and support of LGBTQ+ persons have eroded among young adults in the U.S. in recent years. The shifts in attitudes about LGBTQ+ people and issues among college-age adults may also affect campus climates. Even with shifting public attitudes, college campuses have remained complicated spaces for LGBTQ+ students. Indeed, although college campuses serve as a space of newfound freedom and independence for many LGBTQ+ students, they can also present threats of harassment and assault, especially in the Southeastern U.S. (Beall & Strunk, 2018). The history of oppressing LGBTQ+ students and the continued presence of anti-LGBTQ+ policies and practices may be especially pronounced in the Southeastern U.S., as well (Strunk et al., 2015). This study will investigate student accounts of bias incidents and their (non)reporting of these incidents to lend insight into student experiences and the silencing of those experiences in the Southeastern U.S.

Unfortunately, bias-motivated harassment and assault, including sexual harassment and assault, remain relatively common on college campuses (DeKeseredy et al., 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). However, harassment and assault incidents are reported at lower rates than which they occur due to cultural and institutional factors, including poorly

written policy, enforcement, and lack of adequate LGBTQ+ specific resources and centers (Boysen et al., 2009; Stotzer, 2010). Cultural and social factors, including survivors' perceptions of confidentiality during the reporting process and fear of not being taken seriously by reporting authorities, create barriers to students reporting bias incidents (Briones-Robinson et al., 2016). These factors contribute to the silencing of LGBTQ+ students' experiences in both campus climate and crime data (Miles-Johnson, 2013; Stotzer, 2010). Silencing LGBTQ+ students' stories may contribute to college and university authorities' failure to facilitate safer campuses and to properly support LGBTQ+ students.

The present study investigated responses on a campus climate survey of LGBTQ+ college students in the Southeastern U.S through a queer theoretical lens. Queer theory as a tool for analysis and interpretation "critiques the enforced norms of gender and sexuality, and also all claims of normalcy, and the processes by which the borders of the normal are defined and policed" (Shlasko, 2005, p. 125). In this study, queer theory guided our understanding of LGBTQ+ bias and discrimination incidents as normal aspects of LGBTQ+ college students' experiences and led to our critique of the cisheteronormative processes that police students' ability to report such incidents. We focused on students' descriptions of bias-motivated harassment or assault incidents and their descriptions of their experience reporting, or not reporting, incidents to authorities. Specifically, the research questions that guided this study were:

1. How did LGBTQ+ students respond to quantitative items about the campus climate differently based on whether they experienced a bias incident and whether they reported that incident?

2. How do college students in the Southeastern United States describe LGBTQ+ bias and discrimination incidents?
3. How do college students in the Southeastern United States describe their decision-making process to (non)report LGBTQ+ bias and discrimination incidents?

The purpose of this study was to understand students' specific reasons for (non)reporting bias incidents in order to uncover the systems of violence that LGBTQ+ students faced on hostile college campuses. Additionally, the purpose of this study was to identify ways that cisheteronormativity operates on college campuses and affects students' ability to report bias and discrimination incidents. We begin by reviewing the existing literature regarding campus climate for LGBTQ+ college students, LGBTQ+ bias incidents including harassment and sexual assault, and the existing literature on student reporting of bias incidents.

Campus Climate for LGBTQ+ Students

Several factors influence campus climate, including sociopolitical and cultural events and policies which affect students' sense of belonging to their institution and community. In general, researchers have demonstrated that LGBTQ+ students report more negative perceptions of their campuses as hostile spaces and not affirming of their multiple identities (Alessi, 2017; Blockett, 2017; Brown et al., 2004; Hong et al., 2016; Vaccaro, 2012). Chilly campus climates make it more difficult for LGBTQ+ students to conceal or disclose their gender and sexual identities and have implications for a student's visibility and safety on campus (Alessi, 2017; Evans & Broido, 1999; Garvey et al., 2019; Garvey & Rankin, 2015b; Nicolazzo, 2016a; Tetreault et al., 2013). Chilly campus climates for LGBTQ+ students may also influence patterns of reporting/not reporting bias incidents. Through a queer theoretical lens, it is important to critique the idea that LGBTQ+ students must conceal or disclose their queer identities and that their safety is

dependent on their level of "outness" with the campus community. Disclosing one's identity reinforces college campuses as heteronormative spaces where LGBTQ+ students must "come out" in order to be visible on campus (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009). Compulsory heterosexuality is something that is always (re)constructed and enforced through the performance of disclosure of queer identities.

Conversely, researchers have identified multiple factors that improve students' perceptions of campus climate. These include the provision of safe and supportive spaces, LGBTQ+ resources and centers, and supportive faculty, staff, and students (Garvey, et al., 2018a; Garvey, et al., 2018b; Garvey et al., 2015; Linley et al., 2016; Nicolazzo, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2018; Pryor, 2018). Positive campus climate is also related to improved academic and social outcomes for LGBTQ+ students (Pitcher et al., 2018). What progress exists in improving campus climates for LGBTQ+ activism can be attributed to factors like student activist movements, expansion of nondiscrimination laws and policies, as well as the creation of LGBTQ+ resources and centers (Renn, 2010; Woodford et al., 2018). However, this progress is always tentative and potentially fleeting, with researchers recently finding decreasing allyship and increasing discomfort with LGBTQ+ persons among college-age young adults from the U.S. after more than a decade of gains (GLAAD, 2019). College campuses can simultaneously be spaces of increasing self-actualization and institutional oppression for students, especially in the Deep South, creating tensions and contradictions for students, educators, and researchers to navigate (Beall & Strunk, 2018).

For example, though colleges can serve as more affirming spaces for students who identify as LGBTQ+, institutional oppressions and violent interpersonal interactions still create hostile campus environments. Some of the ways that campuses are hostile to LGBTQ+ students

include the presence and use of homophobic and transphobic language (Boysen et al., 2009; Garvey et al., 2019; Hong et al., 2016; Nicolazzo, 2016a; Nicolazzo et al., 2017; Silverschanz et al., 2008; Woodford et al., 2018), discrimination as a result of gendered resources and spaces (Nicolazzo, 2016a; Nicolazzo et al., 2017; Pryor, 2018; Woodford et al., 2017), verbal threats and microaggressions in interpersonal interactions (Alessi, 2017), the pervasiveness of cisheteronormativity (Beemyn, 2012; Blockett, 2017), and a lack of institutional, faculty, and peer support and community (Evans & Broido, 1999; Garvey et al., 2015; Hong et al., 2016; Nguyen et al., 2018; Silverschanz et al., 2008; Vaccaro, 2012). In addition, anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes are as common at colleges and universities as in society in general (Stotzer, 2010).

LGBTQ+ students are also more likely to be subjected to sexual harassment and assault, which may be motivated by anti-LGBTQ+ bias (Briones-Robinson et al., 2016; Cantor et al., 2015; Krebs et al., 2016). Hostile campuses may inhibit some LGBTQ+ students' "outness," further marginalizing students with queer sexual and gender identities (Garvey & Rankin, 2015b; Tetreault et al., 2013). While many models treat outness as an ideal state, it is a particularly fraught concept for queer students whose identities place them at the intersections of multiple systems of oppression and marginalization. Environments that encourage or enforce silencing or hiding LGBTQ+ identities may also discourage bias incident reporting. Incidents of bias and discrimination also pose threats to students' academic success and well-being (Garvey & Rankin, 2015a; Squire et al., 2018). These patterns of oppression, bias, and harassment are particularly pronounced in students at the intersections of racial, sexual, and gender identities that are minoritized (Beemyn, 2012; Blockett, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2016a; Nicolazzo et al., 2017).

Understanding the scope and nature of harassment and violence that these students face is crucial

to improving LGBTQ+ student safety on campuses. As a result, it is important to understand students' reporting/non-reporting of bias incidents.

Bias Incident Reporting and (Non)reporting

Data concerning anti-LGBTQ+ bias-motivated harassment and violence are sparse, especially at colleges and universities. One reason for this is that, until recently, most nondiscrimination policies did not address gender and sexual identities. Even with the more widespread inclusion of these identities in nondiscrimination policies, systemic barriers to reporting bias incidents remain. Stotzer (2010) investigated the relationship between LGB anti-discrimination policies and hate crime reporting and found that more widespread policy (at the state, university, and law enforcement training levels) corresponded with higher hate crime statistics. In other words, when the definitions of such incidents explicitly included gender and sexual identities, those incidents were more likely to be reported. Underreporting of incidents may also be due to administrative issues. For example, Briones-Robinson et al. (2016) found that administrators were more likely to fail to properly file sexual orientation bias incidents as compared with other types of incidents and crimes.

In order to be properly categorized, incidents must be reported to formal authorities in the first place. Though bias-motivated harassment may not count as a hate crime in many states, LGBTQ+ discrimination may also not be prohibited by campus policy at some universities (Stotzer, 2010), though this is less common in recent years following 2016 guidance from the U.S. Department of Education requiring such discrimination be included in Title IX-related policies (Lhamon & Gupta, 2016). Bias incidents, hate crimes, and sexual harassment and assault are all severely under-reported for other reasons (Stotzer, 2010). Students from marginalized groups, including LGBTQ+ students and those with multiple marginalized identities, often face

additional barriers to reporting to authorities both on- and off-campus (Briones-Robinson et al., 2016; LePeau et al., 2016; Stotzer, 2010). Given the lack of available data from universities or governments, researchers have used campus climate surveys of LGBTQ+ college students to learn about gender- and sexuality-motivated bias incidents on campuses (Cantor et al., 2015; Coulter & Rankin, 2020; Krebs et al., 2016).

In these surveys, students most often attribute their non-reporting of incidents to their perception that the harassment or assault was not serious enough to report or that campus authorities would not take them seriously, even when the incidents include clearly illegal acts according to victim descriptions (Cantor et al., 2015; Krebs et al., 2016; Mayo, 2004). Others focusing specifically on lesbian, gay, and bisexual students found they tended to minimize the seriousness of incidents more often than their heterosexual counterparts (Krebs et al., 2016). There are many possible causes of this minimization and normalization, but one may be that larger institutional systems of oppression that foster homophobic, transphobic, and other forms of bias dominate student judgments of what constitutes harassment or assault (Mayo, 2004). Multiple systems of oppression may also affect LGBTQ+ people's evaluation of violence severity via their interpersonal reference groups (Meyer, 2010). That is, individuals from marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ people, and especially LGBTQ+ people of Color, are likely to perceive bias incidents they experience as less severe than members of privileged groups like cisgender and heterosexual students and white students.

Victims of gender and sexuality bias incidents may not report because they fear bias or mistreatment by authorities, a fear those individuals express as much as ten times as frequently as those experiencing other reportable incidents (Briones-Robinson et al., 2016). Additional reasons for non-reporting described by victims of harassment and assault who identify as

LGBTQ+ include wanting to protect the offender, to maintain confidentiality, and to avoid feelings of embarrassment or shame (Cantor et al., 2015). Each of these reasons to stay silent about bias incidents may be exacerbated by anti-LGBTQ+ oppression and compulsory heterosexuality and heterogenderism on college campuses (Nicolazzo, 2016b). Students may underreport because reporting a bias incident would "out" their sexual or gender identity, for example. Through a queer theoretical lens, we understand that the risk in identifying oneself as nonnormative causes a disruption to heteropatriarchal operations on college campuses and is an additive risk for LGBTQ+ students (Foucault, 1978). Under-reporting of bias incidents is not limited to formal reporting to authorities, either. Students also choose not to respond or to respond in non-disclosing ways to survey researchers (Wittig & Strunk, 2018). Even in anonymous surveys, researchers have argued that students self-censor their reporting of incidents due to factors such as the pervasive social surveillance inherent to cisheteropatriarchy, enforced by the constant threat of physical violence (Wittig & Strunk, 2018). Overall, LGBTQ+ students experience a range of social, policy, and institutional factors that may drive lower rates of reporting.

The variety of institutional and contextual factors surrounding bias incidents and biased violence complicate a student's decision of whether to formally report an incident or describe it on a research survey. For the purposes of the present study, we recognize the number of ways that students might choose to respond to an experience of a bias incident. We define reporting to authorities as any attempt by a student to divulge a bias incident to campus faculty, staff, or administrators or to legal authorities such as the police. When we refer to students as "not reporting" an incident, we mean only that they did not report in these limited and

institutionalized ways, while recognizing the many means of sharing, addressing, and healing from bias incidents that do not involve these formal institutional mechanisms.

Given the relatively sparse existing research on LGBTQ+ students' (non)reporting of bias incidents, the purpose of the present study was to understand students' decisions to report or not report to campus authorities. We began with quantitative analysis to understand how students who reported may perceive the campus climate differently from those who did not report. We then analyzed open-ended responses regarding the bias incidents and students' (non)reporting of those incidents to better understand the reasons for reporting/non-reporting.

Method

Theoretical Framework

In this paper, we used queer theory to analyze open-ended survey response questions about whether participants reported their bias-motivated or discrimination incident. We asserted the epistemological underpinnings of queer theory that explore sexual identities, communities, and politics, specifically "how they are created, regulated, and contested" (Namaste, p. 224, 1994). Queer theory challenges notions of fixed, stable, and discrete identities and instead examines the dynamic and highly political nature of identity formation (O'Malley, 2013). From this perspective, the creation and sustained meanings attached to sexual identities are used as political and coercive tools that privilege heterosexuality and cisgenderism. Sedgwick (1990) further highlighted this notion by demonstrating that queer inquiry can interrogate meaning and offer a critical analysis of the dominance of heterosexuality in social life. One application of this approach is the understanding of compulsory heterosexuality (Butler, 2006; Rich, 1980) and the related concept of compulsory heterogenderism (Nicolazzo, 2016b). Compulsory heterosexuality and heterogenderism involve, first, the enforcement of cisgender and heterosexual identities as

normal through political and social constructions and simultaneously render those identities invisible and illegible.

On college campuses, compulsory heterosexuality and heterogenderism are enforced by implicit and explicit institutional power structures that affect the lives of all students, especially students marginalized on the basis of gender and/or sexuality. Institutional power examined through the perspective of Foucault's (1979) panopticon describes how diffuse and circulating institutional surveillance alters the behavior of those under its rule such that they conform to the regulated standards of conduct to avoid disciplinary violence. Importantly, this power functions without strict enforcement or visible policing, but through subtle social and academic norms and expectations. In this way, oppression need not be explicit; instead, surveillance and the theoretical threat of physical, emotional, and epistemic violence cause self-regulation that aligns with dominant ideologies. The result is a compulsory heterogenderism that is self-reifying and continually reproducing.

We engaged queer theory as a tool to explore the pervasiveness of compulsory heterogenderism on college campuses in the Southeastern U.S. and how it affected the campus climate for LGBTQ+ students, particularly how it affected LGBTQ+ students' desire and ability to report incidents of bias or discrimination. Queer theory was used to understand "the process, rather than the product" (Dilley, 1999, p. 462) to make sense of the factors that led to whether LGBTQ+ students reported incidents of bias and discrimination. Further, through the critique and deconstruction of binary ways of being and the oppressive systems that (re)produce those meanings, queer theory as a theoretical framework is used to create new and emancipatory knowledges about gender, sexuality, and performativity (Dilley, 1999).

Data Collection

Data were drawn from a campus climate survey for LGBTQ+ students in the Deep South, which included participants from 39 unique institutions in the Southeastern U.S. Data were collected in the 2018-2019 academic year. The survey invitation was distributed via social media and through LGBTQ+ affinity groups at multiple institutions. This survey had several sections of closed-ended campus climate items as well as open-ended items concerning topics such as affirming and disaffirming campus experiences, though this paper focuses primarily on the items around bias incident reporting. The survey was collected online via Qualtrics and downloaded into IBM SPSS software. For this study, we focused on responses to:

- 'Is there a specific incident of bias, discrimination, or harassment that you have experienced on your college campus due to your identity as an LGBTQ individual that you would feel comfortable describing?' (closed-ended)
- 'If you feel comfortable, please describe what the incident was/who the people involved were (student, professor, etc.), when the incident took place and where the incident took place.' (open-ended)
- 'Did you report the incident, which you described in the previous question, to anyone? If so, how did you report it?' (open-ended)
- 'If you did not report the incident, which you described in the previous question, what caused you to choose not to report it?' (open-ended)

Participants in the study attended a college in the Southeastern U.S., self-identified as LGBTQ+, and were at least 19 years old (in compliance with state law at the time) during the 2018-2019 academic years. We also analyzed participant responses to identity questions (gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity, with both open-ended and categorical response options) and Likert-style campus climate questions.

Participants

In total, 143 participants completed the full survey. Of those, the mean age was 22.59 ($SD = 5.24$). In terms of sexual identity, 33 participants identified as gay, 33 as bisexual, 27 as lesbian, 19 as pansexual, 15 as queer, 9 as straight¹, and 7 as asexual. In terms of gender identity, 68 were women, 42 men, 12 nonbinary, 11 transgender, 5 genderqueer, 3 agender, and 2 two-spirit. Finally, in terms of race, 113 were white, 14 were Black, 8 were Asian, 5 were Latinx, and 2 were Native American, with 1 participant not reporting race. All participants attended public colleges (attending a total of 39 different institutions) and universities in the Southeastern U.S.

Data Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered simultaneously, analyzed separately, and findings from each were integrated to build a more thorough understanding of the students' responses. Therefore, this study was conducted with convergent mixed methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In a convergent parallel design, qualitative and quantitative data are collected and analyzed simultaneously before being integrated, compared, and synthesized to draw overall conclusions. After that integration and synthesis, the data are interpreted convergently.

Quantitative Analysis. Survey responses were analyzed for differences in responses to 7-point Likert-type items about perceptions of the campus climate among students experiencing incidents, experiencing general unease or discomfort, and those experiencing no such incidents or discomfort, as well as between those who reported and those who did not report specific

¹ These individuals were included in the analysis because we defined LGBTQ+ broadly across gender and sexual identities.

incidents. These items were evaluated as single-item measures, which prior researchers have suggested are appropriate for items with common or clear shared understandings (West et al., 2012; Milton et al., 2011; Strunk & Bailey, 2015). We used Mann-Whitney *U* analyses to determine patterns of difference among survey participants.

Qualitative Analysis. Queer theory and coding can be in conflict due to queer theory's rejection of categorization and coding's potential to create and solidify categories. The primary tension lies in the notion of establishing 'codes' that are stable and narrowly define queer theoretical concepts. As such, we did not attempt to establish a rigid codebook, but instead, we used inductive analysis as a means for thinking through emergent patterns in the participant responses (Strauss, 1987). As we analyzed the participant responses, we used memos to record our initial interpretations of the participants' experiences and reasons for (non)reporting incidents of bias, discrimination, and harassment (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Conducting inductive analysis without a determined theoretical lens allowed the patterns in the participant responses to emerge organically. We also thought with queer theory as a theoretical perspective in our analysis as a second layer of inference. In the first round of analysis, if the participant did report the incident, we analyzed how they described their decision to report it. If they chose not to report the incident, we also analyzed those responses. During this first round of inductive analysis, we individually developed generated 39 combined patterns. We organized the patterns in a table and identified participant responses that aligned with each pattern. Common patterns from participant descriptions of bias incidents included pervasiveness of homophobia and transphobia, verbal and physical harassment, rape, denying queer identity/claiming it does not exist, and damage to property. We identified patterns from the question concerning reporting of incidents related to whether and how students reported. We also identified common patterns of 'why' participants did

not report. After the first round of analysis, we debriefed the patterns; combined and sorted through overlapping patterns. Through memoing (Miles et al., 2014) and constant collaboration, we discussed our initial thoughts about the survey responses and how we were grappling with the troubling responses.

After we conducted the first round of analysis, we individually returned to the participant responses and focused on identifying themes in the data (Saldaña, 2013). After the second round of individual analysis, we debriefed and identified two new themes. We completed one more round of analysis, and after more collaboration, we did not identify any new patterns or themes. In total, we conducted six rounds of analysis, three individual and three collaborative rounds. The broad descriptive themes we identified during the data analysis process included descriptions of the severity of bias or discrimination incident, the actual reporting process and anticipated outcomes of reporting, and the risk to the individual if they reported their incident. Once we identified the final descriptive themes, we highlighted the pervasiveness of institutional barriers rooted in cisheteronormative violence (Nicolazzo, 2016b) that prevented and deterred participants from recognizing the severity of their experience. Recognizing this occurrence, we then took a deductive approach to analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and used queer theory as the theoretical framework. Queer theory guided our interpretation of violence as normal after noting the pervasive theme of cisheteronormative dominance in participant responses. We interpreted these data through the lens of queer theory, with particular attention to issues of compulsory heterosexuality (Butler, 2006; Rich, 1980), heterogenderism (Nicolazzo, 2016b), and power and surveillance (Foucault, 1979) in the context of higher education. Qualitative analyses were complemented by quantitative analyses of respondents' identity designations and select campus climate indicators.

Limitations

One predominant limitation of this study was the survey format of data collection. In the survey, we collected identity-based information, including gender, sexual orientation, and racial and/or ethnic identity. Violent incidents on the basis of race (use of a racial slur) were described by one participant, but our consideration of this incident was limited to the survey format. As a result, we were unable to follow-up with this participant or any others about their experiences, as opposed to other research methods (e.g., interviews) in which the impact of racialization could be better explored. We suggest that future studies be intentionally attentive in their data collection methods to the ways that race and racism, in addition to other forms of oppression, intersect with cisheteropatriarchy.

Positionality

In analyzing the data and considering interpretations of them, we attempted to remain attentive to our own positionalities. Our selection of research questions, frameworks, and approaches are inescapably tied up with our own ontological, epistemological, power, and privileged positionings (Parson, 2019). While one author of this paper was involved in conceptualizing, designing, and carrying out the study, the other authors came to the study after data collection was complete. Although the participants only interacted with an anonymous online survey, the pacing, order, and nature of the questions were researcher generated. All authors are part of public universities in the Southeastern U.S. As a result, we are part of the cisheteropatriarchal systems, which are under interrogation in this paper. In other words, we directly benefit from the existence and extension of higher education institutions, which also function as oppressive contexts for many of the participants. Our subjectivities are also constructed in relation to our social identities as white cisgender people in a system that

privileges and benefits those identities, and as queer people in a system that oppresses those identities. As queer researchers, we believe that queering research is an opportunity to identify, critique, and dismantle cisheteropatriarchal dominance in education (Coloma, 2006).

We also recognize that the nature of anonymous survey research lends itself to extractive and colonizing research processes with limited participant co-construction of knowledge. As a result, our positionalities and subjectivities are particularly relevant to the framing of this study and its implications. Discussing our positionality and relation to the study is limited and does not undo our subjectivities and privileges, but through the process of understanding our position in relation to this study, we hope to use our research to uncover and dismantle cisheteropatriarchal systems within higher education.

Quantitative Results

Of the 143 total participants, 128 completed the survey section concerning bias incidents and reporting located at the end of the survey. Of those, 33.9% experienced a specific bias incident (even if they declined to describe an individual incident), 23.6% reported feeling uncomfortable but could not identify specific incidents, and 42.5% had not experienced any bias incidents. One student provided an open-ended description of a bias incident but did not respond to the rating scale item, resulting in a total of 28 students (19.6%) who described specific bias incidents. Of those, only five (17.9%) reported those incidents to campus authorities, leaving 23 (82.1%) who did not report the bias incidents to campus authorities.

The focus of the present study was on reporting ($n = 5$) and non-reporting ($n = 23$) students. To test differences between reporting and non-reporting students, we compared scores on overall campus experience, perceptions of strong anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes on campus, perceptions that the university adequately addressed issues of sexual orientation, perceptions that

the university adequately addressed issues of gender identity and expression, perceptions of the prevalence of harassment on the basis of sexual identity, and perceptions of the prevalence of harassment on the basis of gender identity and expression. Because the group sizes were very unbalanced and there were few students in the reporting group, we used Mann-Whitney U tests to compare the two groups. There were significant differences between reporting and non-reporting students in their perception of the prevalence of harassment on the basis of sexual orientation ($U = 21$, $Z = -2.243$, $p = .013$), perception of the prevalence of harassment on the basis of gender identity and expression ($U = 20.5$, $Z = -2.329$, $p = .010$), and perception of whether the university adequately addressed issues of sexual orientation ($U = 23$, $Z = -2.108$, $p = .018$). However, there was no significant difference between the two groups in perceptions of overall experience ($U = 52.5$, $Z = -.320$, $p = .375$), perceptions of strong anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes on campus ($U = -1.228$, $Z = -1.228$, $p = .110$), and perceptions that the university adequately addressed issues of gender identity and expression ($U = 48.5$, $Z = -.557$, $p = .289$). Descriptive statistics by group are in Table 1 based on the single-item measures. These results indicate that students who reported their experience of bias incidents perceived harassment as more prevalent than non-reporting students but were also more satisfied with how the university handled issues related to sexual identity.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics by Group for Reporting versus Non-Reporting Students

	Reporting		Non-Reporting	
	M	SD	M	SD
Overall experience	5.13	1.25	5.20	1.30
Strong anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes	4.48	1.68	5.40	1.52

Prevalence of harassment on sexual identity	4.17	1.19	5.80	1.30
Prevalence of harassment on gender identity/expression	4.57	1.20	6.00	1.00
University adequately addresses sexual identity	2.65	1.40	4.80	2.28
University adequately addresses gender identity/expression	2.70	1.40	3.60	2.70

Presentation of Qualitative Data²

We identified major themes from the participants' open-ended responses regarding their experience with incidents of bias and harassment, whether they reported the incident, and why they came to that decision. The themes discussed below may be triggering to readers; the incidents reported by students included incidents of verbal harassment, physical harassment, transphobia, rape, microaggressions, and damage to property. The three broad themes we identified were discounting the seriousness of incidents, opaque and prohibitive reporting mechanisms, and the perceived costs of reporting.

"I Felt Like It Was Something Minor I Had to Stand": Discounting the Seriousness of Bias Incidents

Students' perception of whether or not bias incidents were serious 'enough' influenced their decision not to report bias incidents. Student decisions of whether an incident warranted reporting centered around their tendencies to both minimize and normalize incidents of harassment and assault. Of the 28 students that experienced an incident of bias or discrimination,

² Here we avoid the use of the “Findings” heading in response to calls for decolonizing the language used to describe qualitative research (Bhattacharya, 2009; Lincoln et al., 2008; Patel, 2016). The notion that researchers “found” something in qualitative data is entrenched in colonizing ideas of methodologies that treat the researchers as an explorer of untouched territories and hides the active construction of the themes by researchers. As a result, we opt for this heading in place of the traditional “Findings.”

11 did not report the incident because they believed the incident to be minor or not serious.

Notably, participants minimized incidents or called them "not serious enough," even for those that fall under widely used definitions of harassment or assault. For example, Robin, a 21-year-old Jewish bisexual woman, described an incident of verbal harassment and harassment over social media from a group of friends. She stated that she did not report it because, "I did not think it was something worth reporting. I am used to things like that." In this response, Robin determined that the incident was not serious enough to report even though she stated that she has not felt comfortable eating in the building on campus where the incident occurred ever since. Jessica, a 19-year-old white bisexual woman, described an incident in which a man acquaintance sexually assaulted her because he learned she was bisexual (a scenario that came up in multiple participants' responses) during the first week at the university. She explained that she did not report the incident because:

I didn't see any point in doing so. I didn't know what they could do to help, and I didn't feel like it was that big of an issue. That kind of stuff happens all the time, so I didn't think the university would want to do anything about it.

Here we highlight Jessica's statement that, "I didn't feel like it was that big of an issue," showing that, to her, the incident of sexual assault was not unusual or significant enough to warrant being reported. Some participants described the incidents in terms that acknowledge the incident as harmful, impactful, and biased, but not quite serious enough to warrant reporting. These included responses such as, "they were not strictly discriminatory toward me," acknowledging some form of discrimination, and the student who said, "it didn't affect us enough to take it to administration," acknowledging while minimizing the harm of the incident.

Further, these examples show the participants' normalizing incidences of harassment and assault. Participants who highlighted this described their incident as something that happens often, and as a result, was something not worth reporting. In the quotes above, participants stated, "that kind of stuff happens all the time," and, "I am used to things like that." In this way, the normalization is tied to both the significance of the incident and whether there was "any point" to reporting the incident. An additional response that described this normalizing behavior included, "I felt like it was something minor I had to stand." Participant's perception of the incident of bias or discrimination as normal, as something to be expected, and a 'normal' part of an LGBTQ+ student's experience college campuses, at least in the Southeastern U.S., influenced their decision on whether to report their incident.

"I Don't Know If I Could or If Something Bad Would Happen If I Did": Opaque and Prohibitive Reporting Mechanisms

Participants also cited the lack of clarity around reporting, the difficulty in filing a report, and the complexity of navigating reporting mechanisms as reasons not to report. For example, participants mentioned the process of reporting in terms of the institutional systems for reporting, a lack of knowledge on how to report the incident, victim-blaming, and fear/embarrassment related to coming forward about the incident. Some students cited legal and institutional barriers to reporting bias incidents. Destiny, a 25-year-old white transwoman, described facing transphobic comments in classes to the point that other students would get into "screaming matches," arguing about the validity of her identity. She did not report the ongoing harassment to anyone because "gender identity and gender expression were not protected classes at the time." Her understanding of university policy led her to believe that the incidents were not reportable, regardless of how serious they were.

Others described the ways that the institution required reports to be filed as difficult or prohibitive. Jo, a 22-year-old white genderfluid individual, described ongoing gender-based microaggressions from university staff. They did not report, however, due to the difficulty and cost of doing so, writing:

Students are being told there are no official ways to report an incident and have it formally recorded. We can only report and have a sit down with the people we are concerned about, but we cannot file a formal written complaint that will be kept for records.

Jo described their confusion about how to report an incident at their institution and a lack of ways to report. In a different survey response, Jo also stated that the diversity center on campus frequently "covered up" LGBTQ+ related concerns and disregarded students who brought up incidents with the diversity center. Dean, a 21-year-old white gay man, wrote about incidents of stalking and sexual harassment but did not report because, "I wasn't sure who I could talk to about it... I also wasn't sure how the administration would handle it." Uncertainty in the reporting process was important in participant reflections of their choice to report incidents. So, too, was uncertainty in possible repercussions of reporting, expressed by the participant who said, "I don't know if I could or if something bad would happen if I did."

Participants also made decisions of whether to report based on their perceptions of how the report would be received by campus personnel, perceptions of campus administration, and campus climate culminated on the reaction of campus authorities. For example, one participant did not report "because [the university] isn't LGBTQ+ friendly." Another explained their expectation that campus officials would not be willing to help LGBTQ+ students. "Your best case scenario... is that the faculty or staff just laughs at you. More often, they simply explain that

if you choose to continue a lifestyle offensive to God, then you could at least not rub [it] in good peoples' faces." For some students at public institutions in the Southeastern U.S., their experiences with administration and the campus climate taught them not to report or to trust campus officials. Participants expressed multiple institutional barriers to reporting, unclear reporting processes, and difficulty in identifying supportive places to file a report as reasons they did not report incidents regardless of their severity or impact.

"It Didn't Seem Worth It": Perceived Costs of Reporting

Many participants questioned the possible benefits of reporting while noting the many potential costs of reporting. For example, Mark, a 20-year-old white gay man, was sexually assaulted on campus by another student after Mark came out to him. Mark decided not to report the assault to campus or other authorities because, "I didn't think I'd be supported, I didn't want to draw attention to myself, and I thought it was my fault." Jennifer, a 21-year-old Arab bisexual woman, was harassed by a group of students in the student center. In addition to discounting the seriousness of the incident, stating that, "I am used to things like that," she also anticipated negative consequences to reporting. She felt she would be dismissed or admonished by campus authorities if she reported and that it "probably would have just exacerbated the situation if I had reported it."

Ultimately, most student responses showed consideration for several factors that influenced their decision to report bias incidents, representing a kind of risk evaluation or cost-benefit analysis. Their considerations often included social costs. For example, Tammy, a 21-year-old white lesbian woman, described an incident in which racial slurs were used. When she attempted to intervene in that behavior, students began repeatedly calling her a "dyke." Although she perceived the incident as serious and ongoing, she did not report it because doing so would

not be "worth it." She calculated the social cost as too high, writing, "I didn't want anyone to feel alienated or anything" if she filed a report. The consideration of risk is primarily related to participants' expectations of negative outcomes but is also necessarily tied to participants' skepticism that reporting would bring any positive outcomes, such as the individual who said, "I don't think to report it would really [help] anyone or anything," going on to explain that the costs were not merited given the lack of possible benefit. This expected low benefit of reporting is considered in tandem with potentially high social and emotional costs of reporting, such as revictimization and dismissal from authority figures.

Several participants feared that they would be re-victimized during the reporting process. For example, Amber, a 22-year-old Black lesbian woman, did not report physical assault or rape because of her expectation she would not be taken seriously. Her friend had reported a rape and felt that officials appeared dismissive and, "no one did anything." Ultimately, she stated, "I was afraid to report... and I was afraid no one would believe me." Cassie, a 22-year-old white bisexual woman, described being raped by a friend who was a man after he learned of her sexual identity because "he was so 'turned on' he was 'unable to contain himself (his words).'" She decided against reporting because, "I was afraid of being told that I was 'leading him on' by revealing my sexuality to him." Reporting processes can re-victimize students in many ways, including having to face their assailant(s) during and after the reporting process. Eric, a 26-year-old white asexual homoromantic man, was confronted by a professor off-campus who told him, "I had no right calling myself gay" before becoming physically aggressive. The professor "grabbed me by the front of my collar and started berating me." He did not report the incident to campus authorities because of fears about the academic repercussions and questions about whether he would be believed:

I was scared. I am still scared. I have multiple classes with this professor this semester, and when approaching the professor about the situation, they state that "I don't remember that happening. Where is the proof? It is your word against mine right now."

In this instance, the small, often unavoidable power dynamics and social systems of colleges and universities introduced a challenge that made the difficult experience of reporting violent incidents even worse. Fear of retaliation in the form of grades, academic progress, or classroom treatment was a common theme in the choice not to report. This trend showed, too, that participants did not believe they would be protected by the institution if they reported. Participant responses show a wide variety of reasons for non-reporting of bias incidents, often treating the possibility of reporting to authority as a risk comprised of multiple considerations.

Discussion

In our evaluation of the survey responses, we found that most students chose not to report bias incidents, regardless of their prevalence or severity. Their decisions not to report were layered and involved multiple considerations. Students minimized the significance or severity of their experiences, questioned if they were "enough" to warrant reporting, were afraid or uncertain of the process to report and feared negative consequences of reporting. This pattern is consistent with prior research on LGBTQ+ crime reporting (Stotzer, 2010) and prior research suggesting LGBTQ+ students tend to minimize the seriousness of their experiences (Cantor et al., 2016; Coulter & Rankin, 2020; Krebs et al., 2016). Important, too, in these responses is to note the extreme and ongoing experiences students reported, including continued harassment, assault, rape, sexual harassment, stalking, and negative academic and social experiences. In multiple cases, the genesis of the incidents appeared to be a questioning of the legitimacy of participants' identities. Participants were verbally challenged, physically assaulted, and sexually harassed and

assaulted in attempts to challenge their identities. As prior researchers have argued (Beemyn, 2012; Blockett, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2016a; Nicolazzo et al., 2017), these patterns of harassment and bias were particularly pronounced among those whose identities place them at the intersections of systems of oppression. Moreover, participants felt the legitimacy of their identities and experiences were in question with campus policies and authorities. These contribute to a pattern of compulsory heterogenderism and institutional silencing of queer people and identities. Many of the incidents and ensuing silence about them are results of heteronormativity and cisnormativity on college campuses:

Queer inquiry wonders for what tangled reasons heterosexual society needs the closet and its attendant silence, oppression, and violence. By what mechanisms do the dynamics of the closet assert, enforce, and stratify presumptions that social institutions, such as schools, are – of course – constituted by heterosexuals? (O'Malley et al., 2018, p. 582).

Queer theory helps us critique the metaphorical 'closet' as a tool that enforces heteronormativity, constrains queer identities, and pins nonheteronormative identities as a threat to normalcy (Sedgwick, 1990). As the participant responses highlighted, people insinuated violence as a way to challenge the legitimacy of participants' queer identities. Violence operated as a mechanism to police queer students and deter queer students from disrupting heteronormativity and cisnormativity on campus. This also points to the double-bind of outness, disclosure, and visibility, wherein visibility can lead to more exposure to violence and marginalization for queer students (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009).

Participants expressed silencing, which upheld compulsory heterosexuality and heterogenderism through "its production of normal and deviant categories, often with a singular

experience centered and privileged (such as straight) and a multiplicity of other experiences consigned to abnormal and/or minority status (transgender, intersex, lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc.)" (O'Malley, 2013, p. 360). In participants' narratives, this dynamic resulted in several blaming themselves or anticipating being blamed for their own victimization. Systems of oppression place LGBTQ+ students into deviant categories by going against 'the norm' regarding sexual and gender performativity, allowing incidents of violence to occur more freely (Meyer, 2010). The prevalence and regulation of compulsory heterosexuality and heterogenderism on college campuses and the violence that occurs, as a result, become 'normal.' Silence, then, acts as a coercive tool to regulate queer bodies and experiences, such that (non)reporting further upholds systems of violence on LGBTQ+ students.

Importantly, one reason participants may have chosen not to report was that they recognized the higher education institution was not made to serve their needs. They thought that their reports would be dismissed, first. If the report was not dismissed, they anticipated it would be questioned, and they would be blamed. They expected the institution would fail to protect them from social and academic retaliation, and that their peers, educators, and administrators would not support or affirm them. Ultimately, they anticipated a range of costs that would accumulate to them if they reported and that institutions of higher education would not be invested in mitigating or eliminating those costs. In some cases, they thought of those costs as being imposed by institutions to ensure their silence and protect the institution from their report. This constructs LGBTQ+ victims of bias incidents as something from which the institution needs protection, rather than a group deserving of the institution's support and protection.

The idea of students who experience bias incidents as a threat to institutions' reputation or liability constructs queer students and especially those being targeted in bias incidents as

dangerous subjects. Reporting mechanisms and the offices that handle them are often geared more to protecting institutions than students (Smith & Freyd, 2014), but this is particularly salient in the construction of dangerous queer subjects. Others have written about how higher education institutions can construct queer identities as dangerous, creating dangerous identity and social navigation processes for those inhabiting queer identities (Bailey & Strunk, 2017). In these data, we see the consequences of this construction in the ways that students thought about their own experiences, their place in institutions of higher education, and their ability to find support or even affirmation when they experienced bias incidents.

One consequence of these institutional relations is the relegation of queer victimization to a lesser status. Participants seemed to take up that idea in their own understanding of their experiences as being commonplace and something that simply has to be endured. Assault, harassment, stalking, and rape are not simple nuisances to move past. Yet, participants in this study described them as such, concluding that their experiences did not warrant any meaningful institutional response. This reason for non-reporting was the most common in the data, though it was often paired with other reasons. Others have found that victims of bias incidents often minimize the severity of their experience (Cantor et al., 2015; Krebs et al., 2016; Mayo, 2004), a phenomenon that appears to be more common in LGBTQ+ students (Meyer, 2010). Their normalization of the incidents as minor and commonplace is also aligned with prior queer scholarship, which suggested those trends were related to systems of cisnormativity and heteronormativity (Mayo, 2004). That is, under compulsory heterogenderism, sexualized and gendered violence becomes a 'normal' part of attending a college or university (Cantor et al., 2015; Krebs et al., 2016).

What is considered normal is at least partly driven by the institutions that are hosting sexualized and gendered violence, in this case, colleges and universities. Institutions, through surveillance and systems of discipline, take part in enforcing norms of behavior, as described by Foucault's (1979) panopticon. This description is useful for understanding the relationship between implicit rules and systems of the institution, such as life and campus climate, and what behavior is encouraged or silenced. Because of the systems of power and oppression on college campuses, (non)reporting and/or silence about incidents of harassment or assault may better adhere to norms of compulsory heterogenderism and the normalness of anti-LGBTQ+ violence. From a queer theoretical perspective (Namaste, 1994), the normalness of both violence and silence on campus reflects a troubling shared knowledge held by these participants, that the privileging of hetero-cisgenderism means that violence against LGBTQ+ persons is normal and therefore not worthy of reporting. In this way, (non)reporting becomes a way to regulate the lived experiences of queer students.

Decisions to stay silent about harassment and assault may be related to students gauging the risk of reporting. Participants often referenced both their expectations of negative outcomes of the reporting process and reception (revictimization, retaliation, exacerbation, etc.). Participants who did not report the incidences also believed that no positive outcome would come from their reports or that reporting would not make a difference. The quantitative data supported this phenomenon as well. The students who disclosed that they reported incidents of bias to authorities perceived that their college/university better addressed issues of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and thought their college/university prioritized creating inclusive, diverse, and respectful campus communities. This may indicate that those students reported incidents because they expected the college/university to handle it better or

prioritize addressing the incident (greater potential benefit, lower potential risk). It may also mean that these students see anti-LGBTQ+ violence as less of a norm on campus, and therefore were willing to question and address the incidents of violence against themselves -- that is, perhaps the heterogenderism seems a little less compulsory. However, students who reported incidents also had higher agreement with statements of strong anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes on campus and incidents of harassment, which reinforces the fact that student experiences of violence are multi-faceted and that causality cannot be determined by such correlations.

Notably, in discussing reasons for (non)reporting, none of the participants mentioned confidentiality concerns, and few mentioned a fear of retaliation. Previous research has suggested these may be important factors in the decision to report. However, research has focused primarily on sexual harassment and assault (Cantor et al., 2015; Krebs et al., 2016). The participants in this study described both sexual and non-sexual incidents, so decision-making considerations may be different between bias and discrimination incidents and sexual harassment and assault. Our limited understanding of this topic invokes a reminder that "both the knowledge (found and produced) and the positions (also both found and produced) create a new body of knowledge" (Dilley, 1999, p. 460). Specifically, the current and existing knowledge about the experiences of these LGBTQ+ students attending colleges and universities in the Southeastern U.S. were a result of (re)produced normative systems of power.

Implications of Research

This research reveals student stories about their decisions to seek support after these incidences, whether it be through formal reporting or using peer networks by sharing with friends (Nicolazzo, 2016a). Illuminating these stories of coping and examining student perceptions of the normalcy of anti-LGBTQ+ violence highlights an important narrative about

resiliency – students believe violence is something they must endure in order to survive. Student experiences of reporting to an authority, talking to a friend about it, or even describing the incident on a survey all show the ways in which LGBTQ+ students navigate hostile, cisheteronormative campus climates. Because anti-LGBTQ+ incidents of harassment and assault continue on college campuses, examining reporting decisions and other student responses to violence is imperative to help colleges and universities develop better strategies and resources to prevent these incidents from happening and to support LGBTQ+ students in the aftermath.

A few implications for colleges and universities from this study are directed at student conduct offices, student affairs operations, Title IX offices, and other related institutional offices. First, these offices and practitioners must be informed on the pervasiveness of sexual assault victimization and bias and discrimination incidents targeted at LGBTQ+ students (Stotzer, 2009). Second, these offices must implement reporting processes that are accessible to all students. Student responses showed the numerous barriers to reporting incidents, including the obscure administrative processes. The reporting process should not be ambiguous, confusing, nor hidden because it may deter students from going through the reporting process, particularly for LGBTQ+ students who are silenced, marginalized, and victimized on college campuses. Third, institutions should consider effective ways to educate all students, faculty, staff, and administrators on the support services available. For example, institutions could inform students of support services at incoming student orientations, require all educators to provide a list of campus resources on course syllabi and create a prevention program requirement for all incoming students (Vladutiu et al., 2011). Practitioners should be in community with LGBTQ+ students and student organizations to better understand LGBTQ+ students’ needs and implement appropriate reporting processes and resources. Here, it is important to highlight the frequency in

which students reported confusion about *how* to report an incident and whether an incident was severe enough to report. We do find it important to educate LGBTQ+ identified students, faculty, staff, and administrators about bias and harassment issues generally in terms of the many ways bias and discrimination occurs (i.e., interpersonal behaviors, language, policies). Education is important and effective. However, it is not enough. Providing information on what bias and discrimination are and how to report them is necessary, but its transformative potential is limited because it is still operating within a (cis)heteropatriarchal system that "works according to design" (Oluo, 2020). (Cis)heteropatriarchal violence is woven in the structural fabric of higher education and is thus normal and to be expected, as seen in the participants' responses. Queerness is a threat and disruption to heteronormativity and cisnormativity; institutions built upon normative ideologies, like higher education, allow incremental change within the confines of existing power structures. We encourage practitioners to challenge normative logics and structures that push queer students beyond the margins of colleges and universities and be advocates for LGBTQ+ students.

Challenging heteropatriarchal violence in higher education within, through, and beyond queer theory (Coloma, 2006) allows scholars and practitioners to undo heteronormativity and cisnormativity in higher education. Students communicated fear of retaliation if they used the existing reporting system. Approaching this claim using queer theory suggests that perhaps reporting systems themselves maintain heteronormativity and cisnormativity. Using a queer theoretical framework to consider ways to improve bias and discrimination reporting processes encourages practitioners to create reporting processes that do not inflict more harm upon LGBTQ+ students. Atkinson and DePalma (2009) interrogated the heterosexual matrix or the conflation of binary identities, specifically sexuality, gender, and sex, to suggest that it is

maintained by organized consent to hegemonic behaviors. To disrupt heteronormativity and cisnormativity, practitioners must identify the ways they consent to the heterosexual matrix (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009) and how systems and processes within higher education (re)produce systems of violence on LGBTQ+ students. As such, we encourage practitioners to engage in queer theoretical praxis by disrupting hegemonic ideologies of normalcy in their own practice, offices/departments, and institution.

Adequate resources and strategies to support LGBTQ+ students are important. However, one particularly urgent implication of the present study is that colleges and universities, along with their faculty, staff, and administrators, bear at least some responsibility for students' decisions to not report bias incidents. Students' perceptions that they will not be supported, will be questioned, or will face academic and social consequences do not arise in a vacuum. Ongoing queer erasure, chilly climates, administrative violence, unclear and confusing policies, and lack of queer-affirming resources and public positions can lead students to conclude that they will not be believed, supported, or affirmed if they come forward. Those working in higher education institutions should ask themselves why students believe that, whether the students' beliefs would be confirmed if they came forward, and how to transform their institutions to believe, support, and affirm queer students.

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