Validating Work Discrimination and Coping Strategy Models for Sexual Minorities

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The purpose of this study was to validate and expand on Y. B. Chung’s (2001) models of work discrimination and coping strategies among lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons. In semistructured individual interviews, 17 lesbians and gay men reported 35 discrimination incidents and their related coping strategies. Responses were coded based on Chung’s models. Results supported the validity of the Work Discrimination model and two coping strategy models (Vocational Choice and Identity Management). The Discrimination Management coping strategy model was expanded. Implications for practice and research are discussed.

In a special issue of The Career Development Quarterly (Savickas, 2003) that was devoted to trend analyses of career development literature and projections for the next decade, Chung (2003a) identified one significant and cutting-edge development of this literature—the vocational behavior of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) persons. He stated that conceptual and practical articles about the career development of LGB persons began to emerge in the late 1980s and early 1990s (e.g., Elliott, 1993; Hetherington, Hillerbrand, & Etringer, 1989; Hetherington & Orzek, 1989), followed by theoretical and empirical work during the past decade (e.g., Bieschke & Matthews, 1996; Chung, 2001; Rostosky & Riggle, 2002).

Two of the most important areas of inquiry regarding the vocational behavior of LGB persons are work discrimination and coping strategies (Chung, 2001, 2003b; Croteau, Anderson, DiStefano, & Kampa-Kokesch, 2000). Discrimination in the workplace is an existing barrier that affects LGB persons, and researchers have suggested that work discrimination has a profound effect on the well-being of this population (Croteau, 1996; Croteau & Hedstrom, 1993; Driscoll, Kelley, & Fassinger, 1996; Elliott, 1993; Fassinger, 1995, 1996; Griffin, 1992; Hetherington et al., 1989; Levine & Leonard, 1984; Morgan & Brown, 1991; Orzek, 1992; Pope, 1995, 1996; Worthington, McCrory, & Howard, 1998). In
response to discrimination, LGB persons must learn to develop effective coping strategies (Griffin, 1992; Levine & Leonard, 1984; Pope, 1996). It is essential for career counselors to understand the various forms of work discrimination, their effects, and various coping strategies that correspond to the individual needs and self-efficacy of LGB clients.

Chung (2001) proposed two conceptual frameworks about work discrimination and coping strategies based on an integration of existing literature. He defined work discrimination as “unfair and negative treatment of workers or job applicants based on personal attributes that are irrelevant to job performance” (Chung, 2001, p. 34). His Work Discrimination model describes the nature of work discrimination along three dimensions: (a) formal versus informal, (b) perceived versus real, and (c) potential versus encountered. Formal discrimination pertains to institutional policies or decisions that affect an employee’s status of employment (e.g., being hired or fired, receiving a promotion), job assignment, and compensation. Informal discrimination refers to workplace behavior or atmosphere that is hostile or not welcoming. Perceived discrimination involves acts that are discriminatory according to perceptions; whereas real discrimination is based on actuality. Potential discrimination refers to possible discrimination that would occur should a person’s LGB identity become known or be assumed. Encountered discrimination is discriminatory acts that the person experiences. These three dimensions (2 x 2 x 2) describe eight types of work discrimination (e.g., perceived-potential-formal discrimination, real-encountered-informal discrimination). How these eight types of work discrimination are manifested under various federal and state laws or institutional discrimination policies and how they affect employees’ well-being and coping are worthy topics for investigation.

Chung’s (2001) coping strategy framework includes three models. The first coping strategy model is the Vocational Choice model, which describes how LGB persons make career choices in response to potential discrimination. Three vocational choice strategies are identified in this model: self-employment (being one’s own boss to avoid discrimination), job tracking (examining whether an occupation or job position is welcoming to LGB workers and customers), and risk taking (selecting a vocational option knowing that there will be risk for discrimination). The second model is the Identity Management model, which refers to how a person manages disclosure of information about his or her LGB identity for the purpose of dealing with potential discrimination. Within this model, five strategies are noted that were derived from Griffin’s (1992) model: acting (engaging in heterosexual relationships to make believe that one is heterosexual), passing (fabricating information to make believe that one is heterosexual), covering (censoring information that would reveal one’s LGB identity), implicitly out (behaving truthfully without explicitly identifying oneself as LGB), and explicitly out (explicitly identifying oneself as LGB). The third model is the Discrimination Management model, which involves how a person responds to discrimination encountered. Four strategies are noted for this model: quitting (resigning from employment), silence (refraining from taking any action in the workplace), social support (discussing experience with other people), and confrontation (confronting offenders or their supervisors). Note that Vocational Choice and Identity Management model strategies are for dealing with potential discrimination (both formal and informal), whereas Discrimination Management model strategies are for dealing with
encountered discrimination (both formal and informal). Coping strategies in all three models are chosen by the individual on the basis of his or her perceived discrimination, which may or may not be real.

Although Chung’s (2001) conceptual models seem helpful for career counseling with LGB persons and are based on some research (e.g., Anderson, Croteau, Chung, & DiStefano, 2001; Griffin, 1992; Levine & Leonard, 1984), more research is needed to validate these models because of a lack of empirical research regarding these model strategies, especially for the Vocational Choice and Discrimination Management models. Validation of these models may enhance future theoretical and empirical work, as well as career counseling with LGB persons. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to validate Chung’s (2001) models of work discrimination and coping strategies for LGB persons.

Method

Participants

Participants were 9 gay men and 8 lesbians from a major metropolitan city in the South. Their ages ranged from 26 to 55 years, with a mean of 37.2 years (SD = 7.32). Three demographic variables were used to guide the recruitment of a diverse sample: (a) sex (male or female), (b) education (with or without a college degree), and (c) occupational field (based on Holland’s, 1985, occupational types: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional). Holland’s occupational typology was used in an attempt to capture participants’ experience with work discrimination in various occupational fields. These three dimensions (2 x 2 x 6) resulted in 24 cells, and we attempted to recruit 1 participant for each cell. However, we were able to recruit only 17 participants for different cells, resulting in 7 empty cells.

A majority of the respondents were White Americans (n = 12), along with 1 Black American, 1 Asian American, and 1 Native American, as well as 2 persons with an international origin. In terms of relationship status, 12 were in a same-sex relationship, 2 were dating casually, and 3 were single.

A majority of the respondents were in professional occupations (n = 10), 5 were skilled workers, and 2 were semiskilled workers. The distribution of annual income (in thousands) was as follows: 7 ($30,000–$49,999), 4 ($50,000–$69,999), 2 ($70,000–$89,999), 2 ($90,000–$109,999), and 1 ($110,000–$129,999); 1 person chose not to report income. The distribution of education level was as follows: 3 high school, 7 two-year college, 5 four-year college, and 2 master’s degree.

Instruments

Demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire gathered information about each respondent’s age, sex, racial/ethnic background, sexual identity, relationship status, occupation, income, and education.

Interview. Individual interviews were conducted using a semistructured format with 16 standard questions, some of which were repeated depending on the number of discrimination incidents reported by the interviewees. Using standard questions during the interview helped maintain some uniformity among the interviewers. The standard questions inquired about the following: (a) current occupation, (b) previous occupations, (c) future career plans, (d) factors considered in career decisions, (e) how “out”
the participant was in general and at work, (f) incidents of discrimination encountered, (g) responses to each discrimination incident, and (h) how participants will choose their future employment when thinking about potential discrimination due to sexual orientation. Follow-up probing questions were used to clarify responses.

Procedure
Participants were recruited by word of mouth and through classified advertisements in local LGB newspapers, flyers posted at various LGB establishments, and postings on LGB organizational Web sites. To participate in the study, respondents were required to have work experience and personally identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. In addition, respondents had to express some concern about their sexual minority status in the workplace. Respondents who expressed interest and met the primary requirements were screened using the three demographic dimensions discussed previously (i.e., sex, education, occupational field) and were scheduled for an interview with one of the 12 research assistants who were graduate students in counseling. These interviewers received 1 hour of training from the first author on a detailed interview protocol. At the beginning of each interview, respondents signed an informed consent form and completed the demographic questionnaire. Interviewers followed the interview protocol using the 16 standard questions and the follow-up questions for clarification. All interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours and were audiotaped.

Analyses
Audiotaped interviews were analyzed and coded by nine graduate students in counseling, including the second author (seven heterosexual women and two gay men; one doctorate, eight master’s degrees). There was no personnel overlap between the interviewers and the coders. Coders attended 1 hour of training provided by the first author to learn about Chung’s (2001) theoretical models of work discrimination and coping strategies and how to code the recorded interviews. They were given coding forms and definitions for each coding category. For each discrimination incident reported by interviewees, coders recorded (a) type of discrimination and (b) type of coping strategy. Each discrimination incident was coded using the definitions in Chung’s Work Discrimination model. Similarly, coping strategies were coded using the definitions in Chung’s three coping strategies models. If interviewees reported multiple coping strategies for a discrimination incident, all strategies were coded and recorded. During this initial round of coding, coders were instructed to use the coding definitions based on Chung’s models and to write in new categories whenever existing categories did not apply or when more specificity was needed.

After the first round of coding was completed, all coders gathered to discuss and consolidate all new categories created by individual coders. The second author facilitated the coding consensus meeting. None of the authors of this study provided any specific input on the new coding system. All disagreements were resolved by discussion to reach consensus. Once consensus was achieved, coders revised their original coding based on the new coding system resulting from the consensus meeting. Finally, all interviews were coded again independently by a second coder using the revised system to ensure reliability. Disagreements in this second coding
were again resolved by discussion to reach consensus between the first and the second coders.

Results

Work Discrimination Model
A total of 35 discrimination incidents were reported by the 17 participants. All reported incidents were based on perceived discrimination (as opposed to real discrimination), and thus, only the formal-informal and potential-encountered dimensions were used to code the incidents. Coding results supported the validity of these two dimensions for coding the discrimination incidents. No additional category was deemed necessary by the coders.

Among the 35 discrimination incidents, 29% \((n = 10)\) were coded formal and 71% \((n = 25)\) were coded informal. Furthermore, 14% \((n = 5)\) were coded as potential discrimination incidents and 86% \((n = 30)\) as encountered discrimination incidents.

Coping Strategy Models
Vocational choice strategies. When discussing the 35 discrimination incidents, participants indicated a coping strategy for selecting future employment for only 9 incidents. Coding results supported the validity of the three Vocational Choice model coping strategies; no additional strategy was suggested. When considering vocational choice strategies, 3 participants indicated self-employment, 6 selected job tracking, and no one selected risk taking.

Identity management strategies. Coding results also supported the validity of the Identity Management model; no additional category was suggested. In dealing with the five potential discrimination incidents, no participant used the acting or passing coping strategy, 3 used the covering strategy, 1 used implicitly out, and 2 used explicitly out. Note that multiple strategies were reported for dealing with potential discrimination.

Discrimination management strategies. The coding process resulted in major revisions of the Discrimination Management model. Rather than the original four coping strategies of discrimination management proposed by Chung (2001), the coding process from this study identified three discrimination management categories: nonassertive, social support, and confrontation. The first category combines two categories in Chung’s original model (i.e., quitting and silence). Quitting and silence were categorized as nonassertive techniques because these responses shared the characteristic of the participant internally coping with discrimination versus relying on externalized coping strategies. The other two categories are identical to those of Chung’s model (i.e., social support and confrontation). Another major revision was the inclusion of subcategories within each category to provide more specificity about respondents’ coping styles. The subcategories and percentages of utilization are presented in Table 1.

Discussion
It was not the intent of this study to obtain a representative sample of LGB persons or representative occurrences of work discrimination and coping strategies. Rather, we attempted to examine the comprehensiveness of Chung’s (2001) work discrimination and coping strategy models by capturing a variety of experiences with work discrimination and coping strategies.
TABLE 1
Revised Discrimination Management Model Coping Strategies and Their Utilization Percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category and Subcategory</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>% Utilization</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonassertive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quitting</td>
<td>Terminates employment</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silence</td>
<td>Does not verbally respond</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Avoids discriminatory person/situation</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-talk</td>
<td>Internally processes discriminatory event</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcompensate</td>
<td>Amplifies work performance to evade discrimination</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>Seeks emotional/empathic support from partner</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Seeks emotional/empathic support from friends</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Seeks emotional/empathic support from at least one family member</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coworkers</td>
<td>Seeks emotional/empathic support from at least one coworker</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional help</td>
<td>Seeks mental health services for emotional/empathic support</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offender</td>
<td>Directly confronts offender regarding discriminatory act</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Seeks supervisor intervention regarding discriminatory act</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human resources</td>
<td>Submits grievance to human resources regarding discriminatory act</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal action</td>
<td>Seeks legal counsel and/or litigation regarding discriminatory act</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publicity and media</td>
<td>Publicizes discriminatory act to influence employer</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circumvent policy</td>
<td>Defies discriminatory policy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Multiple strategies may have been used for any discrimination incident. Utilization percentages were based on 30 encountered discrimination incidents reported by 17 participants.

among a variety of LGB persons. Therefore, the percentages of occurrence are only provided for descriptive purposes rather than to suggest a representative pattern of experience. Although we attempted to recruit participants from various demographic backgrounds (e.g., sex, educational level, occupational field), our results may not generalize to other populations.

Results of this study provided some support for Chung’s (2001) work discrimination and coping strategy models. With the exception of the Discrimination Management model, no additional categories were deemed necessary during the coding process. Note that there were three categories that did not have a coding entry. More specifically, the risk taking strategy for the Vocational Choice model and the acting and passing strategies for the Identity Management model were not used by participants. These empty categories may be related to the sample obtained. Coping strategies that involved dishonesty in behavior (acting) or oral communication (passing) were not used by participants in our sample, possibly because our participants were relatively affirmative of their sexual identities. The acting and passing strategies may be more applicable when a sample involves closeted LGB persons. Furthermore, both Vocational Choice and Identity Management model coping strategies are for dealing with potential discrimination. Given that there were only five potential discrimination incidents reported, it was unlikely that all categories
would be used. The small number of potential discrimination incidents reported poses limitations for our study regarding the evaluation of Vocational Choice and Identity Management model coping strategies. Future research could focus more on potential discrimination and include more participants who are not as open about their sexual orientation.

The main contribution of this study was the expansion of the Discrimination Management model, which was identified by Chung (2001) as particularly in need of empirical validation. Our findings supported the original four coping strategies of this model but provided a more comprehensive picture by further specifying two of the original strategies (social support and confrontation). A total of 16 coping strategies were identified and grouped under three categories by the coders: nonassertive, social support, and confrontation. These coping strategies are not mutually exclusive; multiple strategies may be used to cope with a discrimination incident.

The nonassertive category includes five coping strategies. In addition to quitting and silence from Chung’s (2001) original Discrimination Management model, we found that some of the respondents in this study coped by avoiding the source of discrimination (avoidance), by internally processing the experience (self-talk), or by working extra hard to evade discrimination (overcompensation). Silence was the most frequently used strategy among this study’s participants. It seems important to study the kind of resilience involved in using nonassertive strategies, as well as the effects of such strategies on the well-being of LGB persons.

We identified five sources of social support: partner, friends, family, coworkers, and professional help. Participants in this study seemed more likely to seek support from coworkers and less likely to seek it from family and professionals. Future research could study how LGB persons make decisions about the source of social support they seek and the effects of various sources of support.

Finally, we identified six strategies of confrontation. In addition to confronting discrimination by addressing the offender, supervisor, or human resources, or by taking legal action, participants in this study also applied advocacy actions, such as approaching the media and circumventing discriminatory policies (although this occurred less frequently). It will be important in future research to investigate how LGB persons decide to confront discrimination, the risks and benefits involved in confrontation, the self-efficacy and skills needed to execute such confrontation, and the effects of confrontation.

**Counseling Implications**

Counselors can benefit from using conceptual frameworks to understand the various forms of work discrimination and how LGB persons cope with this discrimination. This study validates and advances Chung’s (2001) models for such conceptualizations. When conducting career counseling with LGB clients, counselors can help clients to (a) understand that discrimination can manifest in both formal and informal manners regardless of non-discrimination policies, (b) achieve more realistic and accurate perceptions about discrimination, and (c) assess potential and encountered discrimination. Counselors may discuss with clients various options for coping with potential and encountered work discrimination, such as the vocational choice, identity management, and discrimination management coping strategies reported in this article. Specifically, counselors could help clients develop plans on how to address discrimination in the workplace and secure support networks and resources that LGB clients could use. It is important to note that coping strategy
models are not to be used as a modality for change or progression toward any particular type of coping strategy, but to validate the variety of coping strategies used by LGB persons. It is imperative that a counselor validates the experience of any LGB person reacting to the stress of work discrimination and strengthens the client's application of coping strategies that he or she deems appropriate. Counselors need to be cautioned against pushing clients toward more self-affirming and assertive coping strategies. Such an agenda is insensitive to the pace of identity development of individual clients as well as to the possible cultural needs of various ethnic groups.

The work discrimination and coping strategy models can be used as frameworks by which to process occupational best-fit within the context of sexual identity with LGB clients. Exploration of the risks and benefits of the various coping strategies, how they correspond to the client's sexual identity development, the self-efficacy of coping strategy use, individual and family needs, and overall well-being within the context of work can facilitate career and workplace adjustment for LGB clients. Moreover, counselors are encouraged to engage in social justice advocacy to promote human rights and equality for people of all sexual orientations. Considering the advocacy behaviors demonstrated by participants in this study, counselors are also reminded to remain cognizant of client resilience and to empower clients to serve as change agents in their own lives.

Research Implications

This study is limited by its small sample size, the characteristics of the sample, the interview format, and possibly by researcher bias. Some of these limits are related to the difficulty of studying such a sensitive topic with vulnerable participants. Future validations of the theoretical models should use larger samples with different demographic backgrounds, particularly individuals who are more closeted. More focus on coping with potential discrimination is also needed.

Future research should use these conceptual models to examine the different effects of various forms of work discrimination, how LGB persons make decisions on coping strategies that may correspond to the various forms of discrimination, the effects of coping, how individuals learn from previous use of coping strategies, and how such learning informs future coping. Additionally, the applicability of the coping strategy models for transgender persons could be explored. The Work Discrimination model seems to be applicable to other forms of work discrimination that are based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, gender identity and expression, disability, age, and so forth. Multicultural scholars are encouraged to apply this model in their work with various forms of discrimination to further inform the processes by which members of oppressed groups may cope with discrimination and potentially cultivate their resilience.

References


