

Bucknell University

**Bucknell Digital Commons**

---

Faculty Journal Articles

Faculty Scholarship

---

2018

## When Heterosexual Identity is Questioned: Stifling Suspicion Through Public Displays of Heterosexual Identity

Coralynn V. Davis

*Bucknell University*, [cvdavis@bucknell.edu](mailto:cvdavis@bucknell.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/fac\\_journ](https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/fac_journ)



Part of the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Davis, Coralynn V.. "When Heterosexual Identity is Questioned: Stifling Suspicion Through Public Displays of Heterosexual Identity." *Journal of Homosexuality* (2018) : 1683-1708.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Bucknell Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Journal Articles by an authorized administrator of Bucknell Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dcadmin@bucknell.edu](mailto:dcadmin@bucknell.edu).



## When Heterosexuality is Questioned: Stifling Suspicion Through Public Displays of Heterosexual Identity

Laurel R. Davis-Delano, Elizabeth M. Morgan, Ann Gillard & Coralynn V. Davis

To cite this article: Laurel R. Davis-Delano, Elizabeth M. Morgan, Ann Gillard & Coralynn V. Davis (2018) When Heterosexuality is Questioned: Stifling Suspicion Through Public Displays of Heterosexual Identity, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 65:13, 1683-1708, DOI: [10.1080/00918369.2017.1387465](https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2017.1387465)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2017.1387465>



Accepted author version posted online: 02 Oct 2017.  
Published online: 27 Oct 2017.

---



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)

---



Article views: 95

---



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

---



## When Heterosexuality is Questioned: Stifling Suspicion Through Public Displays of Heterosexual Identity

Laurel R. Davis-Delano, PhD<sup>a</sup>, Elizabeth M. Morgan, PhD<sup>b</sup>, Ann Gillard, PhD<sup>c</sup>, and Coralynn V. Davis, PhD<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Social Science, Springfield College, Springfield, Massachusetts, USA; <sup>b</sup>Department of Psychology, Springfield College, Springfield, Massachusetts, USA; <sup>c</sup>Director of Research and Evaluation, The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp, Ashford, Connecticut, USA; <sup>d</sup>Department of Women's and Gender Studies, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, USA

### ABSTRACT

This study examined public heterosexual identity management practices of heterosexual-identified young adults in the United States. Analysis of 415 participants' written narratives indicated that 41% ( $n = 169$ ) described consciously engaging in public displays of their heterosexual status in relation to suspicion about their sexual orientation. This article describes our findings regarding five aspects of these narratives of suspicion: types of suspicion, causes of suspicion, reasons for concern about suspicion, the types of public displays of heterosexual status employed to quell suspicion, and intended audiences for these displays. Overall, the results indicated that heterosexual identity suspicion is multifaceted, this suspicion serves as a catalyst for public displays of heterosexual status, and the climate of suspicion described by our participants reflects and reinforces contemporary heterosexism.

### KEYWORDS

Sexual orientation; heterosexism; identity formation; homosexuality; homophobia; sexuality; sexual attitudes

The heterosexist climate in the United States entails prejudice and stereotyping about and discrimination toward sexual minority people (i.e., individuals whose sexual attractions, behaviors, and/or identities are other than exclusively heterosexual, including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer people). Historically, this hostile climate resulted in sexual minority individuals rarely disclosing their sexual minority status (e.g., Dean, 2014; Seidman, 2002). Consequently, this climate upheld cultural assumptions of heterosexuality (e.g., Frankel, 2004; Hockey, Meah, & Robinson, 2007; Martin, 2009). In contrast to the situation for sexual minority people, among heterosexual people, heterosexual status disclosure has been commonplace, and heterosexual identity has been said to lack cognitive salience (Frankel, 2004; Konik & Stewart, 2004; Savin-Williams, 2011). However, scholars have theorized that due to the greater visibility of sexual minority people more recently, cultural assumptions of heterosexuality have diminished, and uncertainty about the sexual

orientation of others has increased (Dean, 2011, 2014; Herek, 1986; Seidman, 2002). Furthermore, there is emerging evidence that some people who identify as heterosexual are suspected of being sexual minority individuals (e.g., Blinde & Taub, 1992; Davis-Delano & Morgan, 2016; Pruit, 2015).

Suspicion of sexual minority status is possible only because sexual orientation is generally invisible in the absence of behavioral indicators (e.g., Bosson, Prewitt-Freilino, & Taylor, 2005; Clair, Beatty, & Maclean, 2005). As Coates (2013) theorized, “sexual identity has to be repeatedly and interactionally achieved” (p. 537). Thus in a context where sexual minority people are in the closet and heterosexual status is assumed, among heterosexual people behavioral indicators of heterosexual status often go unnoticed and are less often purposely performed to convey heterosexual status. But when the visibility of sexual minority people creates a climate where heterosexual status is perceived as less certain, or is even suspect, heterosexual people become more conscious of behavioral indicators of heterosexual status and more often use these indicators to purposefully convey their heterosexual status (Davis-Delano & Morgan, 2016; Dean, 2014).

The present study examined the phenomenon of sexual orientation suspicion with a focus on how it relates to heterosexual marking, which we define as public behaviors believed to evidence heterosexual identity. More specifically, the purpose of this article was to explore how young adults described having consciously conveyed their heterosexual identities to other people in response to suspicions that they were sexual minority individuals. Because both heterosexual identity suspicion and heterosexual marking are understudied topics, the goals of the present study included furthering our nascent understanding of these phenomena by providing empirical substantiation for the presence, types, causes, and reactions to heterosexual identity suspicion and related heterosexual marking behaviors.

There are two main reasons why heterosexual identity suspicion warrants study. First, heterosexual identity and management are understudied topics, and knowledge about these topics furthers understanding of sexual orientation, especially regarding the relationship between the dominant sexual orientation identity (i.e., heterosexual identity) and subordinate sexual orientation identities (i.e., sexual minority identities). Second, given that our findings suggest that heterosexism is related to both climates of sexual orientation suspicion and some types of heterosexual marking aimed to eradicate this suspicion, our study provides insights into the workings of heterosexism in contemporary United States society.

### ***Heterosexual identity suspicion***

Some researchers have offered preliminary investigations into heterosexual identity suspicion. Although Dean (2014) found that some heterosexual

people do not mind being misclassified as sexual minority individuals, many heterosexual people do not want to be perceived as sexual minority individuals, and some are concerned about being misclassified as such (e.g., Buck, Plant, Ratcliff, Zielaskowski, & Boerner, 2013; Nielsen, Walden, & Kunkel, 2000; Plant, Zielaskowski, & Buck, 2014; Prewitt-Freilino & Bosson, 2008).

Scholars have identified four reasons why heterosexual people may wish to avoid sexual orientation misclassification. First and second, researchers have found that one's own sexual prejudice and the possibility of facing heterosexism from others are associated with desire to avoid being perceived as a sexual minority individual (e.g., Buck et al., 2013; Cascio & Plant, 2016; Davis-Delano & Morgan, 2016; Prewitt-Freilino & Bosson, 2008). Third and fourth, heterosexual people may be averse to being perceived as sexual minority individuals due to a desire for identity coherence (Prewitt-Freilino & Bosson, 2008) and/or a desire to establish other-sex relationships (Plant et al., 2014).

### ***Heterosexual identity suspicion and heterosexual marking***

Although research has not focused on rates or types of heterosexual identity suspicion, research on heterosexual marking behavior has suggested some factors that may cause suspicion. Namely, it is possible that an absence of heterosexual marking behaviors may generate suspicion that heterosexual people possess sexual minority status. First, gender conformity is a type of heterosexual marking behavior (e.g., Bosson, Taylor, & Prewitt-Freilino, 2006; Dean, 2014; Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016b), so when heterosexual people do not conform to dominant gender expectations this can generate suspicion that they are gay/lesbian people (e.g., Bosson et al., 2006; Froyum, 2007; Nielsen et al., 2000; Pruit, 2015). Second, behaviors that are perceived to indicate romantic or sexual interest in the other sex are a type of heterosexual marking (e.g., Davis-Delano & Morgan, 2016; Quinn, 2002; Renold, 2000), so when heterosexual people do not convey interest in the other sex in public, they may be suspected of gay/lesbian status (Currier, 2013; Plummer, 1999). Third, behaviors understood to convey that one is not gay or lesbian are a type of heterosexual marking. Such behavior includes direct statements that one is not a gay/lesbian individual (Froyum, 2007; Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016a; Nielsen et al., 2000), lack of association with sexual minority people (e.g., Buck et al., 2013; Dean, 2014; Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016a), and refraining from exhibiting behaviors that are perceived to indicate romantic or sexual interest in the same sex (e.g., not touching people of the same sex) (Davis-Delano, Pollock, & Vose, 2009; Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016a). Thus it is possible that when heterosexual people associate with sexual minority people, engage in behaviors perceived to indicate romantic or sexual interest in the same sex, or neglect to directly repudiate sexual minority identity, they may be suspected of sexual minority status.

Research on heterosexual marking has also offered some preliminary insights into associations between this marking and heterosexual identity suspicion. We know that some people mark their heterosexual status to avert the possibility that they will be associated with sexual minority status (e.g., Currier, 2013; Dean, 2014; Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016a). There is also some evidence that when their heterosexual status is questioned, heterosexual people may be more apt to engage in heterosexual marking behavior (Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016a; Nielsen et al., 2000; Pruit, 2015). Given that sexual orientation is invisible without marking behaviors, in a climate where sexual orientation is uncertain, it is possible that people who sense suspicion about their heterosexual orientation use marking behaviors to assert their heterosexual status.

### ***The present study***

Although scholarship reveals that some people who identify as heterosexual are suspected of sexual minority status (e.g., Blinde & Taub, 1992; Davis-Delano & Morgan, 2016; Pruit, 2015), we have not found any research focused on illustrating aspects of heterosexual identity suspicion. Furthermore, researchers only recently have begun to thoroughly examine the phenomenon of heterosexual marking (Davis-Delano & Morgan, 2016; Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016a, 2016b). Thus the purpose of the present study was to explore these two phenomena and their associations via inductive analysis of stories young adult heterosexual participants from the United States wrote about a time that they consciously conveyed their heterosexual identities to other people in relation to suspicions that they were sexual minority individuals. Our inductive approach was guided primarily by the following research question: What are the main themes present in these stories of heterosexual marking that involved suspicion? More precisely, our research questions were: What were the features of both suspicion and heterosexual marking that were common in participant descriptions of their conscious heterosexual marking in response to suspicion that they might be or were sexual minorities? And what did our participants convey about the relationship between this suspicion and marking?

In this study, we employed a symbolic interactionist theoretical framework. This entails soliciting and presenting participant accounts of their interactions and interpretations of these interactions (Blumer, 1969). More specifically, our approach resembles West and Zimmerman's (1987) "doing gender" approach, except that we focus on "doing sexuality." According to this approach, doing sexuality is an accomplishment that is generated, reproduced, and recognized within interaction that is embedded in a wider context of social sexual ideals. As people interact, they consider accountability relative to others' actual or potential assessment of their

behavior in comparison to social sexual ideals. Doing sexuality includes conveying sexual difference that undergirds sexual inequality (Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016b).

Our inductive qualitative analysis of stories of suspicion written by young adult participants enabled us to generate rich descriptions of: types of heterosexual identity suspicion, causes of suspicion, reasons for concern about suspicion, forms of heterosexual marking used to quell suspicion, and the intended audience for these marking behaviors. In addition to providing information about heterosexual identity suspicion and heterosexual marking, a closer examination of these understudied topics helps further our understanding of heterosexual identity as well as the ways in which heterosexual identity management practices intersect with heterosexism.

## Method

### Participants

The primary data analyzed for the present study were derived from 169 young adult participants who self-identified as heterosexual when asked to select from a list of sexual orientation categories. Seventy-nine percent ( $n = 134$ ) of these participants were recruited from Mechanical Turk, whereas 21% ( $n = 35$ ) were recruited from an undergraduate psychology participant pool. All psychology pool participants ( $n = 35$ ) were enrolled in college, whereas 55% ( $n = 74$ ) of the Mechanical Turk participants were enrolled either full-time or part-time in college. The education levels of the Mechanical Turk participants who were not enrolled in college ( $n = 60$ ) were: 50% ( $n = 30$ ) bachelor's degree, 28% ( $n = 17$ ) some college or associate's degree, 20% ( $n = 12$ ) high school diploma, and 2% ( $n = 1$ ) graduate degree. Of the 169 participants, 51% ( $n = 87$ ) were men and 49% ( $n = 82$ ) women. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25, with a mean of 21.8 years. Racially, the participants indicated that they were: 68% ( $n = 116$ ) White American, 11% ( $n = 18$ ) Asian American, 5% ( $n = 8$ ) Black American, 5% ( $n = 8$ ) Latino/a American, 9% ( $n = 16$ ) multiracial, and 2% ( $n = 3$ ) other. The median level of education for participants' parents/caretakers was "some college or associate's degree." When participants were asked about their political beliefs via a scale that ranged from *very liberal* to *very conservative*, the mean was between liberal and moderate. Mean degree of religiosity, as measured by a scale that ranged from *very* to *not at all*, was between "not at all" and "somewhat." In terms of religious affiliation, participants indicated that they were: 43% ( $n = 72$ ) no affiliation, 27% ( $n = 46$ ) Christian other than Catholic, 22% ( $n = 38$ ) Catholic, 2% ( $n = 3$ ) Jewish, 1% ( $n = 2$ ) Buddhist, and 5% ( $n = 8$ ) other.

Research participants from the United States recruited through Mechanical Turk are in most ways at least as representative of the United States population as traditional participant pools (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). Further, scholars have found that samples recruited through Mechanical Turk are reliable and valid (e.g., Berinsky et al., 2012; Paolacci et al., 2010; Schleider & Weisz, 2015). For example, scholars have found that samples drawn from Mechanical Turk are relatively reliable regarding measures such as test-retest, paying attention, non-response errors, and internal consistency (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Holden, Dennie, & Hicks, 2013; Paolacci et al., 2010; Schleider & Weisz, 2015). Rand (2012) found that 97% of Mechanical Turk participants were honest when asked about their country of residence. Finally, Berinsky et al. (2012) found that Mechanical Turk samples produced similar experimental effects when compared to nationally representative and convenience samples.

We included the participants from the college psychology pool because they increased our sample size and helped to diversify our sample of young adults. In comparison to the participants from Mechanical Turk, the psychology pool participants were generally younger, more religious, and less liberal. The psychology pool participants averaged 19 years old versus 22 years old for the Mechanical Turk participants. Forty-five percent of Mechanical Turk participants indicated that they are “not religious at all” compared to only 26% of the psychology pool participants. Only 31% of the psychology pool participants indicated that they were liberal or very liberal, compared to 54% of the Mechanical Turk participants. Furthermore, the vast majority of participants from the psychology pool lived on a college campus, an environment we wished to represent in our sample.

### ***Procedures and materials***

Following previous research with focus groups designed to provide preliminary descriptions of heterosexual marking practices among young adults (Davis-Delano & Morgan, 2016; Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016a, 2016b), the authors developed an online questionnaire to further investigate heterosexual marking practices among young adults as well as explore how these practices may relate to individuals' attitudes related to gender and sexual orientation. We focused on the emerging adult time period, limiting the age range of our questionnaire participants to 18 through 25. This time period is typically one of identity exploration and sexual and romantic relationship development (e.g., Morgan, 2013; Shulman & Connolly, 2015), making it a valuable period for examining how heterosexual people perceive—and behave in regard to—their sexual orientation.



Data analyzed in the present study were derived from participant responses to an open-ended measure in our online questionnaire. These data consist of heterosexual marking stories that participants wrote in response to the following open-ended prompt:

Please tell us about a time that you consciously acted in a way to lead other people to believe that you were heterosexual. Describe the event in detail so that someone who was not there would know exactly what happened. Please include information about: what you did (in terms of behavior), the reasons for your behavior, when this happened (e.g., your age), where you were, who else was present, [and] the reactions of other people who were present.

Only participants who self-selected “heterosexual” from a list of sexual orientation categories were offered this question prompt. These self-identified heterosexual participants saw this prompt after they had been asked a series of closed-ended questions about whether they had engaged in a list of 28 (for female participants) or 33 (for male participants) behaviors believed to signify heterosexual status (based on findings from a prior study; Davis-Delano & Morgan, 2016). Five percent ( $n = 29$ ) of the heterosexual participants did not respond to the prompt, 2% ( $n = 13$ ) wrote that they could not recall a specific time, and 19% ( $n = 109$ ) wrote that they did not consciously convey their heterosexual status, evidencing that many participants felt empowered to reject the prompt that requested a story of conscious heterosexual marking. Furthermore, the rest of the self-identified heterosexual participants articulated conscious intent to convey their heterosexual status in the stories that they wrote.

This research project received Institutional Review Board approval from the first and second authors’ institution. Participants for the online questionnaire were recruited from Mechanical Turk and the psychology department participant pool at a small private college in the northeastern United States. Mechanical Turk participants were offered \$4 to complete a questionnaire about “beliefs and behaviors related to gender and sexual orientation” if they qualified via a short demographic screening questionnaire. The psychology pool participants were offered course credit.

The completed online questionnaires were examined, and some were excluded when participants did not meet the study criteria and when otherwise problematic. In terms of study criteria, we excluded questionnaires from participants who were not age 18 to 25, did not identify as heterosexual, identified as neither male nor female, did not live in the United States, or were not raised in the United States. In terms of problematic questionnaires, we excluded those from participants who had completed the questionnaire more than one time, not completed the vast majority of the questionnaire, or provided answers that indicated lack of serious attention (e.g., whose answers repeated a numerical pattern). After removing the unusable surveys, we were

left with 566 participants. Of these 566 participants, 415 (74% of all participants: 78% of the men participants and 69% of the women participants) provided a heterosexual marking story.

### **Data analysis**

Consistent with our symbolic interactionist theoretical framework, the first author employed a grounded theory technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) for inductive analysis of the 415 written narratives about heterosexual marking. The first author used open coding to identify themes within the sample of 415 heterosexual marking stories. During this process, many different themes emerged related to types of marking, age of marking, location of marking, reasons for marking, target audiences for marking, and others' reactions to marking. For example, the following themes emerged—to varying degrees—as common reasons for marking: to secure other-sex relationships, to convey anti-gay attitudes, to share one's life, to demonstrate love, to gain attention, and to convey gender conformity. Many of the themes that emerged from the inductive analysis of the 415 narratives have already been discussed in existing publications authored by ourselves or other scholars. One theme that emerged that had not been discussed in depth or breadth in prior publications was heterosexual identity suspicion. Thus the first two authors determined that detailed analysis of the subset of responses evidencing suspicion was warranted.

The first author developed a working definition of suspicion, which was: "The participant expresses a sense that another person or other persons could, might, or do think that the participant is a sexual minority." Although we are aware that the term *suspicion* is often used in instances where the nature of the suspicion is negative, we are using the term in a descriptive neutral manner that allows for the possibility of suspicion of sexual minority status from a prejudicial viewpoint as well as suspicion without a negative association. Using this neutral definition of suspicion, the third author independently reviewed the larger sample of 415 narratives and identified marking stories that evidenced suspicion that the participant was a sexual minority individual with an 88% agreement rate with the first author. Coding discrepancies were resolved in discussions between the first and third authors, resulting in 169 of the marking stories being identified as containing this theme (41% of all the marking stories; 38% of the marking stories written by women and 43% of the marking stories written by men). These stories ranged from 24 to 678 words, with a mean of 105 words.

The first author used thematic analysis (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006) to inductively code the 169 stories to determine and delineate various aspects of suspicion expressed in these stories. In the first phase of this analysis, the first author used open and axial coding to generate a list of a wide variety of themes

and subthemes that appeared throughout the narratives about heterosexual identity suspicion. In the second phase of this coding, the first author employed “content analysis” (Patton, 2002) to determine the prevalence of the themes. The (most) common themes were refined in discussion with the second author.

The first author created a codebook that specified criteria employed during her inductive coding process to identify the presence of each of the common themes in the 169 stories that evidenced suspicion. Using this codebook, all 169 narratives were independently coded for each common theme by the third or fourth author. Percent agreement on the findings reported in this article ranged from 85% to 100%, with a mean of 94%. Each coding discrepancy was discussed between the first author and the other coder and was resolved collaboratively.

It is these common themes, related to aspects of suspicion derived from analysis of the 169 narratives, as determined by the first, third, and fourth author, and as reviewed by the second author, that constitute the findings reported in this article. In the Results section, we report each of these findings and illustrate them with quotations from the narratives. In the Discussion section that follows, we present our analysis of these findings, including implications of our findings and the relationship between our findings and others’ scholarship.

## **Results**

As previously reported, 41% of the participants who wrote marking stories spontaneously discussed instances involving suspicion that they were sexual minority individuals. It is important to note that this does not mean that the other 59% of participants who wrote stories were never suspected of being sexual minority individuals. It is remarkable that almost one half of the participants provided a marking story related to this topic when any instance of marking was solicited by the question prompt.

In this section, we begin by delineating types of suspicion described by the 169 participants who wrote about heterosexual identity suspicion. This is followed by a presentation of participant perceptions about causes of the suspicion. Next, we discuss reasons the participants were concerned about the suspicion. Lastly, we describe the marking behaviors participants used to quell the suspicion and their target audiences for these marking behaviors. We report gender differences when they were found. We are unable to report racial differences due to low numbers of participants in many racial categories.

### ***Types of sexual orientation suspicion***

In their marking stories, the 169 young adult participants described several different types of suspicion, all of which could be grouped into two main

categories: actual instances of suspicion and a general concern about suspicion. Regarding the latter, 60 (35%) of the participants conveyed that they were generally concerned that they were, could, or may be perceived as sexual minority individuals, but without describing any concrete indication that others saw them this way. For example, one man wrote, "I made sure that I told my friends all the sexual things I did with the other-[sex] individual so they knew that I was not homosexual. I did not want friends calling me gay or thinking that I was gay." Also demonstrating such a concern, a woman commented:

I was at a party with my friends one time and there was a group of us [girls] staying in the corner and talking to each other. I didn't want people to think I didn't like guys, so I branched out and left the group to talk to a guy.

In these stories, the absence of indications that other people actually did suspect that these participants were sexual minority individuals does not mean that there was no such suspicion, as (some of) these participants may have simply neglected to describe others' suspicion. Furthermore, given that some of these participants may never have experienced any actual heterosexual identity suspicion, these narratives suggest that anticipation and fear of suspicion can be a driving force behind conscious decisions to mark heterosexual identity.

Of the participants who referenced some kind of suspicion, 109 (65% of the 169, constituting 26% of all 415 participants who wrote marking stories) mentioned that others actually suspected them of being sexual minority individuals. These participants' stories conveyed different degrees of suspicion by others. Analysis focused on this degree of suspicion led us to identify four subtypes of actual sexual orientation suspicion.

In the most common subtype of actual suspicion, participants described situations where one or more people simply suspected that the participant was a sexual minority individual ( $n = 45$ ; 27% of the stories of suspicion). For example, a woman explained: "[Diana] and I were pretty close friends back then that some people thought we might have been lesbians." Also illustrating this type of suspicion, a different woman wrote, "I told my family that I wasn't gay...because my sister mentioned something about me never dating and that sometimes she wondered if I was a lesbian."

In a second subtype, participants described a situation where one or more people asked the participant about their sexual orientation ( $n = 28$ ; 17% of the stories of suspicion). For example, one woman related: "I have...stated that I was heter[o]sexual when asked by friends/family for not looking as feminine as they'd like." Also illustrating this type of suspicion, a man noted, "I was asked once if I was gay, mostly because I had a lot of female friends but didn't seem to hook up with any of them."

In other narratives, participants described a situation where others publicly labeled the participant as—or spread rumors that the participant was—a sexual minority person ( $n = 20$ ; 12% of the stories of suspicion). For example, providing an explanation for her heterosexual marking, one woman wrote: “I had fear of being labeled gay as it had occurred so much in high school.” Another woman reported, “There were rumors going around the whole school that my best friend and I were lesbian lovers.”

Lastly, a subset of participants described situations where they were treated negatively based on perceived sexual minority status ( $n = 16$ ; 9% of the stories of suspicion; 12 of which were men). As one man recounted, “My friends made fun of me and called me a ‘fag.’” Another man related, “Many...friends and classmates would tease me saying I was gay.”

### ***Causes of sexual orientation suspicion***

Despite not being directly prompted to do so, 95 (56%) of the participants who wrote about suspicion in relation to their heterosexual marking behavior also described at least one perceived cause of this suspicion. Thirty-one (33%) of the participants (20 of which were women) who specified a cause of suspicion wrote that the suspicion arose because their behaviors were believed to indicate romantic or sexual interest in the same sex. In the following example, a woman wrote about a time that a same-gender compliment generated suspicion: “I once commented that a friend’s sister was pretty...The person I made this comment to looked at me and said, ‘What, are you gay or something?’” A man offered another example of this source of suspicion:

I went to the movies with four of my friends of the same sex and during the movie there was a scene with a nude male...I was blushing...My friends...started to...say things like “Why are you turning red man, you like the way he looks?”...I responded with saying “Nah man I was looking at that hot girl.”

Of the participants who wrote about causes of suspicion, 29 (31%; 19 of which were men) indicated that they were suspected or concerned about being suspected of being a sexual minority individual due to their association with sexual minority people, including eight (seven of which were men) because they were in a sexual minority bar, eight because they had a sexual minority friend or sexual minority friends, and nine simply because they were in settings/situations where some sexual minority persons were present. In the following example, a participant describes how she was assumed to be a lesbian because she was in a gay bar:

I was at a gay bar with a group of friends for one of my friend’s birthday part[y]... A woman...kept trying to hit on me...I told her I was just there for a friend’s party and that I wasn’t a lesbian.

As illustrated by this man, having sexual minority friends can also trigger concern about suspicion: “I did not want to seem as if I was homosexual around my homosexual friends...So, I talked about how homosexual individuals are lucky to be around girls and don’t have to worry about their image as much.” Even the simple presence of sexual minority persons can generate suspicion, as demonstrated by this man’s narrative: “I was the new kid in school...I got seated behind this girl...She said in an offhand comment...that we have a gay kid in this class, and then got really wide eyes and asked me if I was gay.”

Twenty-seven (28%) of the participants who wrote about causes of suspicion mentioned that this suspicion existed because others saw little or no indication from them of romantic or sexual interest in members of the other sex. For example, a woman explained:

I never really had a legitimate boyfriend in high school...Some of my friends used to joke that I was gay because they’ve never seen me in a real relationship. These conversations would always end with “I swear I’m not gay!” They never seemed to believe me.

Similarly, a man recounted:

My aunt asked m[e] why I didn’t have a girlfriend yet. I told her, “I don’t know.” She asked me some [other] questions[:] “Are you into girls?” (I answered “yes”), “But you’re not looking for girls?” (I answered “No, not really”), “Are you sure you’re not gay?” (I answered, “Yeah, I’m sure”).

Eighteen (19%) of the participants who wrote about causes of suspicion indicated that the suspicion was due to their gender nonconformity. As one woman related, “In high school I was once asked if I was bisexual or gay because I was and am athletic and do not have a very girly physique and do not dress extremely feminine.” Focusing on only one kind of gender nonconformity, a man recalled, “When I was younger my siblings would imply that I might be gay because of how much time I invested into my looks.”

### ***Reasons for concern about suspicion***

Of the 169 young adult participants whose stories revealed that their heterosexual marking was related to suspicion that they were sexual minority individuals, the vast majority ( $n = 144$ ; 85%) expressed some concern about being perceived as a sexual minority person. Sometimes this concern was focused on the participant’s immediate situation, other times the participants had long-term concerns about the suspicion, and sometimes both immediate and long-term concerns were expressed by the same participant. We did not ask participants why they were concerned about being perceived

as sexual minority individuals; nonetheless 92 (64%) of the participants offered specific reasons for their concern. There were three common reasons.

First, 48 (52%) of those who articulated a reason for concern about suspicion that they were a sexual minority individual indicated that the reason was that they did not want to be hit on by sexual minority persons. Here a woman reveals this concern: "A girl who was gay told some of my friends that she was interested in me, at a school wide meeting[.] I received a note f[ro]m her telling me this...From then on, I made it clear I liked men." A different woman wrote, "One time, when I went to this night club[,] I dressed very femin[in]e to let people know I was heterosexual. I, also, only danced with men...I did this because I did not want to be hit on by other women."

The second common reason for concern, mentioned by 26 (28%; 18 of which were men) of the participants who discussed a reason, was that if they were perceived as a sexual minority individual, then they could or would face heterosexism. As one woman wrote:

My behavior was that I told my family that I wasn't gay...I did it because my sister mentioned...that sometimes she wondered if I was a lesbian...I told them I was straight because...while I would have no problem being a lesbian,...they would pretty much disown me. My sister has stated that she could never be friends with someone who's homosexual and my parents both believe that it's horribly sinful and wrong and unnatural and maybe even that homosexual people are messed up in the head.

Here, a man describes his concern about heterosexism:

When I started college, a few of the guys I met had used the term "gay" to make fun of something. I felt like they would treat me differently if they thought I might be gay/bi or that they wouldn't let me in their friend circle if I didn't express my heterosexuality openly....Although we had friends who were gay or bi, we didn't really hang out with them as a group.

Lastly, 13 (14%) of the participants who expressed a reason for concern conveyed that they did not want to be perceived as a sexual minority individual because it would inhibit their ability to secure romantic or sexual relations with the other sex. These participants believe that if they are suspected of being gay/lesbian (and—for a couple participants—if they are suspected of being bisexual), then people of the other sex will not view them as romantic or sexual possibilities. As one woman reported, "One time in 10th grade I talked about how I thought boys were cute...because I...didn't want guys to think they couldn't hit on me or date me because I was a lesbian...There was a rumor that I was a lesbian." After a man recalled that his heterosexual marking was motivated by teasing that involved others calling him gay, he concluded, "I simply wanted people to think I was straight...so that they wouldn't potentially spread rumors that I was gay, which could have effectively 'cock-blocked' me."



For our participants, these three reasons for concern about sexual orientation suspicion—the possibilities or actual experiences of facing heterosexism, being hit on by sexual minorities, and difficulty securing romantic or sexual relationships with people of the other sex—were motives for heterosexual marking. Now we turn to the particular marking behaviors that were motivated by our participants' concerns.

### ***Marking behaviors used to quell suspicions***

The 169 young adult participants who wrote stories related to suspicion discussed a variety of heterosexual marking behaviors (i.e., behaviors enacted with the goal of conveying that they were heterosexual persons) that were motivated by their concerns that they could be or actually were perceived as sexual minority persons. Despite this variety, two types of marking behaviors were much more commonly mentioned than others.

First, 79 (47%) indicated that they marked their heterosexual status by directly stating that they were heterosexual (35 participants; 21%; 26 of which were women) and/or not gay/lesbian individuals (52 participants; 31%). For example, one woman described how she directly communicated her heterosexual status: "My parents outright asked if I was gay or not....I bluntly stated I was heterosexual." Here a man described how he preemptively informed others that he was not a gay person: "I used to do gymn[a]stics[,] and most male gymnasts are automatically associated as being gay so when I would meet someone new I would tell them what I did but I would always say 'don't worry I'm not gay.'" It is important to note that when participants were directly asked about their sexual orientations, they most often—but not always—marked their heterosexuality by using one or both of the two types of direct statements discussed above, yet types of suspicion other than direct inquiries about sexual orientation also elicited these direct statements of heterosexual marking.

The second common way that the participants described marking their heterosexual status was conveying romantic or sexual interest in people of the other sex ( $n = 77$ ; 46% of the participants whose heterosexual marking was related to suspicion). Most often this marking involved talk (51 participants), as illustrated by this woman:

The only example I can think of is talking about my boyfriend openly to individuals who may not have been sure about my sexuality. Alternatively, I have talked about attractive male celebrities, etc. with new friends who did not know me well.

Another common way participants conveyed their heterosexual status via displaying interest in the other sex was by touching or locating themselves in close physical proximity to someone of the other sex (13 participants; 10 of which were men), as evidenced in the narrative of this man:



I was on a date with my girlfriend and we were holding hands in the movie theater. While the movie was playing, we made out for a very long period of time...I did this and agreed to continue doing it because there were some guys sitting behind us around the same age. I did not want to seem “gay” to them.

### ***Target audiences for marking associated with suspicion***

All young adult participants whose marking was related to suspicion that they were sexual minority individuals mentioned at least one target audience for their marking behaviors. Although 14 (8%) of the 169 participants mentioned their family, there were three other target audiences with much higher frequencies: sexual minorities, friends, and peers.

First, 61 (36%) of the participants whose marking was related to suspicion wanted sexual minorities to notice their marking. This included sexual minorities who the participants stated were hitting on them (33 participants; 20%), sexual minorities who the participants conveyed may hit on them (17 participants; 10%), and other sexual minorities (14 participants, 8%). In the following example, one man described how his heterosexual marking was aimed at a sexual minority man who was hitting on him: “As I was studying in the library another male student came up to me and began...hitting on me[,] so I... informed him that I was VERY straight.... I did not want him to think I was queer.” A woman participant revealed that she directed her marking at sexual minority women whom she worries may hit on her in the future: “The only example I can think of for indicating that I’m straight is on social media websites. I have done this for the past 2 years...because it makes my intentions clear when talking to gay or bisexual women.” In the following quote, a different woman indicated that her marking was directed at those she thought were lesbian, not specifically lesbians who were hitting or potentially hitting on her:

I had my hair cut pretty short, and people in my hometown associated short hair with being a lesbian. I would tell people I wasn’t gay, ...and when I was dating someone I’d make sure to use the pronoun “he” all the time...I would do the same thing in front of people who I thought were lesbian...I just thought I needed to assure them so they didn’t think otherwise.

Second, 58 (34%) of the participants whose marking was related to suspicion indicated that their target audience was their friends. For example, one man recalled:

I once play[ed] a game of truth and dare with [a] couple of friends. We had just been talking about the gay people at our school. So, I wanted to make it clear that I was not gay. When someone chose me to say a truth I stated that I was not gay.

Similarly, a different man wrote: “One time when I was 17 a (male) friend of mine asked me if I was gay at a friend’s house. There were some other

male friends [there]. I told them that I was not because I didn't want them to think I was gay."

Third, 49 (29%) of the participants whose marking was related to suspicion included a wider group of people than just their friends—generally, their peers—as the target audience for their heterosexual marking. Aiming marking at one's peers was evident, for example, in this man's story: "I was in a locker room and I made a joke about gay people in order to make sure the other kids in the high school I attended did not think I was a gay." Classroom peers were the target audience for this man:

I had to...act out going on a date with another male as if I was a girl...in front of an entire class...I was basically acting in ways that a stereotypical homosexual male would. To lead other people to believe that I was heterosexual, I consistently laughed and joked.

## Discussion

Given the lack of prior attention to the phenomenon of heterosexual identity suspicion, this study contributes to the literature by providing empirical substantiation of the presence of suspicion, types of suspicion, causes of suspicion, reactions to suspicion, and heterosexual marking behaviors motivated by this suspicion. These findings are valuable because they enhance understanding of the relationship between heterosexual identity and sexual minority identities, as well as of heterosexism in contemporary United States society.

The finding that 41% of our young adult participants referenced heterosexual identity suspicion in their responses to a prompt about a time they purposely conveyed their heterosexual status corresponds with scholarship that demonstrates that heterosexual people are sometimes suspected of sexual minority status (e.g., Blinde & Taub, 1992; Davis-Delano & Morgan, 2016; Nielsen et al., 2000). Further analyses of these narratives revealed a wide variety of aspects of the phenomenon of suspicion that young heterosexual adults are actually sexual minority individuals.

First, we found that the type of suspicion discussed by our young adult participants ranged considerably from simple concern that others may suspect them of sexual minority status, to knowledge that others did suspect them of sexual minority status, to being asked if they were sexual minority individuals, to others generating public labels and rumors that associated the participants with sexual minority status, to the participants facing heterosexism based on perceived sexual minority status. Although other scholars have found evidence of concern among heterosexual people about being misclassified as gay/lesbian persons (Buck et al., 2013; Cascio & Plant, 2016; Nielsen et al., 2000; Plant et al., 2014; Prewitt-Freilino & Bosson, 2008), as well as heterosexual people facing heterosexism because of such misclassification

(Carnaghi, Maass, & Fasoli, 2011; Nielsen et al., 2000), in this article we documented a wider range of types of suspicion. Of particular interest, these types of suspicion evidence both situations where actual people hold participants accountable for public conveyance of heterosexual identity in social interaction and situations where participants' prior experiences (perhaps including climates of suspicion) have led them to internalize and adopt the perspective of a "generalized other" (Mead, 1962), which leads to concern about possible suspicion. As such, both actual and possible suspicion resulted in heterosexual marking.

Second, our young adult participants specified several reasons why others suspected that they were sexual minority individuals (i.e., causes of suspicion): gender nonconformity, lack of public display of romantic or sexual interest in the other sex, behaviors perceived to indicate interest in same-sex romantic or sexual relationships, and association with sexual minority people. Other researchers have also found that heterosexual people face suspicion of gay/lesbian status when they do not conform to dominant gender expectations (e.g., Bosson et al., 2006; Froyum, 2007; Nielsen et al., 2000; Pruit, 2015) and when they do not convey romantic or sexual interest in the other sex (Currier, 2013; Plummer, 1999). In what seems related to suspicion triggered by association with sexual minority people, Sigelman, Howell, Cornell, Cutright, and Dewey (1991) found that participants with high levels of sexual prejudice believed that a man who chose a gay roommate had homosexual tendencies. Previous research has not determined that heterosexual identity suspicion can be triggered by behaviors perceived as signifying romantic or sexual interest in the same sex. It could be that behaviors that in the past were not often interpreted by heterosexual people as evidence of sexual minority status—such as comments about the attractiveness of same-sex individuals and lack of recent dates/hookups/relationships with a person of the other sex—are now more often perceived as causes of suspicion. Overall, in the contexts discussed by our participants, heterosexual marking often occurred following others' interpretations of participants' behaviors that generated suspicion, thus rendering these interpretations part of the accountability structure (West & Zimmerman, 1987), the parameters of which are necessarily contextually dependent.

Another set of findings pertained to reasons why our young adult participants were concerned about being perceived as sexual minority individuals. The participants were most concerned that suspicion did or would result in sexual minority people hitting on them; relatedly, many participants performed heterosexual marking behaviors for sexual minority audience members. This finding supports those of a few other scholars who also found that heterosexual people are concerned about sexual minority people hitting on them (Bortolin, 2010; Dean, 2014; Pirlott & Neuberg, 2014). Another common reason that our participants were concerned about being suspected of sexual minority status

was that they might, as a result, face heterosexism. A few studies have found that one reason for heterosexual marking is to avert the heterosexism that sexual minority people experience (Carnaghi et al., 2011; Davis-Delano & Morgan, 2016; Nielsen et al., 2000). Additionally, Cascio and Plant (2016) found that the more sexually prejudiced heterosexual participants perceived their peers to be, the more they were concerned about being perceived as gay/lesbian; and the more they were concerned about being perceived as gay/lesbian the more they indicated they would feel anxious about and avoid contact with a gay/lesbian classmate. The third reason our participants were concerned about facing heterosexual identity suspicion was that they believed it would inhibit them from acquiring other-sex romantic and/or sexual partners, which corroborates findings from a set of experiments conducted by Plant et al. (2014). Our results also suggest that participants are focused mostly on the latter two concerns in relation to their heterosexual friends and peers, as a great deal of their marking was aimed at these two audiences. These concerns can be framed through a symbolic interactionist perspective in that people are believed to have goals in their social interactions to shape how others view and respond to them (Goffman, 1959). In this study, since participants believe others' interpretations of their behaviors might be or are hindering their ability to secure their goals (of deterring people of the same sex from hitting on them, discouraging heterosexual people from directing heterosexism at them, and encouraging people of the other sex to view them as romantic and sexual possibilities), they engage in heterosexual marking behavior to modify how others view and treat them.

Most of our young adult participants responded to suspicions that they were sexual minority individuals by engaging in one of two types of heterosexual marking behaviors. First, participants marked their heterosexual status by directly stating that they were a heterosexual person or that they were not a gay/lesbian person. As far as we know, only a few other scholars have mentioned that people convey their heterosexual status in this direct manner (Froyum, 2007; Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016a; Nielsen et al., 2000). The second common type of behavior used to display heterosexual status in response to suspicions was to convey romantic and/or sexual interest in people of the other sex. Several other scholars have discussed this type of heterosexual marking (e.g., Davis-Delano & Morgan, 2016; Quinn, 2002; Renold, 2000), which could, as discussed elsewhere (Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016a), also signify bisexual status. Our symbolic interactionist theoretical framework moves us to note that both types of heterosexual marking behaviors constitute a form of impression management (Goffman, 1959) aimed at altering others' interpretations of identity. And, given that the participants directed their heterosexual marking at particular audiences, it is clear that the participants were considering social context when engaged in such impression management.

Although we examined our findings for gender differences, the majority of these findings were not evidently related to gender. Only a slightly higher number of men than women wrote a story about conscious heterosexual marking, and only slightly more men than women wrote a story that involved suspicion. Among the 169 stories that involved suspicion, most of our findings applied relatively equally to our women and men participants. We were especially surprised about these results given the substantial gender differences found in an earlier study of heterosexual marking (Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016b). However, in the current study, we did note some differences between men's and women's narratives. Consistent with prior research findings that men are more apt than women to both generate and face heterosexism (e.g., Pascoe, 2007; Poteat, DiGiovanni, & Scheer, 2013), we found that the men in our sample: (a) more often than women wrote about the type of suspicion that involves negative treatment based on suspected sexual minority status; (b) more often expressed concern about suspicion due to apprehension of facing heterosexism; and (c) less often wrote that they were suspected of being sexual minorities due to engaging in behaviors that were believed to evidence romantic or sexual interest in the same sex (e.g., men touching or complimenting other men). Regarding the last finding, we think it is possible that men might more often avoid these behaviors due to greater apprehension of facing heterosexism. Since men more often than women initiate romantic and sexual relationships with members of the other sex (e.g., Clark, Shaver, & Abrahams, 1999; Simms & Byers, 2013), it is not surprising that men participants more often indicated that they addressed suspicion that they were a sexual minority by marking that involved touching or locating themselves in close proximity to someone of the other sex.

Our findings are related to Goffman's (1963) scholarship on stigma in that some of our participants seem less invested in establishing a heterosexual identity than in avoiding association with a stigmatized identity. In other words, although not all of our participants seem concerned about stigma (e.g., some wrote that their goal of securing an other-sex partner generated their concern about suspicion and marking behavior), much of the suspicion and subsequent heterosexual marking discussed by our participants evidenced concern about being stigmatized as a sexual minority. These participants employed heterosexual marking to prevent future stigmatization or remove existing association with stigma. Since the only non-stigmatized sexual orientation identity is heterosexuality, for some participants emphasizing heterosexuality is perceived as stigma avoidance. Further, given that identities are created in relation and sometimes in opposition to other identities (McCall, 2003)—and “stigmatized” and “normal” are complementary roles (Goffman, 1963)—the act of marking oneself as heterosexual and marking oneself as “not gay” (or not a sexual minority more generally) are equated in the minds of many participants (Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016a).

### ***Implications of findings***

The findings from this exploratory study have several important implications and offer certain advancements in our previously limited understanding of heterosexual identity suspicion and its association with heterosexual marking. First, supporting the contention of a few scholars (Davis-Delano & Morgan, 2016; Dean, 2011, 2014; Seidman, 2002), our data reveal that there exists a climate of uncertainty regarding others' sexual orientations in some social contexts in the contemporary United States. Our findings specifically evidence clusters of young (mainly heterosexual) friends and peers who monitor and police the sexual orientations of those in their midst via generating a climate of sexual orientation identity suspicion. In contrast to mere uncertainty, suspicion implies some type of interest or concern regarding others' sexual orientations. Others have also observed this type of behavior, especially among boys and men (Carnaghi et al., 2011; Nielsen et al., 2000; Pascoe, 2007).

Our findings evidence that these climates of suspicion generated by clusters of young friends and peers pressure some young heterosexual people to mark their heterosexual status. Furthermore, if heterosexual people surrounded by these climates of suspicion do not mark their heterosexual status, friends and peers may generate suspicion of sexual minority status. This climate of suspicion—and related pressure—is problematic because (some) heterosexual people may not wish to engage in heterosexual marking behavior.

Although climates of sexual orientation suspicion generate problematic pressure for heterosexual people to mark their heterosexuality, these climates, and heterosexual marking in response to these climates, likely generate even more stress for sexual minority people. When heterosexual people mark their heterosexual identity, this minimizes their chances of facing heterosexism and can result in heterosexual privilege (Davis-Delano & Morgan, 2016), lessening the pressure—and related stress—experienced by heterosexual people in relation to climates of suspicion. When many heterosexual people respond to a climate of suspicion by revealing their sexual orientation, this may generate even greater suspicion focused on the sexual orientation status of closeted sexual minority individuals. Further, when sexual minority individuals do reveal their sexual identities, they may expose themselves to (more) heterosexism (e.g., Lasser & Tharinger, 2003; Swank, Fahs, & Frost, 2013).

Another important implication of our study relates to our finding that the climates of sexual orientation suspicion discussed by our participants render sexual minority people a threat to some heterosexual people. More specifically, we found that sexual minority people can be perceived as threatening to young heterosexual people in three main ways: being in the presence of sexual minority people can generate suspicion that one may be a sexual minority individual; engaging in behavior associated with gay or lesbian



people can generate suspicion that one may be a sexual minority individual; and sexual minority people are believed by some to indiscriminately hit on heterosexual people who are suspected of sexual minority status. In all three cases, association with sexual minority people generated concerns among our participants that others think that they are or might be sexual minority persons. In the absence of heterosexism, in most situations, heterosexual people would not care if others thought of them as sexual minority persons. Although many aspects of sexual prejudice are in decline (e.g., Schafer & Shaw, 2009), it may be that this decline does not extend to the personal identities of many heterosexual people. Furthermore, that some heterosexual people perceive association with sexual minority people to be a threat likely limits the amount and intimacy of contact these heterosexual people allow with sexual minority people, and involves generating and reinforcing simplistic and heterosexist beliefs and behaviors among some heterosexual people that supposedly evidence differences between heterosexual and sexual minority people (e.g., equating gender nonconformity with gay/lesbian status). Thus it seems that heterosexism undergirds these perceptions of sexual minority people as threats to one's heterosexual status.

Related to the heterosexism discussed above, we believe our findings can inform efforts to reduce heterosexism. Given that climates of sexual orientation suspicion bolster heterosexism, and that some heterosexual marking reflects and reinforces heterosexism (in addition to evidence in this article, please see Davis-Delano & Morgan, 2016), practitioners working to reduce heterosexism (e.g., in activist organizations; workplace training programs) might want to incorporate some information about sexual orientation suspicion and heterosexual marking into their work. Specifically, practitioners working with heterosexual people could discuss problems associated with climates of sexual orientation suspicion, as well as reasons why people reveal their heterosexual identities and implications of these revelations. Helping heterosexual people understand the importance of challenging those who generate climates of sexual orientation suspicion, and also helping them to understand when and how heterosexual marking reinforces heterosexism, can contribute to reduction of heterosexism in groups, organizations, communities, and societies.

A final implication we wish to identify is the value of using a "doing sexuality" approach to studying sexual identity (Coates, 2013; Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016b). Although certainly not the only valuable theoretical approach, our research suggests that it can be a fruitful one. In other words, it is illuminating to study sexual identity as a performance done with and for others in micro-level interactions that are embedded in wider social contexts. When doing so, it is essential to focus on accountability, which involves individuals considering the potential and actual assessment of their behaviors relative to social sexual ideals (Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016b; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

### ***Limitations and future research***

There are clearly some limitations to our study. First, our findings about heterosexual identity suspicion emerged from inductive analysis of stories about heterosexual marking, and thus our study was not designed to directly examine this suspicion. Had we posed direct questions about suspicion, our analysis might have generated additional findings. Nonetheless, given the substantial number of narratives provided by participants on this topic, we believe that our findings offer a rich exploratory analysis of this phenomenon. Another important consideration is that the questionnaire prompt solicited narratives about times the participants intentionally conveyed their heterosexual status, which likely differed from times participants unintentionally did so. The solicitation of narratives about only intentional heterosexual marking may have contributed to the high percentage of stories about suspicion and limited the number of narratives in which participants wrote that they were undisturbed by suspicion. A third consideration is that participants completed closed-ended measures related to heterosexual marking prior to the open-ended prompt that solicited the stories analyzed in this study. The presence of these closed-ended questions may have influenced the topics that participants discussed in their stories. However, because many of the topics in the prior measures were not discussed at all or very often in these stories, we do not believe that the potential influence was strong. A fourth limitation is related to the nature of questionnaires, even those that include open-ended prompts. Had we utilized an interview method, we would have been able to ask our participants follow-up questions that would have enabled us to gain greater clarity and information. A fifth limitation is that the stories participants told are retrospective; thus participants' memories may limit their abilities to describe their experiences in a fully accurate and detailed manner. A sixth limitation is that samples drawn from college psychology pools and Mechanical Turk involve some validity issues and are certainly not nationally representative. Our sample included only young adults, and it was not representative of young adults in the United States in regard to race, economic class, and other demographic characteristics. Thus our results cannot be generalized to the United States; nor can they be generalized to other countries.

We did not directly seek information about suspicion that heterosexual people are sexual minority individuals, and therefore we recommend that researchers explore this phenomenon more directly. Specifically, it would be fruitful for scholars to use interviews to inquire directly about heterosexual identity suspicion and to follow up interview questions with probes to clarify participant answers. Regardless of whether interviews or questionnaires are used, some topics that could be explored in a direct and in-depth manner are: the degree to which these suspicions exist in various social settings, sources



of this suspicion, ways this suspicion is expressed, perceptions and behavior that are generated by this suspicion, and consequences of these perceptions and behaviors. Further, given that people can simply convey disinterest to those who hit on them, we believe that exploration of concerns about sexual minority people hitting on heterosexual people is also warranted.

## Conclusion

In this article, we discussed our findings about the phenomenon of heterosexual identity suspicion that were derived from a sample of young adults from the United States. To our knowledge, although some other scholars have observed and discussed this phenomenon (e.g., Blinde & Taub, 1992; Cascio & Plant, 2016; Dean, 2011), none have offered broad or rich descriptions of aspects of this phenomenon in a single study. Our data allowed us to discover a diversity of types of suspicion, causes of suspicion, concerns about suspicion, and responses to suspicion. Beyond offering descriptions of aspects of heterosexual identity suspicion, our findings also speak to the ways that suspicion can interface with heterosexual identity management practices and illustrate how the climate of heterosexual identity suspicion evidenced in our data reflects and reinforces heterosexism.

## Funding

This work was supported by a Springfield College Summer Research Grant of \$2,500 in 2016.

## References

- Berinsky, A. J., Huber, G. A., & Lenz, G. S. (2012). Evaluating online labor markets for experimental research: Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk. *Political Analysis*, 20, 351–368. doi:10.1093/pan/mpr057
- Blinde, E. M., & Taub, D. E. (1992). Women athletes as falsely accused deviants: Managing the lesbian stigma. *Sociological Quarterly*, 33, 521–533. doi:10.1111/j.1533-8525.1992.tb00141.x
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Berkeley, CA: University of California.
- Bortolin, S. (2010). "I don't want him hitting on me": The role of masculinities in creating a chilly high school climate. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 7, 200–223. doi:10.1080/19361653.2010.486116
- Bosson, J. K., Prewitt-Freilino, J. L., & Taylor, J. N. (2005). Role rigidity: A problem of identity misclassification? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 89, 552–565. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.89.4.552
- Bosson, J. K., Taylor, J. N., & Prewitt-Freilino, J. L. (2006). Gender role violations and identity misclassification: The roles of audience and actor variables. *Sex Roles*, 55, 13–24. doi:10.1007/s11199-006-9056-5

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research*, 3, 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Buck, D. M., Plant, E. A., Ratcliff, J., Zielaskowski, K., & Boerner, P. (2013). Concern over the misidentification of sexual orientation: Social contagion and the avoidance of sexual minorities. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 105, 941–960. doi:10.1037/a0034145
- Buhrmester, M., Kwang, T., & Gosling, S. D. (2011). Amazon's Mechanical Turk: A new source of inexpensive, yet high-quality, data? *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 6, 3–5. doi:10.1177/1745691610393980
- Carnaghi, A., Maass, A., & Fasoli, F. (2011). Enhancing masculinity by slandering homosexuals: The role of homophobic epithets in heterosexual gender identity. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37, 1655–1665. doi:10.1177/0146167211424167
- Cascio, J. L., & Plant, E. A. (2016). Judged by the company you keep? Exposure to non-prejudiced norms reduces concerns about being misidentified as gay/lesbian. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 42, 1164–1176. doi:10.1177/0146167216652858
- Clair, J. A., Beatty, J. E., & Maclean, T. L. (2005). Out of sight but not out of mind: Managing invisible social identities in the workplace. *Academy of Management Review*, 30, 78–95. doi:10.5465/AMR.2005.15281431
- Clark, C. L., Shaver, P. R., & Abrahams, M. F. (1999). Strategic behaviors in romantic relationship initiation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25, 709–722. doi:10.1177/0146167299025006006
- Coates, J. (2013). The discursive production of everyday heterosexualities. *Discourse & Society*, 24, 536–552. doi:10.1177/0957926513486070
- Currier, D. M. (2013). Strategic ambiguity: Protecting emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity in the hookup culture. *Gender & Society*, 27, 704–727. doi:10.1177/0891243213493960
- Davis-Delano, L. R., & Morgan, E. M. (2016). Heterosexual identity management: How social context affects heterosexual marking practices. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, 16, 299–318. doi:10.1080/15283488.2016.1229611
- Davis-Delano, L. R., Pollock, A., & Vose, J. E. (2009). Apologetic behavior among female athletes: A new questionnaire and initial results. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 44, 131–150. doi:10.1177/1012690209335524
- Dean, J. J. (2011). The cultural construction of heterosexual identities. *Sociology Compass*, 5, 679–687. doi:10.1111/j.1751-9020.2011.00395.x
- Dean, J. J. (2014). *Straights: Heterosexuality in post-closeted culture*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Frankel, L. (2004). An appeal for additional research about the development of heterosexual male sexual identity. *Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality*, 16(4), 1–16. doi:10.1300/J056v16n04\_01
- Froyum, C. M. (2007). “At least I'm not gay”: Heterosexual identity making among poor Black teens. *Sexualities*, 10, 603–622. doi:10.1177/1363460707083171
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Herek, G. M. (1986). On heterosexual masculinity. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 29, 563–577. doi:10.1177/000276486029005005
- Hockey, J., Meah, A., & Robinson, V. (2007). *Mundane heterosexualities: From theory to practice*. Houndsmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Holden, C. J., Dennie, T., & Hicks, A. D. (2013). Assessing the reliability of the M5-120 on Amazon's Mechanical Turk. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29, 1749–1754. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2013.02.020
- Konik, J., & Stewart, A. (2004). Sexual identity development in the context of compulsory heterosexuality. *Journal of Personality*, 72, 815–844. doi:10.1111/j.0022-3506.2004.00281.x
- Lasser, J., & Tharinger, D. (2003). Visibility management in school and beyond: A qualitative study of gay, lesbian, bisexual youth. *Journal of Adolescence*, 26, 233–244. doi:10.1016/S0140-1971(02)00132-X
- Martin, K. A. (2009). Normalizing heterosexuality: Mothers' assumptions, talk, and strategies with young children. *American Sociological Review*, 74, 190–207. doi:10.1177/000312240907400202
- McCall, G. J. (2003). The me and the not-me: Positive and negative poles of identity. In P. J. Burke, T. J. Owens, R. Serpe, & P. A. Thoits (Eds.), *Advances in identity theory and research* (pp. 11–25). New York, NY: Springer.
- Mead, G. H. (1962). *Mind, self, & society from the standpoint of a social behaviorist*. C. W. Morris (Ed.), Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.
- Morgan, E. M. (2013). Contemporary issues in sexual orientation and identity development in emerging adulthood. *Emerging Adulthood*, 1, 52–66. doi:10.1177/2167696812469187
- Morgan, E. M., & Davis-Delano, L. R. (2016a). Heterosexual marking and binary cultural conceptions of sexual orientation. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 16, 125–143. doi:10.1080/15299716.2015.1113906
- Morgan, E. M., & Davis-Delano, L. R. (2016b). How public displays of heterosexual identity reflect and reinforce gender stereotypes, gender differences, and gender inequality. *Sex Roles*, 75, 257–271. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0613-2
- Nielsen, J. M., Walden, G., & Kunkel, C. A. (2000). Gendered heteronormativity: Empirical illustrations in everyday life. *Sociological Quarterly*, 41, 283–296. doi:10.1111/j.1533-8525.2000.tb00096.x
- Paolacci, G., Chandler, J., & Ipeirotis, P. G. (2010). Running experiments on Amazon Mechanical Turk. *Judgment and Decision Making*, 5, 411–419.
- Pascoe, C. J. (2007). *Dude, you're a fag: Masculinity and sexuality in high school*. Berkeley, CA: University of California.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pirlott, A. G., & Neuberg, S. L. (2014). Sexual prejudice: Avoiding unwanted sexual interest? *Social Psychology and Personality Science*, 5, 92–101. doi:10.1177/1948550613486674
- Plant, E. A., Zielaskowski, K., & Buck, D. M. (2014). Mating motives and concerns about being misidentified as gay or lesbian: Implications for the avoidance and derogation of sexual minorities. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40, 633–645. doi:10.1177/0146167214521467
- Plummer, D. (1999). *One of the boys: Masculinity, homophobia, and modern manhood*. New York, NY: Harrington Park.
- Poteat, V. P., DiGiovanni, C. D., & Scheer, J. R. (2013). Predicting homophobic behavior among heterosexual youth: Domain general and sexual orientation-specific factors at the individual and contextual level. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 42, 351–362. doi:10.1007/s10964-012-9813-4
- Prewitt-Freilino, J. L., & Bosson, J. K. (2008). Defending the self against identity misclassification. *Self and Identity*, 7, 168–183. doi:10.1080/17405620701330706
- Pruit, J. C. (2015). Preschool teachers and the discourse of suspicion. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 44, 510–534. doi:10.1177/0891241614545882

- Quinn, B. A. (2002). Sexual harassment and masculinity: The power and meaning of “girl watching.” *Gender & Society*, 16, 386–402. doi:10.1177/0891243202016003007
- Rand, D. G. (2012). The promise of Mechanical Turk: How online labor markets can help theorists run behavioral experiments. *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, 299, 172–179. doi:10.1016/j.jtbi.2011.03.004
- Renold, E. (2000). “Coming out”: Gender, (hetero)sexuality and the primary school. *Gender and Education*, 12, 309–326. doi:10.1080/09540250050122221
- Savin-Williams, R. C. (2011). Identity development among sexual-minority youth. In S. J. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, & V. L. Vignoles (Eds.), *Handbook of identity theory and research* (pp. 671–689). New York, NY: Springer.
- Schafer, C. E., & Shaw, G. M. (2009). The polls – trends: Tolerance in the United States. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 73, 404–431. doi:10.1093/poq/nfp022
- Schleider, J. L., & Weisz, J. R. (2015). Using Mechanical Turk to study family processes and youth mental health: A test of feasibility. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24, 3235–3246. doi:10.1037/t00540-000
- Seidman, S. (2002). *Beyond the closet: The transformation of gay and lesbian life*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Shulman, S., & Connolly, J. (2015). The challenge of romantic relationships in emerging adulthood. In J. J. Arnett (Ed.), *Oxford handbook of emerging adulthood* (pp. 245–2261). New York, NY: Oxford University.
- Sigelman, C. K., Howell, J. L., Cornell, D. P., Cutright, J. D., & Dewey, J. C. (1991). Courtesy stigma: The social implications of associating with a gay person. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 131, 45–56. doi:10.1080/00224545.1991.9713823
- Simms, D. C., & Byers, S. (2013). Heterosexual daters’ sexual initiation behaviors: Use of the theory of planned behavior. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 42, 105–116. doi:10.1007/s10508-012-9994-7
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Swank, E., Fahs, B., & Frost, D. M. (2013). Region, social identities, and disclosure practices as predictors of heterosexist discrimination against sexual minorities in the United States. *Sociological Inquiry*, 83, 238–258. doi:10.1111/soin.12004
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & Society*, 1, 125–151. doi:10.1177/0891243287001002002