


# “We Won’t Go Back into the Closet Now Without One Hell of a Fight”: Effects of the 2016 Presidential Election on Sexual Minority Women’s and Gender Minorities’ Stigma-Related Concerns

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**Abstract** Much progress has been made in terms of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) rights. The 2016 United States presidential election, however, raised concerns that this progress could be slowed, if not reversed. We conducted an internet-based study and gathered both qualitative and quantitative data from a national convenience sample to examine how sexual minority women and gender minorities ( $n = 741$ ) perceived the outcome of the election in relation to stigma-related concerns, perceptions, and expectations. Quantitative analyses of responses collected between December 2016 and the presidential inauguration (January 20, 2017) revealed that participants reported high levels of election outcome-related concerns, including psychological and emotional distress. Qualitative responses centered on the individual-level impacts of the perceived threat of potential increases in structural stigma. Participants raised specific concerns about the possible rollback of rights and the rise in hate speech and discrimination, and the stigmatizing

effects of these on LGBTQ and other marginalized populations.

**Keywords** Sexual identity · Gender identity · Effects of policies · Politics · Mixed-methods

## Background

The passage of marriage equality in the USA in 2015 was largely seen as a seismic shift in support of sexual minorities. Opinion polls at that time demonstrated widespread support for same-sex marriage and greater acceptance of sexual minorities. President Barack Obama’s administration heralded further progress with its inclusiveness and vocal support for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) rights, including, but not limited to, the recognition of Pride Month and the hiring of LGBTQ people for top positions in the administration. Moreover, policies such as extending Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 [20 U.S.C. §§ 1681–1688] to include protections for equal educational opportunity for LGBTQ students and an executive order to include sexual orientation and gender identity in non-discrimination policies of federal bureaucratic agencies, further demonstrated the administration’s support for LGBTQ rights. Some researchers suggested that the USA was now perhaps “post-gay,” and that the deleterious health and well-being effects seen among older generations would be greatly diminished among LGBTQ youth due to higher levels of acceptance, thus reducing minority stress (Meyer, 2016). The results of the 2016 presidential election, however, raised concerns and fears among many minority populations due to the rhetoric used by the newly elected president (Gallup, 2017a; Williams & Medlock, 2017).

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Overall, stigma against sexual minorities in the USA has been decreasing, as evidenced by opinion polls (Gallup, 2017b; Pew Research Center, 2017), legislation (e.g., bans on reparative therapy; repeal of “Do not ask, do not tell”), and the passage of inclusive anti-discrimination policies by businesses, cities, and states (Herek, 2015; Levy & Levy, 2016). Together, these evince a shift in support for sexual minorities. Despite this shift, relatively high rates of hate crimes, bullying, and discrimination persist (Herek, 2015), and more recently, anti-LGBTQ legislation introduced in multiple states suggests that anti-LGBTQ attitudes and stigma are still pervasive (see Stone, 2016 and Levy & Levy, 2016 for a history of legislative actions).

Such oblique and overt anti-LGBTQ actions and policies are indicative of continued structural stigma. Structural stigma is defined as “societal-level conditions, cultural norms, and institutional policies that constrain the opportunities, resources, and well-being of the stigmatized” (Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014, p. 2). Structural stigma has been found to have chronic, negative effects on well-being and has been associated with higher rates of psychological distress and physical health problems, including increased risk for premature death among sexual minorities. These negative effects are theorized to be due to higher levels of stress associated with marginalization (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014).

Sexual and gender minorities face unique and chronic stressors related to their marginalized status (Meyer, 1995, 2003; Meyer & Frost, 2013). Minority stressors may be both distal (objective stressors originating from external sources, such as heterosexism, homophobia, and discrimination) and proximal (subjective stressors originating from internal sources, such as internalized homonegativity). Higher levels of minority stress increase the risk of multiple negative health outcomes such as depression, physical symptomatology, and unhealthy behaviors such as alcohol use (Herek & Garnets, 2007; Hughes, 2011; Keyes, Hatzenbuehler, Grant, & Hasin, 2012; Lewis, Kholodkov, & Derlega, 2012). High levels of structural stigma and high levels of exposure to negative rhetoric against LGBTQ individuals may increase levels of minority stress (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014; Riggle, Rostosky, & Horne, 2010) and contribute to poor health outcomes.

Sexual minorities living in states that passed constitutional amendments restricting same-sex marriage rights (prior to the 2015 Supreme Court decision) reported significantly higher levels of mood disorders before the passage of the amendments and significant increases afterward, compared to their heterosexual counterparts and to those living in states that did not pass such amendments (Hatzenbuehler & McLaughlin, 2010). Moreover, anti-LGBTQ policies more broadly are believed to increase sexual and gender minorities’ sense of stigma and exclusion (Lewis, 2016). Conversely, state-level policies

protecting the rights of sexual minorities are associated with improvements in psychological well-being (Riggle et al., 2010). For example, after the passage of civil union laws in Illinois, sexual minority women reported lower levels of depression, substance use, and perceived discrimination (Everett, Hatzenbuehler, & Hughes, 2016). Moreover, stigma consciousness and perceived discrimination also decreased, suggesting that such laws have positive impacts on identity and lower levels of marginalization (Everett et al., 2016).

Marginalized groups’ rights and liberties may be subjects to the vicissitudes of popular opinion and the political party currently in power (Frost & Fingerhut, 2016). A small body of literature has explored the impact of social discourse, and particularly devaluing messages, that accompany structural policy proposals and changes. For example, Frost and Fingerhut (2016) described the impact of exposure to negative campaign messages among sexual minorities in four US states where marriage rights for same-sex couples were subject to vote through popular referendum. Simply being exposed to the negative rhetoric of campaigns and the ensuing discussions among colleagues, friends, and families has deleterious effects on marginalized groups. Specifically, exposure to negative messages about LGBTQ people was associated with increased negative affect, decreased positive affect, and decreased relationship satisfaction (Frost & Fingerhut, 2016). During the national debates about marriage equality, sexual minorities were exposed to negative discourse writ large about LGBTQ individuals (Riggle, Rostosky, & Horne, 2009; Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, & Miller, 2009). These discursive opportunities reify and reinforce negative views and may, over time, increase stigma (Frost & Fingerhut, 2016; Levy & Levy, 2016).

As part of a pilot study to develop measures for a larger funded study of sexual minority women’s health, we conducted a national internet-based survey to learn about how recent policies—particularly marriage equality and the 2016 presidential election—had impacted perceptions of health and well-being. The current study focused on sexual minority women and transgender or non-binary individuals because these populations are underrepresented in research (Coulter, Kenst, Bowen, & Scout, 2014) and face potentially higher levels of oppression due to their multiple marginalized identities (Hagen, Hoover, & Morrow, 2017). These groups were of specific interest due to underrepresentation in the socio-political power structures in the USA, which may put them at greater risk for negative political impacts. To understand the perceived potential impact of the 2016 election, we analyzed both qualitative and quantitative data from the online survey related to perceived outcomes of the election in relation to stigma-related concerns, perceptions, and expectations.

## Methods

### Research Design

Using a mixed-methods design, we explored how sexual minority women and gender minorities experienced the impact of the 2016 election. Specifically, we used a concurrent triangulation design, which involved concurrent but separate collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data of a specific phenomenon, followed by converging results in the interpretation phase (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2006). This study was a sub-component of a larger research project focusing on the “Exploration of the impact of marriage recognition on sexual-minority women and transgender individuals and their relationships” that was due to launch in November 2016. After the election, however, it became clear that experiences and perceptions of marriage equality might well be impacted by the results of the election. We thus added a set of questions related to perceptions of the election results, and began recruitment on December 13, 2016; recruitment is ongoing.

### Participants and Procedure

Recruitment strategies were designed to reach individuals over 18 years old who identified as lesbian, bisexual, queer, same-sex attracted or something other than exclusively heterosexual, as well as individuals who identify as transgender or non-binary (e.g., genderqueer, transwoman, transman, non-binary transindividual, gender fluid). All recruitment took place online, and the study was advertised as a study of “Marriage Recognition and Recent Political Events.” Advertisements were placed on social media sites (Facebook and Twitter), listservs (e.g., professional organizations and community organizations), and websites aimed at sexual minority women and transgender individuals (e.g., AfterEllen, Autostraddle, Curve). A total of 930 participants completed the survey; of those, 802 completed the survey before Inauguration Day on January 20, 2017. At the culmination of the survey, participants were provided with a list of possible resources (e.g., crisis hotlines) in case any participants experienced distress while completing the survey. We limited our sample to participants who completed the survey before the inauguration in order to focus on how anticipation of the presidential administration and expectations of the administration’s policies were perceived by participants. Data from those who did not meet eligibility criteria (i.e., were younger than 18 years old, not a sexual minority female or transgender individual) were excluded, resulting in an analytic sample of  $n = 741$ . All study procedures were approved by San José State University’s Institutional Review Board.

## Measures

Data were collected through an online survey using Qualtrics. The survey included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Questions were developed in consultation with the University of Illinois Survey Research Laboratory and based on in-depth qualitative pilot interviews with a convenience sample of 19 sexual minority women who were recruited separately.

**Demographics** Demographic information included age, relationship status, race/ethnicity, education, employment status, religious preference, and residence (i.e., state and size of city/town/community in the USA. [or other country]). Participants were asked their sexual identity, “Recognizing that sexual identity is only one part of your identity, how do you define your sexual identity? Would you say you are: only lesbian or gay; mostly lesbian or gay; bisexual; mostly heterosexual; only heterosexual; queer, questioning; or other (please specify).” For ease of interpretation of our findings and to increase the size of the subgroups, responses were grouped into three sexual identity categories: lesbian/mostly lesbian, bisexual/mostly heterosexual, queer or other. Before grouping those who identified as bisexual and mostly heterosexual together, we compared the two groups on all outcomes and found no significant differences, supporting our combining those groups. Following recommendations from The Williams Institute’s GenIUSS group (The GenIUSS Group, 2013), we also asked participants to indicate their current gender identity using multiple options, which we collapsed into three categories: female/woman; transgender (transwoman, transman); and non-binary (gender non-conforming, genderqueer, non-binary, or other).

**Responses to the Election** Participants were invited to respond to questions about the 2016 election by selecting “the category that best reflects your level of concern or feelings compared to how you felt before the election,” using a 7-category scale (much higher, moderately higher, slightly higher, about the same, slightly lower, moderately lower, much lower). Examples of eight statements to measure election-related concerns include: “concerns about LGBTQ rights,” “concerns about my safety,” and “concerns about the safety of others.” Three items addressed individual reactions, including “feelings of sadness or depression,” “feelings of anxiety,” and “comfort with my identity.”

Narrative data for this study were drawn primarily from an open-ended question inviting participants to “share with us your thoughts or concerns related to the current political and social environment.” Participants were also asked, “In what ways has the election affected your relationships (e.g., intimate relationships, familial relationships, relationships with friends)?” Because some responses to this question

overlapped with the research question for the current paper (i.e., stigma-related concerns, perceptions, and expectations), these data were included in analyses; analysis of the full responses to the relationship question will be presented in a separate paper. Narrative responses were compiled and analyzed for participants who answered the question about election-related thoughts and concerns ( $n = 371$ ) and/or the question about the impact on relationships ( $n = 133$ ). A total of 399 narrative responses, out of 741 survey responses, were included for analysis. Length of responses varied from one sentence to multiple paragraphs, and ranged from one to 706 words in length.

### Data Analysis

**Qualitative Analyses** We conducted inductive thematic analysis of all narrative responses to identify patterned responses or meanings associated with the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a flexible approach to qualitative research that may be used with different types of research questions, including questions that focus on people's lived experiences and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We used six phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clark: (1) immersion through reading and re-reading data and noting initial ideas, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report, including selection and use of extract examples. Specifically, the first four authors read and independently coded a set (40 each) of narratives to identify and label meaning units (a complete thought or idea ranging from a phrase to several sentences). Initial codes were collated to reach consensus on provisional categories. We used these provisional categories to create a code sheet, which defined emerging themes and their associated specific codes. We compared coding of this set of data across multiple researchers to assess consistency in coding: inter-coder reliability was 93%. Extracts of data from all participants were compiled into thematic areas, and the first four authors continued analysis using an iterative process to further define and refine themes.

We used four primary strategies to enhance trustworthiness of the data analysis; Creswell and Poth (2018) and suggest using at least two strategies in any qualitative study. First, we used an audit trail to log changes to the coding sheet and definitions of codes and to review analytic decisions. An audit trail is “a document that allows a researcher to retrace the process by which the researcher arrived at their final findings” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 323). Second, to minimize potential biases, we continued an open critical dialog about the emerging data and each of our perspectives. Specifically, the authors met regularly

throughout the data analysis process to challenge one another about similarities and differences in interpretation and to reflect on the ways in which individual biases, values, and experiences may have influenced analysis. Third, we corroborated qualitative findings through triangulation with quantitative data. Fourth, as a final check on the stability and trustworthiness of the data, the findings were examined and verified by the last author who had not previously participated in the data analytic activities.

**Quantitative Analyses** Because we had no a priori hypotheses for the quantitative analyses, these analyses are presented for descriptive purposes and as additional information as to aid interpretation of our qualitative analyses. Univariate analyses were used to examine the distributions of election concerns by sexual identity, gender identity, and race/ethnicity. We fit unadjusted ANOVA models to the data to examine differences in election concerns by sexual identity, gender identity, and race/ethnicity. All analyses used SPSS version 23 (SPSS, version 23, 2016) statistical software.

### Description of the Sample

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample. More than half (59.2%) of participants identified as lesbian/mostly lesbian, 24.6% identified as bisexual/mostly heterosexual, and 16.2% identified as queer/other. Most participants identified as female (82.6%), 7.7% as transgender (2.3% as transmen, 5.4% as transwomen), and 9.7% as non-binary. The sample was predominantly White (87.6%), with smaller proportions of Latinx (a gender-neutral term for people of Latin American descent or origin; 3.6%), African-American (2.7%), Asian/Pacific Islander (3.5%), American Indian/Alaska Native (1.4%), and individuals who reported other racial/ethnic backgrounds (0.6%). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 82 years old ( $M = 34.8$ ,  $SD = 14.0$ ), with almost half being 26–40 (48.0%). Most participants were single (34.1%), married (27.9%), or in a committed relationship (27.9%); and of those in relationships, the majority lived with their partner (76.9%). Overall, the sample was highly educated, with 40.4% having a graduate or professional degree, and 11.8% currently enrolled in graduate school; most of the sample (56.1%) reported being employed full-time. Questions about religion were added partway through data collection, thus not all participants were asked about their religious affiliation. Of those who provided information ( $n = 230$ ), most said they were not religious (57%), with smaller proportions identifying as Protestant (10%), Jewish (7.8%), Catholic (3.5%), Muslim (0.4%), or other (21.3%). Most participants reported living in large (40.7%) or medium-sized cities (23.1%).

**Table 1** Demographics

	Number	Percentage
<b>Sexual Identity</b>		
Lesbian/mostly lesbian	438	59.2
Bisexual/mostly heterosexual	182	24.6
Queer or other	120	16.2
<b>Gender Identity</b>		
Female	612	82.6
Trans	57	7.7
Non-binary	72	9.7
<b>Age</b>		
18–25	167	27.5
26–40	292	48.0
41–55	74	12.2
56–70	65	10.7
71 and over	10	1.6
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>		
White	557	87.6
African American	17	2.7
Latinx	23	3.6
American Indian/Alaska native	9	1.4
Asian/Pacific Islander	26	4.1
Other	4	0.6
<b>Place of residence</b>		
Large city	259	40.7
Suburb near large city	121	19.0
Medium sized city (50,000–250,000)	147	23.1
Small city or town (under 50,000)	88	13.8
On a farm or open country	18	2.9
Other	3	0.5
<b>Education</b>		
<High School	5	0.8
High School/GED	12	1.9
Technical/vocational schooling	5	0.8
Some college/currently attending	101	15.9
2-year college degree	11	1.7
4-year college degree	170	26.7
Currently enrolled in graduate school	75	11.8
Graduate or professional degree	257	40.4
<b>Employment</b>		
Full-time	129	56.1
Part-time	35	15.2
On leave	1	0.4
Unemployed	4	1.7
In school	18	7.8
Retired	31	13.5
Other	12	5.2
<b>Gender identity of partner</b>		
Female	359	78.7
Male	56	12.3
Trans	20	4.4

**Table 1** (continued)

	Number	Percentage
Non binary	21	4.6
<b>Relationship status</b>		
Single or dating	253	34.1
In a committed relationship (no legal status)	207	27.9
Legal status other than marriage	11	1.5
Married	235	31.7
Separated/divorced	12	1.6
Widowed	2	0.3
Other	21	2.8
<b>Cohabiting</b>		
Yes	350	76.9
No	105	23.1
<b>Plan to formalize relationship through marriage?</b>		
Yes, we plan to	92	46.5
No, but I would like to	11	5.6
No, but my partner would like to	9	4.5
No, we have no intention	25	12.6
Undecided	54	27.3
Other	7	3.5

## Results

### Stigma-Related Concerns

Qualitative findings provide insight about the specific stigma-related concerns, perceptions, and expectations of participants. Two levels of thematic content emerged from the analysis: (1) individual-level impacts and concerns and (2) structural-level concerns about the broader political and social context. Quantitative analyses provide additional insights about stigma-related concerns in these two overarching areas.

#### *Individual-Level Impacts and Concerns*

Three themes emerged in narratives about the individual impact of the election on participants: fears for self, stress and hopelessness, and assessment of risk related to being “out” or visible.

**Fear for Self** Participants frequently described fears and concerns about their own safety and well-being, using language such as “terrified,” “scared,” “shell-shocked,” and “afraid.” These statements were typically followed by descriptions of concerns related to safety (e.g., “I’m concerned about my physical safety and how much the law will or will not protect us”), health (e.g., “I’m afraid of losing my health insurance; I’m afraid that I will lose

the right to choose [to have an abortion] should something terrible happen to me”), or the personal impact of the potential loss of rights.

“I am terrified about both having my rights taken away by the government AND the increased possibility of targeted violence because of the hatred that has been whipped up by Trump. I’m afraid not only because I’m a lesbian, but because I’m a woman, a Jew, and an activist.”

Concerns about health were particularly salient for transgender individuals. For example, one trans-identified individual commented, “I’m very concerned about my rights as a transperson, and whether I will continue to have access to medical care (I’m very early in transition, only 3 months on testosterone and pre-top surgery).”

In addition to concerns for themselves, participants were frequently explicit about their own social location relative to others and their heightened awareness of their privilege. They linked their personal fears to their concern for others. For example, one participant commented,

“I’m privileged, in a good city, I know I’ll be okay unless things get REALLY bad. Even if we lose the right to marry, we’ll be okay. However, I’m so f\*\*\*\* worried for young queer people growing up in this time, for poor queer people who can’t get out of hateful communities, and for everyone who’s marginalized in some way.”

Several participants commented on heightened awareness of their privilege, such as one participant who noted being “keenly aware that my privileged position (well-educated, financially stable, strong relationship, liberal neighborhood/state) may be shielding me from what others are experiencing and from knowing when/how to act and help!”

Many participants also reported concerns about the impact of the election on their relationships with families of origin. This was sometimes expressed as a general tension or stress in interactions with family members (“It makes things tense when [I’m] with family.”) Other times, the election highlighted or exacerbated tensions surrounding differences of opinion with family members about politics in general, or LGBTQ rights specifically (“My family voted for Trump and I think they just don’t get it that my rights are at stake”).

**Stress and Hopelessness** Participants reported a range of emotional and psychological responses to the election, such as depressed mood, anxiety, hopelessness, fear, and hopefulness. Several reported new or worsening experiences of depressed mood following the announcement of the election results: “I also feel much more depressed, being reminded that

roughly half of the country sees me and my wife as less than human” and “I’ve felt incredibly scared and depressed and shocked at realizing the fragility and fallibility of all the laws and systems that protect me.”

A few participants reported depressed mood and hopelessness at a level that led them to question whether they wanted to continue living. For example, one transgender participant wrote, “Mike Pence believes that the only good tranny [transperson] is a dead tranny, and he thinks the world would be better off if I were dead. He doesn’t even believe I exist... I should just kill myself now.” Several participants reported feeling concerned about their mental health. For example, one participant observed,

“I’ve noticed a very serious impact on the mental health of myself and friends since the election, especially those who are members of marginalized communities/identity groups. My girlfriend immediately began experiencing panic attacks. I was unable to sleep well for weeks, I started seeing a therapist again and started anti-anxiety meds again. I can’t listen to news radio like I used to, I feel consistently depressed and low-energy.”

Additionally, many participants described the impact of constant stress and hyper-vigilance following the election: “I’ve been so anxious over the political environment, I’m exhausted.” Some described a pervasive sense of apprehension related to the potential of discrimination and lack of personal safety: “I am scared s\*\*\*\*less. My emotions run high, I am constantly on edge, and I’m very aware of my surroundings and the people around me.” Similarly, another participant wrote, “I feel like most people I know cannot relate to the stress I constantly feel. I feel like some people minimize the potential for discrimination, acting like it is isolated instances that occur elsewhere.” A few participants described somatic expressions of their high stress levels, such as feelings of nausea and “a new growing pit of anxiety in my stomach.”

While many participants reported depressed mood, anxiety, fear, and other difficult emotional reactions to the election, a few described vacillating between these feelings and positive feelings such as hope, motivation, and determination: “I seem to swing wildly between terror, hopelessness, and determination.”

“I keep going back and forth between feeling a focused, driven anger that propels me to act, to resist, and a despair that there’s too much, that I can’t do enough to actually help. I’m trying not to let the latter win out, but also give myself permission to take breaks, to step back, to take care of myself.”

These participants described emotional responses to the election that were both psychologically challenging and a source of inspiration and drive to action.

**Risk of Being “Out” or Visible** Participants often linked discussions about their sense of safety with statements related to visibility and disclosure of their identities, such as one participant who observed, “I felt comfortable coming out only when I knew I had legal protection.” Many participants reported increased concerns related to safety or other negative consequences of visibility as sexual or gender minorities. For example, one participant explained, “I will not ‘come out’ to my family or friends as bi – in part, it’s ‘none of their business,’ but mostly, I would fear for my own safety.” Participants described attempts to address safety risks by reducing visibility, such as one participant who succinctly captured this dynamic, noting, “I am more careful these days – Try not to look to gay in order not to be hate crimed.” Some participants also described changing behaviors, or limiting exposure to environments that were perceived as hostile. This dynamic is illustrated by one participant who explained,

“My partner and I are more aware of where we should be publicly open about our relationship and where it is not safe. Places with large numbers of white men scare her more than ever before, and public places are feeling more and more unsafe because she is Latina.”

Other participants were explicit about their resistance to concealment, exemplified by the following quote:

“I still would never want to take back my choice to live as myself, openly and proudly. But I know far too many people will be smothered by this, their hopes and dreams buried alive. All I can really hold onto right now is the willingness of people to keep standing up and saying, ‘No. Not this.’”

#### *Descriptives of Individual-Level Concerns*

Consistent with our qualitative findings, participants rated concerns about their safety and their emotional well-being as high. Overall, 69.5% of participants reported “moderately higher” or “much higher” concerns about their own safety since the results of the election. Participants reported less change in comfort with their identity (only 12.8% reported being moderately or much more concerned), their relationship with their partner/spouse (7.3%), and with their family (22.5%). There were also high levels of perceived effects of the election on psychological/emotional well-being, with 73% reporting they were experiencing higher levels of sadness or depressed mood, and 76.5% reporting higher levels of anxiety.

We conducted planned pairwise comparisons by sexual identity (participants who identified as lesbian compared to those

who identified as bisexual and those who identified as queer or other), gender identity (participants who identified as women compared to those who identified as transgender and those who identified as genderqueer/non-binary), and race/ethnicity (White participants compared separately to Black and Latinx participants). We found significant sexual identity  $F(2, 626) = 3.725, p < .05$  and gender identity  $F(2, 626) = 4.265, p < .05$  differences and a marginal effect of race/ethnicity  $F(3, 626) = 2.558, p = .054$  in concerns about participants’ own safety. Planned post-hoc comparisons revealed that those who identified as queer or other reported significantly higher fears for their own safety ( $M = 6.31, SD = 0.87$ ) compared to those who identified as lesbian ( $M = 5.94, SD = 1.05; p < .05$ ), and that those who identified as transgender reported significantly higher fears for their own safety ( $M = 6.38, SD = 0.981$ ) compared to those who identified as female ( $M = 5.93, SD = 1.019, p < .01$ ). There were sexual identity  $F(2, 626) = 7.777, p < .001$  and racial/ethnic differences  $F(3, 626) = 2.677, p < .05$  in concerns about the safety of others. Planned post-hoc comparisons demonstrated that participants who identified as bisexual ( $M = 6.86, SD = 0.44; p < .01$ ) and those who identified as queer ( $M = 6.90, SD = 0.46; p < .01$ ) were significantly more likely to report concerns about others’ safety compared to participants who identified as lesbian ( $M = 6.66, SD = 0.68$ ). Latinx participants reported significant higher levels of concerns for the safety of others ( $M = 6.96, SD = 0.84$ ) compared to Black participants ( $M = 6.47, SD = 0.94, p < .05$ ). We also found an effect of race/ethnicity on reported level of anxiety  $F(3, 626) = 3.070, p < .05$ ; Latinx participants reported significant higher levels of anxiety ( $M = 6.43, SD = 0.84$ ) compared to white participants ( $M = 6.20, SD = 1.01, p < .05$ ). There were no group differences in concerns about relationships with spouse/partner or with family members.

#### *Structural-Level Impacts*

The structural effects of the election emerged in four themes: worries about national and global harm, fears for marginalized groups, fear of a rise in hate speech and violence, and concerns about loss of progress and rollback of rights.

**Worries About National and Global Harm** General concerns about the nation and the world post-election were ubiquitous, such as being “concerned about instability in the world and wars. Economics decline.” Some listed very specific concerns about how the election would affect the country, people’s rights, and the economy.

“I’m worried about freedom of the press, the reinstatement of the House Committee on Un-American activities, the acceleration of mass incarceration and the exacerbation of issues with police violence and a militant law enforcement system. I’m worried about millions of Americans

losing health insurance, losing job security and housing security because they are LGBT.”

Fears centered both on the USA and whether the election was a harbinger of greater global instability and the global rise of hate, “There is currently a global populist swing to the hard right happening all over the world, and the restrictions of freedoms and democratic ideas from Turkey to the Philippines should be a grave concern for everyone with a brain.” Concerns were also raised about the divisiveness of the election, and whether the country would recover from that, and overcome the deep schisms.

“I feel as if everything has become polarized in the extreme politically, and I fear the country’s ability to grow together. Socially I fear the gains made over the past decade will be heavily impacted. I feel an extensive violent civil conflict is possible in the U.S.”

The divisiveness of the election and the rise of hateful rhetoric in concert made some people feel like they lost faith in the country and in democracy and a sense of their place in the world. One participant reported that it made her, “reevaluate [her] view of the world becoming safer and more accepting.”

**Fears for Marginalized Groups** Throughout many of the narratives was a specific concern about how the election would affect the most vulnerable—those with the least amounts of power, “I know that this election season negatively impacted all marginalized groups and I’m worried that the incoming administration will keep their campaign promises. [It] will not suddenly become allies to Muslims, Latinx, or LGBTQ people.” Specific concerns were raised about how policies would negatively affect, and perhaps even target, those who are most vulnerable.

“People are going to die under the incoming administration and its eugenics aims. That affects people with disabilities (the elimination of Obamacare, elimination or cutbacks to Medicare and Medicaid) rolling back of ADA enforcement, cutting Social Security Disability and SSI. Longer term, the white supremacist rhetoric and the eugenics rhetoric endanger the lives of people of color...I’m terrified. I have friends and neighbors who are worried about deportation. That affects all of us.”

Multiple people interpreted the results of the election as indicative of a country in which those belonging to marginalized groups no longer have a place in society, “I am now more clearly aware that a significant majority of Americans want people like me to be dead.” Participants had specific concerns about the future for Muslims, immigrants, and racial/ethnic

minorities: “I’m extremely worried for immigrants, POC [people of color], and GNC [gender non-conforming] folks. I work with students who are undocumented or have family who are undocumented. They’re all fearful of this rising tide of racism.” Concerns were also raised for trans and gender non-conforming individuals and those who do not adhere to traditional gender roles, “I worry for the safety of queers that don’t pass as hetero.”

“I am especially concerned about the wellbeing of trans women of color, who already experience a much higher rate of violence than the rest of the population, as it does not seem like they will be protected whatsoever in this new political environment.”

**Fears of a Rise in Hate Speech and Violence** Fear of a possible rise in discrimination and discriminatory language, including hate speech, was expressed. These fears followed three themes: the early rise in hate speech and discriminatory actions, the legitimization of hate speech, and the emboldening of those who hold discriminatory beliefs. Across narratives, a specific fear emerged that the election results would result in a rise in hate speech, violence, and discrimination against people of color, immigrants, Muslims, women, and LGBTQ people, “I worry about what feels like a reactionary shift in our culture that is already inciting hatred and violence, not just toward LGBTQ people but toward all women, people of color, people of non-Christian faith, and other marginalized groups.” Participants also pointed to the presidential election as specific encouragement of discriminatory language, that it has “created a ‘safe space’ for the uncivilized and their bad behavior” and moreover that, “what was once unspeakable is becoming normalized and no longer shameful to do or say.”

“Very concerned about some of President-elect’s supporters who feel that it’s open season on LGBT community, women, Persons of Color, Muslims, Jewish people, etc. Highly frightened of potential for violence, harassment, and civil unrest. President-elect keeps feeding division among Americans, instead of unifying the country.”

Further, participants were concerned that the election would “embolden” discriminatory beliefs, words, and actions, “socially, we’re much more accepted (at least, compared to the past), but we are facing down what seems to be an increasingly hostile minority of the population that’s being empowered by the government.” Participants were worried the election would deteriorate social norms that kept people from expressing discriminatory beliefs, “I’m afraid that by electing Trump, bigots and racists now feel empowered to act, where before



they were held in check by societal norms.” Indeed, some participants reported that either they personally, or those close to them, had experienced discrimination and hate speech since the election, “I’ve had friends be told that gay lives don’t matter anymore. I know people who have been assaulted for being LGBTQ.”

### Concerns About Loss of Progress and Rollback of Rights

Participants were concerned that sociopolitical progress would be lost under the new administration, “I can’t shake the idea that he might do everything he said he wanted to do, in which case our entire society goes back 50 years to overt racism, homophobic discrimination, and more.” This loss of progress was attributed by many participants to the perception that the incoming administration not only lacks concern for minority and marginalized groups, but is perceived as despising them.

“It is one thing to have laws that discriminate against you, and another [to have] powerful people modeling actions and words that devalue you as a person and encourage others to do so. The new administration is promising both of those things. And after decades of progress, both social and legal, the forces of hate and prejudice are promising a march backwards.”

Loss of progress was also attributed to a desire of those with power to ensure they maintain that power, “the White heteropatriarchal majority is afraid to touch anything that will [threaten] the status quo and their comfortable lives, even if it means continuing to subjugate those who have never truly seen or felt equality.”

Fears of the potential loss of rights under the new administration were echoed by many participants, “The cabinet positions that Trump is entertaining are so rabidly anti-LGBT that I fear many of the hard-earned rights over the past 15 years could be rolled back.” Multiple participants raised specific concerns about the loss of rights and protections against discrimination for LGBTQ individuals. Participants worried that the rollback of rights could have cascading effects by opening the doors for states to follow suit, “I worry that LGBT rights on a federal level will be rolled back and in red states, LGBT people will be actively legislated against.” Even if protections are not rolled back, some participants were concerned their rights would not be upheld, “I feel that whatever LGBT protection laws that were previously in place will no longer be enforced.”

The loss of rights specifically for transindividuals was of concern to many, “I personally worry about losing what few legal protections and status I hold as a transgender woman.” Some reported attempting to put processes and protections into place before the inauguration, just in case there was indeed a rollback of rights, “I’m terrified. My partner is trans, and we’re working as

quickly as possible to get her name and gender marker changed on legal paperwork before inauguration.”

Multiple participants raised concerns about marriage equality, and whether it was vulnerable to being rolled back, “I’m quite worried...that marriage equality will be, if not repealed, weakened through state laws.” Loss of marriage equality was perceived by participants to have broader effects than just restricting actual rights to get married.

“Our primary concern now is about whether or not I will be recognized as a legal guardian of my son. I was not the birth mom, but my name is on the birth certificate and the state of Illinois recognizes this. But if federal equality is overturned, and we’re out of state, we’re not sure what would happen in an emergency.”

Some people expressed optimism that marriage equality would be very hard to repeal, “there are a lot of channels the Republicans would have to (legally) go through to dismantle marriage equality, so there’s the idea that anything that happens won’t be too dramatic or will take too long to push through.” Yet, others were concerned that even if marriage equality is upheld, there would be other ways of reducing rights, “I’m quite worried that the social environment with regard to LGBT issues will deteriorate and that marriage equality will be, if not repealed, weakened through state laws.”

### Descriptives of Structural-Level Concerns

Quantitative analyses mirrored our qualitative findings and revealed high levels of concerns about discrimination, social acceptance, social rejection, and LGBTQ rights. Among participants in the sample, 93.2% reported feeling more concerned about discrimination, 57.8% reported being more concerned about social acceptance, and 49.7% reported being more concerned about social rejection since the election. Most participants additionally reported that they were more concerned about the safety of others (94.9%) and about LGBTQ rights as a whole (94.5%).

Planned pairwise comparisons revealed no significant differences in levels of concerns based on sexual identity (participants who identified as lesbian compared to those who identified as bisexual and those who identified as queer or other), gender identity (participants who identified as women compared to those who identified as transgender and those who identified as genderqueer/non-binary), and race/ethnicity (White participants compared separately to Black and Latinx participants) about discrimination, social acceptance, social rejection, and LGBTQ rights. Bisexual women ( $M = 6.86$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and queer/other individuals ( $M = 6.90$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ ,  $p < .01$ ), however, reported significantly higher levels of concerns for others compared to lesbian women ( $M = 6.66$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ).

## Discussion

Stigma exists at multiple levels, including individual (e.g., internalized responses), interpersonal (e.g., interactions between stigmatized and nonstigmatized individuals), and structural (e.g., societal-level enactment of stigma, discriminatory policies; (Hatzenbuehler, 2017). In the current study, we focused on the interaction and impact of individual and structural levels of stigma on sexual minority women and transgender individuals in the context of the 2016 presidential election outcome. Our findings suggest that sexual minority women and gender minorities view the results of the election, and the threat of heightened structural stigma, as having resounding effects on their perceived safety, civil rights, and psychological and emotional well-being. Moreover, participants raised concerns about the normalization of discriminatory beliefs and actions along with rollback of rights that appear to disproportionately target marginalized groups. Some worried that this foreshadowed the administration codifying their discriminatory beliefs into discriminatory policies. Participants also worried that rollback of progressive policies protecting civil rights would reify discriminatory behaviors and attitudes. In tandem, this normalization and the threat of rollback of rights were seen as having sizable deleterious effects on participants' worldviews, their sense of their place in the world, and their sense of safety and well-being. Above and beyond fear for themselves, participants were often profoundly aware of their own personal privilege and worried for the safety and well-being of other marginalized and stigmatized groups, particularly those with multiple marginalized identities.

Across studies, and across marginalized identities, stigma has been linked to negative outcomes such as poorer mental and physical health, lower social status, higher likelihood of poverty, and decreased access to education, jobs, and housing (see (Major & O'Brien, 2005) for a review). Being a member of a stigmatized group marks an individual as being different and devalued (Major & O'Brien, 2005), and members of stigmatized groups are well aware of this devaluing by the dominant culture and the stereotypes associated with their group. This sense of stigma threatens identity through marginalization and devaluation, and increases risk of exposure to stressors.

Stressors differ in the amount of threat they pose to an individual and the larger group, and the level of threat, as well as the effects of the stress from the threat, differs depending on an individual's characteristics (e.g., stigma sensitivity, level of identification with the stigmatized group, goals and motives) and their appraisals of the stressor (Major & O'Brien, 2005). To cope with the stressor, individuals may disengage, blame themselves, or de-identify with the marginalized group (Major & O'Brien, 2005). Coping with a stigmatized identity taxes emotional regulation and coping skills, which in turn leads to poor psychological health outcomes and greater risk of

engagement in negative health behaviors (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, & Link, 2013).

Indeed, participants in this study reported high levels of psychological distress such as sadness, depressed mood, anxiety, and high levels of stress and vigilance. Our quantitative findings suggest that those with multiply marginalized identities may be experiencing the highest levels of stress and concern after the election. For example, although levels of personal concern were high among all groups, fear for safety among gender non-conforming participants and anxiety among Latinx participants were more elevated. Intersectionality theory would suggest that multiple, intersecting forms of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, bi/homophobia, islamophobia, xenophobia) might synergistically increase risks (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016; Ferguson, Carr, & Snitman, 2014; Lincoln, 2015; Moradi & Risco, 2006; Moradi et al., 2010). More research is needed to longitudinally track the impact of political and social climate on psychological and emotional reactions to see if they abate or increase over time, and whether these emotional reactions are associated with risky behaviors, such as drinking heavily as a method of coping.

Stigma and homophobic/transphobic hate crimes emanate from sexist beliefs (both cultural and individual) and target those who do not conform to stereotypical gender roles (Levy & Levy, 2016). Although some participants reported feeling the need to conceal their identities—even from family members—in order to be safe, others noted a desire to be more “out” and to openly defy or challenge hegemonic gender roles as a form of resistance. Notably, our quantitative findings indicated that participants were less concerned overall about how the election would affect their sexual and/or gender identity, rather concerns centered predominantly on others' reactions and possible external threats. Longitudinal research is needed to determine whether, over time, sexual and gender minorities' sense of comfort with their sexual/gender identity changes in the face of higher levels of structural stigma and potential changes to protective policies, and whether the resulting stigma becomes internalized over time (Hatzenbuehler, 2009).

One of the overarching concerns among study participants was that the results of the election would provide discursive opportunities that support hate, discrimination, and stigma against marginalized and minority groups. In research comparing the effects of homophobic attitudes between the USA and Canada, among people in the USA, those with high levels of homophobia reported feeling as though their views and actions were in some way sanctioned by the US culture (Levy & Levy, 2016). In contrast, in Canada those with high levels of homophobia had concerns about how they would be perceived due to their beliefs, and were less likely than those in the USA to act on their biases. This suggests that in a culture of equality and lack of tolerance for hate and discrimination, there may be a lower likelihood of discriminatory acts (Levy & Levy, 2016). More research is needed to examine the

interaction over time between the discourse and policies from the presidential administration and attitudes toward LGBTQ people in the USA.

### Limitations

This study is among the first to examine the effects of the United States 2016 election on LGBTQ individuals, and more broadly the perceived effects of the social and political climate. Nevertheless, there are several limitations that should be considered when evaluating results of the study. First, this sample focuses on SMW and transgender individuals. Although these groups have received far less attention in research compared to other sexual minority groups, they do not represent the full spectrum of LGBTQ individuals. For reasons delineated in the introduction and because our research team's program of research centers primarily on SMW, the sample did not include cisgender heterosexual men and women, nor did it include gay and bisexual men. Future research could include a broader sample to permit examination of the differential effects of the 2016 election by sexual identity and sex/gender, particularly among those with multiple minority or stigmatized identities who may be at differential risk or may have unique coping resources. Second, this study relied on a convenience sample, which limits generalizability of the findings. Third, despite attempts to recruit a diverse sample, the majority of study participants were White and well-educated. It is possible that our recruitment strategy, which occurred solely online, contributed to this as in-person recruitment has been found to be a better mode for recruiting sexual and gender minority people of color (DeBlaere, Brewster, Sarkees, & Moradi, 2010; Durso & Gates, 2013; Reisner et al., 2014). Further, our sample's higher levels of education may have influenced voting patterns and perceptions of the Trump presidency. Future research using other non-online based recruitment methods may help to increase sample diversity. Fourth, when advertising the study, our description indicated that we were interested in learning about perceptions related to marriage equality as well as about the recent presidential election. This description may have led to a biased sample as those who had strong feelings about the election may have been most likely to respond, potentially leading to an overestimation of the effects of the election. Fifth, at the time of the survey, there were no existing measures of effects of the election. Thus, the measures used in this study have not been validated; future research is needed to develop robust measures of these types of event impacts. Sixth, the current study reports on perceptions of the anticipated impact of the election. More research is needed to determine the actual effects of the new administration and its policies. Finally, this is a cross-sectional study, and longitudinal data are needed to examine the impact of socio-political changes over time.

### Conclusion

Findings from this study document profound concerns about increases in stigma and marginalization of sexual minority women and gender minorities after the 2016 presidential election. LGBTQ people are already impacted by high levels of mental and physical health disparities and face continued state-level attempts to reduce rights and institutionalize discrimination (Wang, Geffen, & Cahill, 2016). For many in this study, the results of the election ignited or exacerbated fears that marginalized groups would experience a rollback of rights and the legitimization and normalization of hate. Participants described feeling fearful and anxious; some reported feeling so stigmatized that they felt they had no place in the USA; and some felt as though the meta-message was that they ought not exist at all.

Lewis (2016) suggests that for marginalized groups, under new external sources of stress, the trauma from marginalization at earlier times may become re-activated. When the negative rhetoric and attitudes toward LGBTQ individuals are promulgated by one's own local environment or community, the effects may be more severe, perhaps particularly when this occurs at a time when attitudes seem to be improving (Lewis, 2016). This suggests the need for prevention and intervention strategies to ensure that marginalized and minority populations have support and effective coping tools to weather potential increases, or perceptions of increases, in stigma, and to prevent such perceptions from becoming internalized and increasing risks for poor psychological outcomes and for engaging in unhealthy behaviors. Findings from this study also underscore the critical importance of both federal and state policies that protect the civil rights and safety of sexual and gender minorities.

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### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflicts of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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