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Pursuing Recognition: LGBTQ+ Academic Couples' Experiences of Visibility in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article explores the problematics of visibility and recognition for LGBTQ+ academic couples. Despite important strides to secure rights for gender and sexual minorities and to promote more inclusive academic workplaces, intolerance and discrimination persist. Drawing on interviews with LGBTQ+ couples at U.S. institutions, we find that such scholars actively engage in visibility maintenance with respect to their institutions, colleagues, students, and the job market. Visibility maintenance occurs through internalizing hyper-awareness of others' potential biases and preemptively comporting oneself to mitigate undesired responses. We argue that while selective invisibilities may serve strategic purposes for LGBTQ+ couples, such configurations also mask fundamental incompatibilities between individuals and institutions. Only by fostering deeper forms of recognition can academic workplaces achieve inclusivity that respects members in their full complexity.

Keywords

academic couples, LGBTQ+, paradox of exposure, recognition, torque

Despite progress in increasing the representation of marginalized groups in academia over the past few decades, those advancements are clearly fragile achievements that are under increasing attack (Budnick, Pao and Velasco 2025). LGBTQ+ faculty in particular can face both subtle and overt forms of discrimination (Eliason 2023), particularly at more conservative or religiously affiliated institutions (Hughes 2019). Among other things, faculty may feel compelled to regulate how, to what degree, and to whom they disclose their identities, either out of fear of discrimination and reprisal or out of a desire to maintain social harmony (LaSala et al. 2008; Veldhuis 2022). A sense of identity friction, or what Bowker and Star (1999) refer to as *torque*, may be especially pronounced for LGBTQ+ faculty who are partnered with other academics. Whereas most academic couples face challenges in managing their collective careers in an increasingly tight job market (Sallee and Lewis 2020), LGBTQ+ couples must also navigate social and organizational contexts that may be prejudiced against them because of their relationships (Fowler and Depauw 2005). Understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ academic couples can provide insight into the tensions between individual identities and institutional cultures, which are tensions that may be exacerbated in a political climate increasingly hostile to marginalized groups. This article contributes to the literature on sexuality by drawing attention to

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persistent forms of institutional antagonism to sexual and gender minorities in higher education.

In this article, we focus on the experiences of LGBTQ+ academic couples in the United States through the lenses of visibility and recognition. Whereas visibility is an ambivalent condition that may facilitate either unwanted or desired exposure, recognition often signifies a positive alignment between individual identities and institutional cultures. Drawing on semistructured interviews, we describe how LGBTQ+ academic couples have navigated shifting legal frameworks of recognition over time, employment barriers on the job market, and hostile institutional climates in their academic workplaces. Given the challenges they have faced, we show how these couples engage in what we call *visibility maintenance*—a process of internalizing hyper-awareness of others' potential biases and preemptively comporting oneself to mitigate undesired responses. We argue that while selective invisibilities may serve strategic purposes for LGBTQ+ couples, such configurations also mask fundamental incompatibilities between individuals and institutions. We conclude by reflecting on the torque generated by these institutional and identity frictions and advocating for more inclusive environments in the face of rising intolerance.

Exploring Visibility and Recognition

Within the literature on LGBTQ+ faculty, a commonly expressed idea is that of in/visibility, discussed in relation to how much one can and does conceal or express one's sexual or gender identity. The decision to disclose one's sexual identity, known more colloquially as "coming out," approaches the issue of visibility as both a personal and a political act (Prock et al. 2019), with risks of "exclusion, harassment, and career setbacks" for faculty and graduate students in higher education (Reggiani et al. 2023:70). With respect to LGBTQ+ academic couples, these risks might be compounded, such that unwanted exposure could have negative consequences for both members of the collective unit (Rupp and Taylor 2005). Nonetheless, visibility is an essential part of recognition, which Brighenti (2010:176) characterizes as providing "access to social existence," whether in the eyes of institutions, individuals, or both.

Recognition itself is a contested concept in critical social theory. To describe efforts at achieving multicultural social inclusion in the early 1990s, Taylor (1992) advocated for a "politics of recognition" that would accommodate and integrate cultural difference. Honneth (2021:25) similarly has argued for a form of "normative" recognition, which would lend itself to legal application by "granting somebody a certain status, entitlement, or right." Recognition from these vantage points operates "optimistically" in the register of affirmation, as a way of fostering the autonomy of the other through their incorporation into dominant sociopolitical structures (Ikäheimo, Lepold, and Stahl 2021).

In contrast, other theorizations of recognition have emphasized how "it takes away the freedom of those whose autonomy it purports to acknowledge" (Ikäheimo, Lepold, and Stahl 2021:3–4). In this vein, Butler draws attention to both the conditions that undergird recognition and the power relations inherent in such acts (Butler 2021b). Butler explores how "recognizability," which has historically not been afforded to those subject to systems of gender and racial exclusion, acts as a precondition for recognition: "To understand the epistemological conditions under which the differential production of the human takes place, or the differential production of the subject, we have to first understand that nexus of power and knowledge that constitutes various fields of recognizability" (Butler 2021a:63). Thus, while legal or normative recognition may serve important ends, a broader view of recognition would also attend to underlying conditions of exclusion and would confront the inherent performances of unequal power in expressions of "recognition" (Butler 2021b, see also Wong 2025). For Butler, while recognition is linked to ideology, it also exceeds ideological constraints and throws subjects into mutually constitutive relations where "the one who grants recognition is in need of being granted recognition, so that 'one' is never exclusively active; it seeks to grant moral value at the same time that its own moral value has to be granted" (Butler 2021b:51). Recognition in this formulation is premised on intimate relations of interdependency.

Visibility occupies a complicated and paradoxical relationship to recognition, especially for marginalized groups. Brighenti (2007) relates how visibility can render subjects vulnerable to control or it can foster empowerment through forms of sociality and legal integration. This contradiction can be explained by the broader concept of "paradox of exposure," defined as "the double bind that places those who stand to significantly gain from being counted in the most danger from that same counting (or classifying) act" (D'Ignazio and Klein

2020:105). D'Ignazio and Klein give the example of undocumented immigrants to illustrate this situation: if undocumented immigrants claim their status in a census, this may open them up to prosecution, yet if they do not, then as an aggregate they will not benefit from the resources allocated according to the number of people living in a geographical region. The inverse of this dynamic may also be true: vulnerable groups opting for opacity to evade unwanted scrutiny and violence, such as transgender people, may be maligned as being deceptive and subject to amplified forms of marginalization and exclusion (Beauchamp 2019; Blas 2018).

For LGBTQ+ faculty, as our study demonstrates, masking a core part of their identity may engender affective strain in institutional settings, yet visibility can also carry the risk of exposure to discrimination and harassment, both from students and colleagues (Eliason 2023; Prock et al. 2019; Reggiani et al. 2023). Visibility can also spark negative career consequences for LGBTQ+ workers, manifesting, for instance, as a "lavender ceiling" that presents barriers to "recruitment, retention, and promotion of openly gay and lesbian people" (see also Bullard 2015; Swan 1995:52). Bowker and Star's (1999) concept of torque aptly describes situations of such personal and institutional friction, where one's biography and institutional classification, when severely mismatched, can exert accumulated pressures and burdens on people who do not fit within normative categories. Studies on queer faculty in academia appear to confirm this, showing how heteroprofessionalism and cisheteronormativity lead to a "hostile obstacle course" for queer academics (BrckaLorenz et al. 2025; Burchell, Franz-Odendaal, and Joy 2022; Davies and Neustifter 2023; Veldhuis 2022) and frequently catalyze decisions to leave oppressive campus climates (Garvey and Rankin 2018).

Another paradox is the simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility of LGBTQ+ identities, where the identity of a faculty member can either be ignored, forcing them to come out multiple times, or they may be asked to "'tone down' their LGBTQ+ identities in order to better fit the academic environment" (Veldhuis 2022:963). This is particularly true for trans and gender nonconforming faculty, who may both feel like they are "spectacles" and are "ignored and forgotten" (Jaekel and Nicolazzo 2022:634). This can lead to LGBTQ+ individuals not "being seen" or having their identities acknowledged as a result of cis- and heteronormative institutional cultures (Dozier 2015). Similar challenges also exist for other groups who are visibly legible as Other, such as people of color (Eliason 2023). Forms of "intersectional invisibility" (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008) are also prevalent, where the people with multiple marginalized identities can elude some forms of oppression directed toward more prototypical outsiders but may also struggle to be recognized and represented. Pushing back on trends in intersectionality scholarship of trying to calculate which groups suffer more, the intersectional invisibility model emphasizes that many people who are "marginal members within marginalized groups," such as ethnic minority gay men or white lesbian women, can face forms of identity erasure and distortion (akin to torque) as others impose normative frames upon them (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008:381).

While some scholars of higher education argue that safeguarding LGBTQ+ visibility should be an institutional obligation (Reggiani et al. 2023), others question institutional recognition or policies directed toward marginalized populations as these may prevent "attempts at establishing more democratic strategies for queer inclusion" (Nadeau 2005:92). Even apart from conservative political backlash against programs designed to promote inclusiveness in organizations (Chin 2025; Monahan 2025), progressive scholars have worried that such initiatives are often performative, limited, and service-intensive for minoritized individuals (Eliason 2023). As Ahmed (2012:11) has found, diversity or equality policies, more broadly, can act as "non-performatives" that become a substitute for action: they can forestall substantive change while occluding the fact that it has not occurred.

Our study contributes to this literature by showing how engaging in visibility maintenance as an academic couple can introduce many points of friction for LGBTQ+ scholars. The broader literature on "dual-career" academics has highlighted various stigmas and organizational obstacles to successfully managing two careers, including having a partner's work discounted (Blake 2023; Culpepper 2024; Monahan and Fisher 2023; Wolf-Wendel, Twombly, and Rice 2003), being discriminated against by hiring committees (Rivera 2017), and encountering deficient institutional resources or a lack of clear policies for making partner hires (Monahan et al. 2024a, 2024b; Schiebinger, Henderson, and Gilmartin 2008). While there is a relative dearth of research on the experiences of LGBTQ+ couples, some studies have found that such couples face additional forms of bias in recruitment, exclusion from academic networks, and devaluation of their scholarship (Bilimoria and Stewart 2009; Fowler

and Depauw 2005; Gibson and Meem 2005; Nadeau 2005; Rupp and Taylor 2005). Our study not only echoes some of these earlier findings but also highlights the agency of LGBTQ+ couples in carefully navigating and selectively resisting forms of institutional opposition.

In the sections that follow, we explore how LGBTQ+ scholars in dual-career relationships manage the politics of visibility and recognition at their institutions and in their careers. We attend to the ways that institutional incompatibilities, such as those revealed by bias or discrimination, may foster experiences of torque that obstruct robust "recognition" of LGBTQ+ couples in the academy.

Methods

Our data are based on semistructured qualitative interviews with U.S.-located academics who were part of an academic couple. The research was reviewed and approved by the institutional review board at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Recruitment for interviews was made by drawing on a preexisting database of 1,764 respondents who participated in a national survey we conducted about academic couples and who indicated their willingness to be contacted for a future interview. To ensure geographic and institutional diversity, we used purposive sampling techniques to select informants for interviews (Patton 2015). We contacted a total of 207 participants by email, with 100 agreeing to, scheduling for, and completing an interview. Out of these 100 participants, 47 identified as women, 48 as men, and 5 as nonbinary or genderqueer. In terms of race and ethnicity, 41 participants identified as non-Hispanic White; 20 as Hispanic or Latino; 11 as Black or African American; 11 as Asian; 8 as multiracial; 4 as Middle Eastern or North African; 3 as American Indian, Alaska Native, or Hawaiian; and 2 as Black or African American and Hispanic. Most participants (55) were between the ages of 40 and 60, with 26 under the age of 40 and 19 over the age of 60. At the time of their interview, 77 participants were in a tenured or tenure-track position, and 24 were working in nontenure track academic jobs. Two participants who were recruited independently stated that they were partners.

From this complete sample of interviewees, we focus in this article on a smaller subset of 24 informants who self-identified as queer, gay, lesbian, trans, or nonbinary. This subset was composed of 7 people who identified as women, 12 as men, and 5 as nonbinary or genderqueer. The group was predominately non-Hispanic White (18), along with 1 who identified as Hispanic or Latino, 2 as Black or African American, 1 as Asian, 1 as multiracial, and 1 as Black or African American and Hispanic. When also accounting for the race and ethnicity of their partners, nine participants were part of couples that included at least one racial or ethnic minority member. Of the total subset of LGBTQ+ informants, 10 of them reported having children.

The research team iteratively developed an interview guide that drew upon the broader literature on challenges faced by academic couples. Although this literature is predominately based on studies of heterosexual couples, one of our primary goals for our research was to fill in the empirical record by including a range of LGBTQ+ interviewees and analyzing their specific experiences. Therefore, while we worked from a single interview guide for all participants, this guide was designed to elicit stories about the unique obstacles faced by those participants, their feelings about the job-search process, their decision-making practices, their assessment of outcomes, and their critiques of institutions. We also collected stories on people's career experiences over time to afford comparative perspective on how shifting legal, cultural, and institutional contexts affected those experiences. Through open-ended and follow-up questions, our interview process encouraged participants to reflect on ways that their identities or relationships inflected their interactions with—or experiences of—academic institutions.

Interviews were conducted between November 2023 and July 2024, either via Zoom or telephone, per the informant's preference. All informants were provided with an information sheet by email as part of recruitment, and at the time of the interview, they gave verbal consent to be interviewed and recorded. Each interview lasted about an hour and was recorded and transcribed in full. To protect informants' confidentiality, we stripped transcripts of identifying information and assigned pseudonyms.

To analyze the data, we first produced an initial codebook that corresponded to the questions in our interview guide. These codes concentrated on elements such as strategizing for the academic job-market, interviewing, negotiating, receiving mentorship, managing professional relationships, disclosing one's dual-career status, and managing personal relationships, among other codes. The themes of visibility and recognition were not initially part of the codebook; rather, these themes emerged organically through the coding process and were then applied to the data. At the conclusion

of each interview, a team member drafted descriptive memos to explore expressions of codebook codes and compare articulations across interviews. Following the memoing process described by Charmaz (2014), these memos were used to formulate analytic categories for our coding process and to construct meaning from our interview data more broadly. Next, all transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose qualitative software and coded with the project's provisional codebook. During this process, we noted areas where codes could be refined or expanded, and we developed and added new codes to fit salient elements not adequately captured by our codebook. Some of these new codes included elements such as experiencing stigma, manifesting emotional affect, and perceiving differential treatment (e.g., by LGBTQ+ identity status). One team member took the lead on coding the transcripts, while another member reviewed that work, refined or generated new codes based on excerpts, and deliberated with the other team member about changes to codes. While no disagreements remained after this process, a third team member was consulted in cases where there was ambivalence about which codes to grant primacy. All transcripts were then recoded by one team member to reflect additions and alterations. Reliability and validity were ensured through this rigorous, iterative testing and adjusting of codes to align them accurately with the data elements found in our interviewees' stories (Charmaz 2006; Corbin and Strauss 2015). Furthermore, all team members revisited the transcripts throughout the process to verify the accuracy of the analysis based on the data's specific qualitative context. Finally, team members produced a color-coded analytic table to visually represent the coded data and depict the preponderance of excerpts by code, along with illustrative examples from the interviews. This table was used to identify dominant themes to be explored more fully in this and subsequent papers.

Results

Interviews with members of LGBTQ+ couples illustrated how their pursuit of academic careers is subject to identity and institutional frictions—or torque—that stem from formal and informal politics of visibility and recognition. Legal frameworks, employment barriers, and hostile institutional climates each present durable constraints on the decisions LGBTQ+ couples make for themselves and their families. In the sections that follow, we explore how our informants navigate and make sense of these constraints and how they engage in practices of visibility maintenance to minimize experiences of torque and agitate for institutional change.

Contending With Shifting Legal Frameworks of Recognition

Legal frameworks are perhaps the most powerful generators of identity friction for marginalized groups because they can explicitly or implicitly assert that how one views oneself is invalid (Moore and Currah 2015). More than that, discriminatory legal frameworks frequently pair with cultural prejudices to erect boundaries to inclusion, often by depriving marginalized groups of access to resources or services or by criminalizing such groups for their very presence (Monahan 2017). In the case of LGBTQ+ academic couples, historical lack of legal recognition of their relationships compelled many to hide their sexual identities. As this section shows, even with increased rights for same-sex couples over the past few decades, many LGBTQ+ scholars described still needing to structure their life choices to obtain practical forms of legal recognition, when relevant, and/or to ensure their personal security.

Conditions for LGBTQ+ academic couples in the United States have notably improved since the early 2000s, starting with increased recognition and rights for LGBTQ+ couples and the first same-sex marriage in 2004 (Glass 2018). Our interviewees who had personally experienced such shifts in cultural attitudes, like Gale, described their experiences prior to the early 2000s in terms of their disempowered position as a couple within academia:

> I think the moral of our story is that there was a lot of homophobia. People didn't want to look at us because we were unmarried. There was no such thing as a national same-sex marriage. Different states had different attitudes toward us in general. We just didn't have any leverage. There wasn't a strategy for us in comparison to our heterosexual friends because I couldn't be a spouse. . . . And even though we felt committed to each other, we couldn't prove that we were because . . . there was no domestic partnership that we could take advantage of until [my partner] moved to California.

For Gale and others, the lack of legal recognition of their relationship created a clear disadvantage and

a sense of discrimination on the job market. In response, to manage their careers and relationship, couples in our study talked about different visibility-maintenance strategies they employed, ranging from staying in the closet to maintaining long-distance relationships for as long as 10 years because there were no opportunities for LGBTQ+ academics to be hired as a couple.

Between 2004 and 2015, at which point same-sex marriage was federally recognized with the Supreme Court's Obergefell decision (Nicolas 2015), legal eligibility of LGBTQ+ couples for partner-hire programs and employment benefits in certain states changed alongside wider cultural shifts toward inclusion. Informants who were working in academia during this transitional period described it as one of navigating restrictions and finding states that would recognize LGBTQ+ couples as domestic partners. Such a geographic patchwork of different legal standings created complicated situations. For instance, Jules told the story of having children with her partner in the mid-2000s and getting married in California in 2008, yet not having their marriage recognized in Florida, where they resided, until 2015. Others like Morgan and her partner tried to restrict themselves to states such as California that recognized their couple status, at least as domestic partners:

> When [my partner] moved here in 2014, we couldn't legally get married, but we could be registered domestic partners in the state of California. And at the time, most states didn't offer that. . . . So, when she moved here without a job, she could at least have benefits. . . . And when I was on the job market, there were certain positions that I applied to, and she [said], "Well, if that's the job you get, I won't follow you there." So, I was making decisions about my own career, thinking about my partner, but with some added complexities.

Morgan's experience illustrates some of the difficulties of job searches for LGBTQ+ couples at that time. In the absence of nationwide recognition of same-sex marriage and/or partnership, LGBTQ+ couples found themselves restricted to certain U.S. states. This meant both seeking academic positions in far-flung places that recognized their rights and eliminating institutions in less progressive states from their job searches.

The consequences of not being legally recognized as a couple also extended to accessing employment benefits that are available to different-sex couples. Even when they were hired at the same institution, some of our interviewees reported needing two separate healthcare plans and paying higher premiums because they could not take advantage of a family plan, sometimes even when they were married if those marriages were not recognized in the state in which they lived. For example, Jules explained how she and her partner had individual plans for a long time, with her partner's plan covering their children under the family plan but not her, because the state did not recognize their marriage. Increased healthcare costs resulting from lack of spousal or domestic-partner benefits are only part of the problem, however. Even though access to healthcare benefits has not been an issue for many married LGBTQ+ academic couples since 2015, concerns persist in the current political climate for those needing access to gender-affirming healthcare. Ashley, whose partner is trans, said that although a law to ban health care for trans people had not yet passed in their state, the possibility "impacts the choices that [they] make as marginalized academics" about where to live. Their visibility maintenance manifests as preemptive opting out of positions in places antagonistic to their identities or healthcare needs.

Before 2015, not being recognized as a couple at the federal level had additional consequences, especially for noncitizens or couples with children. For example, Frances explained how their foreign national partner who was on a temporary visa had to find a job in order to stay in the country because they could not legally marry. Consequently, Frances could not be "her route to citizenship." Because of these international and legal restrictions, the couple was forced to either live in two separate countries or have the partner take whatever job she could get in the United States to extend her visa. The choice of living together while one worked and the other searched for a better job was not a possibility for them.

Even with federal recognition of marriage equality, LGBTQ+ couples can face torque navigating bureaucratic systems when they have children. For example, the nonbiological parent may not automatically be recognized as the parent of the child, and the rules may change from one state to another. As Morgan explained:

> There are multiple states that I do not want to raise my children in as a queer couple with biracial kids. I'm not biologically related to my

> children. I'm on their birth certificate, which I can be in California, but many states I could not be. We've had to go through all this extra stuff. I have adopted my children as if I were their stepparent. We all have passports with . . . a hyphenated last name so that we have this claim to parentage over our children. And those are just all the things we've had to do to legally support the family.

Aside from the additional bureaucratic burdens of having to "adopt" one's children and change one's name, the realities of being an LGBTQ+ couple with children reduced this couple's options about where they could live and work. As an interracial family, they faced additional concerns about discrimination for them and their children.

These examples show lingering trepidation on the part of academic couples about their political and legal status. Such trepidation motivated cautious visibility maintenance to limit their collective exposure to potential harm. Some of the wariness of LGBTQ+ couples could be attributed to their previous experiences, but many expressed growing concern about how long the legal rights achieved could be kept in the face of conservative backlash. The increased visibility and recognition of LGBTQ+ couples have made them more vulnerable to harm from hate groups or Christian nationalist politicians (James 2023), which exemplifies the "paradox of exposure" discussed above (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020; Eliason 2023). These concerns also inflect job-market decisions. For instance, when Morgan was going up for tenure, she considered going on the job market but found only two jobs she would be willing to apply for because she did not want to move to certain places "if Trump [was] going to dismantle rights in the country." Her perceptions at the time of our interview prior to the 2024 election sadly presaged many of the policy shifts underway during Donald Trump's second presidency, such as retrenchments on rights for LGBTQ+ people, often justified through specious, disinformation-fueled moral panics about them (Monahan 2025; Shuster et al. 2025).

Perhaps the most concrete example of this backlash was shared by Marlee, a queer person of color who benefited from the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies at her institution through a target-of-opportunity program in the late 2010s. Specifically, she reported receiving threats and hate mail:

> This year [2024] in particular, it's pretty bad in the [state university] system, and I've been targeted directly as a result of it, because one of the things they're trying to cut with DEI is that target-of-opportunity hire program that I and my partner [were] hired through. And so, I've been targeted as [a] poster child for why DEI is so terrible and we shouldn't hire diverse people. So, [there is] just a lot of racism and sexism . . . being directed at me on social media and over email and sometimes physical mail, and it's just exhausting.

Marlee further noted that she had been considering what we would view as a protective mode of visibility maintenance because of these attacks: leaving academia. Her experience demonstrates both how visibility can be a liability—and possibly even dangerous—in hostile political and cultural climates and how such experiences could catalyze attrition in the academic workforce. Although backlashes against DEI programs and LGBTQ+ protections have not yet eroded the broader legal achievements of marriage equality and partnerships, institutional support structures are nonetheless vulnerable.

Facing Employment Barriers on the Job Market

Apart from considerations about uneven protections throughout the country, our informants also focused on the effects of local practices at colleges and universities. In particular, discrimination against LGBTQ+ couples in job searches was seen as stemming from the overarching heteronormativity of the academy, with the effect of creating insidious barriers to LGBTQ+ couples' career advancement. When confronting these obstacles, our informants detailed a range of voluntary compromises they made to achieve some degree of career stability, even if that meant delimiting their collective opportunities for career advancement or geographic mobility.

As practical forms of visibility maintenance, some of our informants described calibrating their understandings of institutional discrimination and altering their approaches to the academic job market based on their prior partner-hire requests. For instance, Lindsey related how her partner, despite being overqualified, was not granted a job interview at Lindsey's first institution, which she attributed to them being a lesbian couple. Lindsey recounted receiving resistance from her department, which left her disheartened about their job prospects:

> Not only didn't they interview her, but they came after me . . . because I [confronted them] and said, "I don't get what you're saying. I don't know why you would just decide out of hand that this person wasn't qualified." So, they kind of pushed back on me, like that was not something appropriate to say. . . . We'd had another kind of similar experience [at another institution] where [my partner] wasn't rehired for a teaching job, I think, because they got wind of the fact that we were a lesbian couple and they didn't like that. So, I think it made me sort of reticent to do anything like that [reveal our relationship status in the future].

As exemplified in Lindsey's remarks, experiences of repeated discrimination or hostility could curtail LGBTQ+ partners from advocating for each other in the future.

Especially at religious institutions, LGBTQ+ couples related a general lack of support for partner hires. For example, Gale was convinced that the resistance they and their partner experienced was because of the religious culture of their partner's institution:

> The reason that [her institution] didn't [support us] is that they are a very conservative Catholic university, and they were never going to give me an offer or her a counteroffer. . . . And so, they didn't recognize our relationship. They weren't ever going to partner-hire a gay couple. . . . So, we weren't competitive on the partner-hire circuit at all. It was just walls.

In this case, not being recognized as a couple affected their job opportunities by foreclosing partner-hiring mechanisms that were otherwise available to different-sex couples. Independent of the qualifications of these two faculty members, the fact that they were visible as a gay couple decreased their value to the religious institution, which meant that no recruitment or retention offers would be made.

Finding limited support for LGBTQ+ couples on the academic job market, many informants described needing to compromise by one or both of them accepting fixed-term or contingent positions. Also, by perceiving themselves as being limited geographically to maintain their relationship, they even chose to stay in what they perceived as undesirable jobs longer than they would have liked. For example, Hayden described a combination of different factors influencing their job-market decisions as an interracial gay couple: they each were hired right before the 2008 economic crisis into nontenure-stream positions at different institutions, but they were in the same region of the country and could continue to live together. When they interviewed elsewhere for tenure-track positions early on in their careers, they mentioned their academic partner and never received a job offer, perhaps—in Hayden's words—because of being a gay couple. Fearing that disclosure about their partner had cost them the job, they decided on the visibility-maintenance strategy of limiting their future job searches to their current geographic area and not negotiating for partner positions. Although Hayden's partner eventually got a tenure-track job, Hayden did not. Because of Hayden's disappointment with his career outcome, the couple was considering living apart to improve his career opportunities. While job-market challenges of this sort are experienced by many academic couples, this story emphasizes how experiences of marginalization can exacerbate the situation to negatively shape the job-searching activities of and career success for LGBTQ+ academics, especially when partner-status disclosure can be met with heterosexism in addition to general resistance to partner hiring.

When it comes to negotiating for positions, pay, and benefits, some woman-identifying, woman-presenting, and nonbinary couples perceived themselves to be at a disadvantage because of tenacious patriarchal norms. For example, Morgan mentioned that their combined income as a lesbian couple was affected by the fact that they were both women:

> Two women together actually are paying this pay penalty more than gay men. So, it's not to say I'm competing with gay male colleagues who also deal with heteronormativity and all that stuff, but they do, just by virtue of being men, potentially have more income power. So, there is potentially an additional burden placed on two women trying to navigate academia.

Morgan's comment points to a specific facet of visibility for LGBTQ+ couples in academia, where gender identity can lead to different results for different couples. To the extent that gatekeepers might view men as being "worthy" of better pay and resources, lesbians couples in academia may face additional forms of implicit bias that affect them materially.

In sum, this section has illustrated how LGBTQ+ couples' perceptions of institutional discrimination shape their views on the fairness of the academic job

market—in terms of job prospects and pay—and guide their future decisions. When such scholars see their chances of academic success and financial security limited by bias they face as a couple, this can lead to visibility-maintenance decisions to reduce future exposure, such as by not asking for partner hires, or to restrict possibilities for future mobility, either geographically or professionally.

Confronting Hostile Institutional Climates

The microlevel social environments of universities also play an important role in structuring the paradox of exposure. Tensions resulting from the visibility of LGBTQ+ couples in our study were discernable through their colleagues' and students' attitudes and behaviors. Our informants' experiences in this regard ranged from outright hostility to more subtle forms of discrimination that frayed their sense of fit in their institutions. To navigate such corrosive contexts, our informants described registering and adjusting to the biased views others had of them as being out of place, which informed how they managed their visibility.

The most striking examples of hostile workplace environments were direct instances of threats or bullying, such as when Killian was told in the mid-1990s that he would be fired for being gay. About a month before he left for another institution, one of his colleagues, who happened to know his partner, saw a letter addressed to the partner in Killian's office and asked about it. When Killian told him that they were partners, his colleague responded, "Well, it's good you're leaving because otherwise we'd have to fire you for moral turpitude." At that point, Killian was not in actual danger of losing his job given he was already leaving, but he left that exchange wondering whether his colleague was joking (other colleagues later told him he probably was not). This incident highlights the potential pitfalls of visibility—job loss or censure—particularly at times or places marked by intolerance (Pascoe 2011).

Other examples our participants gave about hostile institutional climates were more subtle, often manifesting as forms of nonrecognition. Nonrecognition can be an impediment to social integration, where the LGBTQ+ faculty are made to feel like they do not belong and/or their partnership is invalid. As Hayden described:

> I think that as a gay couple, we're very used to not being recognized as a couple, unfortunately, in academia. . . . It's gotten better over the years, but I think it's just something that still kind of comes up in our interactions in academic settings. My partner is at a Catholic institution, and it's very hard to be there and to be recognized as someone who does work on sexuality, but then has a [same-sex] partner and is also an academic. . . . So, there's a lot of microaggressions, leaving stuff out, or it's really more non-acknowledgment . . . than anything else.

Here, visibility is not just a case of being seen and accepted as an LGBTQ+ individual, but also of having one's relationship socially recognized. This situation may be unique for LGBTQ+ academic couples, whose bureaucratic and legal struggles to be recognized we covered above. Hayden's partner had two additional obstacles by working for a religious institution and studying sexuality. Religious institutions have a reputation for being hostile environments for LGBTQ+ individuals (Hughes 2019), and being an LGBTQ+ faculty member doing research on sexual minorities, which is often perceived of as dirty work (Littlejohn and Stone 2025), is reported to be a "doubly marginalizing" experience with negative mental health and career consequences (Veldhuis 2022).

Norm conflicts can also occur when LGBTQ+ couples find that they do not fit the expectations of other academics and students, especially for those embodying intersectional identities. As Cameron explained:

> What I'm realizing is that as a tenured, Black, gay, forthcoming scholar, this is something that many students and many academics aren't used to. They have to adjust and deal with their implicit and explicit bias. . . . And so it gets magnified because . . . with my classes, I'm probably the first person of color in a position of authority that will make the students jump. And some of them have a hard time with it.

Cameron defined the intersection of his identities as a teaching moment for his students and colleagues and framed his experience as empowering. Instead of acting from a position of vulnerability, he believed that others should confront their prejudices and adapt to him. Cameron's more secure position, however, could also be attributed not only to being tenured but also to what he described as the "rock star" status of his partner who was at a point in his career where he was in very high

demand, which afforded this couple institutional mobility if they desired it.

A sense of not fitting in also led some LGBTQ+ informants to conclude that they had to be more productive than "normative" academics in order to succeed. This is a sentiment shared by many marginalized populations (Masters-Waage et al. 2024), but Killian also viewed this as an intentional strategy for securing a job with his partner:

> Being with [my partner], I also knew that I had to make myself valuable. I had to make myself someone that they would want to hire because I knew I had this liability, . . . so I had to overcompensate for [it]. . . . Everyone's going to see me in a negative light. I've got to deal with the fact that people are going to just think the worst of me once they know that I'm gay, and I've got to just do twice as good as a regular person just to even be average.

It is revealing in this passage that Killian described his sexual identity—and the fact that he had a same-sex partner—as a "liability." As with the other LGBTQ+ informants quoted in this section, being visible as nonnormative can be seen as producing torque that affects these scholars' careers and work relationships. These are situations that they managed through visibility-maintenance approaches of acknowledgment and selective adaptation, such as by overcompensating for perceived liabilities in Killian's case or by asserting one's authority, as Cameron relates.

Leveraging Visibility Maintenance

Given the larger shifting legal frameworks for LGBTQ+ couples, employment barriers at U.S. colleges and universities, and hostile institutional climates in academia, navigating academic life as an LGBTQ+ couple clearly means managing one's visibility. For some informants, the most pronounced aspect of their visibility maintenance pertained to their decisions about whether or how to come out. Job searches have a way of bringing such disclosures to the fore. For instance, in reflecting on negative job-market experiences, Hayden shared:

> But to be honest, if somebody asked me now [about having a partner], . . . I might lie. I might say, "Well, I don't have a partner," which feels weird to me, but I just feel [I should] based upon my experience. . . . I mean, it seems silly to me that I should be afraid to mention my partner, [but] I just don't know how that might potentially be used against me.

For others, making a partner-hire request automatically placed their gender and/or sexual identity on the table, which might conflict with their preferred approach to visibility maintenance. Losing control over when and how to disclose one's sexual identity created the most concern when the institution was perceived to harbor heterosexist tendencies. This was the case for Ian, who was told by a department chair and dean at a religious university to hide his relationship during the job interview because both were fearful the university president would prevent Ian's hire should he find out.

Other couples engage in visibility maintenance to navigate the perceived hostility of the general political environment of the places where they live and work. This was the case for Jules and her partner who deliberately chose not to present themselves as a couple because they live in a conservative state in the South. The couple met after they had each obtained their academic positions, and Jules mentioned their discussions around whether to let colleagues know about their relationship, noting: "Basically, I've been with her for 25 years, but she has not attended a single university-wide event with me." Jules' case provides an example of how couples can decide to remain invisible even long after being employed at the same institution. Instead of outright denial, the strategy here was one of quiet omission.

In other cases, participants shared that opting for visibility was their preferred strategy during an academic job search. Unlike Hayden who considered lying about his partner, Evan thought mentioning his partner was the natural course of events in an interview because he "would feel very awkward going through a two-day visit and not talking about [his] kids and husband." Additionally, Evan asserted that disclosure helped him gauge the culture of the institution because it would be "clear at some point that we are gay, so if you get a horrible reaction, you know" it is not the right place to take a job. For others, like Morgan, coming out created a dilemma if she were asking for a partner hire. On one hand, she wanted to present her full identity to make sure there was a good fit with the institution, and on the other, she was conflicted about how that might shift the tenor of her interactions:

> Me talking about my partner is not going to help me, but me pretending I'm not queer is just not going to work for me at all. I don't want a job

> that doesn't want me. But the dual-career thing feels like you're asking someone to give you a big favor, not give you a job. So, I went into it thinking I need to get the job, and then the spousal hire is a thing you ask after you've got the job. So, I have to think about it that way and weighing what's the version of myself that I'm comfortable presenting, and I'm not going to pretend I'm not queer.

Morgan described a delicate balancing act of revealing her sexuality to be true to herself but postponing discussions of her partner so as not to disadvantage herself in the interview process. Although aspects of this balancing may be shared by all academic couples looking for jobs, LGBTQ+ couples bear a greater disclosure risk in the face of potential heterosexism. These articulations also underscore the unique challenges of navigating academic job interviews, where employers may be prohibited by law from asking questions about one's partner or family (U.S. EEOC n.d.), yet, in practice, candidates frequently field such personal questions. Conventional wisdom for academic couples is to avoid discussing their partners during campus visits, but there is disagreement in the literature on this point (Monahan and Fisher 2023; Morton and Kmec 2017), and candidates must disclose their partner status at some point (e.g., during negotiation) if they are going to ask for a partner hire.

For many couples, their struggles with visibility did not end with getting a job. Even when they were hired, and there were legally and institutionally recognized spousal benefits, these couples sometimes had to endure bureaucratic struggles to receive those benefits. As Morgan related:

> I talked to three different HR professionals, all of whom gave me completely wrong advice. . . . Three of them told me something different, and one of them even said to me in public in [front of] the whole waiting room, "It's just been a long time since I've had to deal with this." "Dealing with this" meaning, "you have a same-sex domestic partner." . . . So, I had to go to the union and file a grievance to get my partner added to my health insurance in compliance with the policy that was publicly stated on their own website.

In this example, getting employment benefits required insisting on recognition, pushing for individual rights, and invoking legal protections. Formal policies were insufficient because of manifestations of heterosexism, characterized acutely by staff resistance and incompetence.

Regardless of whether their personal experiences were negative, positive, or both, almost all LGBTQ+ couples in our study had stories of resistance to discrimination. They either tried to insist on individual rights for themselves and their partners, manage discriminatory policies, or join with others to achieve institutional solutions. Gale advised all couples to "not settle," saying, "These institutions do have money. . . . And if you're queer, push even harder because now we have rights." Although Gale's message was mostly about fighting an individual battle, other LGBTQ+ couples advocated for collective interventions at institutions. Jules remarked:

> That was something we spent a lot of time talking about, negotiating, with other gay couples. . . . We were one of about three [gay couples at the university], but we spent a lot of time with things like, . . . how [do] you deal with the fact that you're a married couple at a university that doesn't recognize you as a married couple? They don't even want to recognize you as a couple, frankly.

Organizing with other LGBTQ+ couples to share information and deliberate about tactics on the institutional level is one route to empowerment.

However, some of the more senior informants in our study pined for larger political movements. For instance, Killian told stories of his political activism in the LGBTQ+ movement in the 1990s and early 2000s and gave examples of how existing as a gay couple was a vital part of larger political struggles. In one case, he requested a spousal hire position for his partner, and because his colleagues in the department did not support this, they asked him to withdraw his request. Meanwhile, other gay faculty at the institution agitated for the vote because they thought it would mark a significant moment in the history of the university in terms of recognizing gay rights. He did insist on and ultimately lost that faculty vote, in which, he was later told, not a single person had voted for his partner's hire. Upon inquiring into the department's rationale for voting against it, he was informed that faculty members claimed the partner hire would disrupt the department's gender balance and that there might be opportunity costs that prevented them from hiring in a different priority area. Thus,

along with other common arguments against partner hires (Rivera 2017), department faculty could disguise their heteronormativity by appealing to the value of "gender balance" as a justification for why a job could not be extended to Killian's male partner. Overall, this story offers a compelling—albeit unsuccessful—example of how the personal and political can converge. Here, the personal decision to press for a partner hire became tied to the equal rights goals of a larger LGBTQ+ community at Killian's institution.

This section has emphasized the agency of LGBTQ+ couples in negotiating their visibility and strategizing for recognition, both individually and collectively. Visibility maintenance can be an important route for individuals to deal with the torque that results from institutional and identity frictions, but as we have seen, it can also be complemented by advocacy to alter unjust institutional policies and practices. Despite the asymmetrical power that academic institutions hold over their (prospective) employees, our participants illustrate how institutional cultures can be challenged or modulated through the actions and interactions of those within them.

Discussion

Our results show how the politics of visibility and recognition infuse the experiences of LGBTQ+ academic couples. Historically, the more senior couples in our study acquiesced to degrees of invisibility with respect to their sexual identities and their relationships. As Gale recounted, when couples had no legal recognition or rights, they also did not feel like they had any leverage to alter discriminatory systems, only to move to less oppressive ones in different U.S. states. The impulse or expectation to mask one's identity, however, also reveals the dominant heteronormative logics of academic institutions, which can oppress or marginalize those who do not fit the expected mold (Rosiek 2016). Visibility in such situations becomes risky, or paradoxical, in that degrees of personal affirmation could simultaneously foster discrimination. Given that even more junior scholars in our study also opted for visibility maintenance, or of delaying the timing and limiting the details of their disclosures, this illustrates ongoing frictions between LGBTQ+ scholars' gender and sexual identities and the norms of institutions of higher education, at least for academic couples.

These perceptions of identity and institutional tension find grounding in our informants' stories. On the institutional level, they expressed frustration with the obstacles they encountered to securing employment benefits for their partners and/or their children, with receiving criticism from administrators for making partner-hire requests, with having their options limited to precarious or geographically separate positions, and with explicit or implicit bias from religious and/or conservative institutions. These negative experiences can foster forms of identity censorship, as with the story told by Lindsey about being leery of revealing she was part of a lesbian couple during any future job searches or negotiations. Similarly, Jules related how she avoided judgment from conservative colleagues by never attending university events with her partner. These tensions manifested in other ways on the interpersonal level as well, such as with Killian's story of being told he could be subject to termination because of his same-sex relationship or with Hayden relating the nonrecognition his partner endures as a gay scholar specializing in sexuality studies at a Catholic institution. In response to such negative forms of visibility, LGBTQ+ couples relate how they must be substantially more productive than their non-LGBTQ+ academic counterparts to compensate for discrimination. They also feel compelled to restrict their job-search options to LGBTQ+ friendly regions or institutions, thereby potentially reducing their prospects not only for top academic positions but also, perhaps, any positions at all.

Even with advances toward marriage equality in the current milieu, the careful and deliberate actions of our informants reveal their heightened awareness of latent forms of discrimination. For instance, Morgan's story about her refusal to "pretend" that she is not queer but also not discussing her partner during interviews shows a cognizance of how negative visibility could be activated at any moment. The fact that one's gender identity could be viewed as recuperable by a heteronormative institution but that having an LGBTQ+ partner could be dangerous betrays heterosexist double standards applied to couples. As Nadeau (2005:94) explains:

> The reason that same-sex spousal hiring is so marginal is that it incidentally discloses in the most ready fashion what spouses are: a sexualized duo, a reality that is downplayed in spousal hirings involving heterosexual partners, while other considerations such as family rights are more likely to be put forward to justify such practice.

In other words, sex itself is conjured as part of the visibility of LGBTQ+ couples, but more than that, assumptions of sexual *deviance* are imposed upon queer relationships, making moments of disclosure

that much more threatening within heteronormative institutions.

Elements of intersectional invisibility add layers onto the challenges faced by some LGBTQ+ couples. Such invisibility can manifest in legal registers of nonrecognition, such as with Frances' partner needing to pursue less-desirable jobs just to remain in the country as a noncitizen (prior to the legalization of same-sex marriage) or with Morgan fearing threats to her standing as a parent without the legal protection of adopting her biracial children. If intersectional invisibility connotes a "general failure to fully recognize people with intersecting identities as members of their constituent groups" (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008:381), this can also be read as the placement of people into frames that do not fit their sense of self and which could result in violence to them. Along these lines, our informants' expressions of fear for their safety show an attunement to the ramifications of such misrecognition. For instance, the racist and sexist threats that Marlee received for being seen as a beneficiary of DEI programs impose an identity upon her that could increase her vulnerability to physical attack or institutional reprisal, but this misrecognition also depleted her preferred scholarly identity such that she was considering leaving the profession. When our other informants divulged their reticence to live in conservative areas of the country, these sentiments likewise betray an awareness that (in)visibility alone is not the only issue—it is how one is seen, by whom, and what the consequences are of that exposure.

These observations underscore the insufficiency of legal forms of recognition alone for actualizing inclusive workplaces for LGBTQ+ couples. Identity and institutional frictions continue to torque nonconforming bodies (Bowker and Star 1999), making their visibility both potentially empowering yet also severely limiting given sedimented forms of intolerance at academic institutions (Ahmed 2012). For these reasons, what Honneth (2021) has described as normative recognition places troubling emphasis on a right that is vouchsafed to a marginalized group. Deeper forms of recognition would instead require shifts in power relations, such that marginalized groups are empowered as subjects (Brighenti 2010) and groups come to see and respect each other on their own terms (Butler 2021a). As Butler (2021a:65) frames it: "The LGBTQ movement surely seeks to achieve legal rights, but a more radical transformation of our idea of life forms, modes of intimacy and association, and ways of loving and living as an embodied person in the world are equally important, if not more so." Given how academic institutions both reflect and respond to larger political discourses, many of which are increasingly stressing intolerance toward LGBTQ+ communities, the challenge of and need for working toward such recognition is pressing.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the problematics of visibility and recognition for LGBTQ+ academic couples. Although important strides have been made to secure rights for gender and sexual minorities and to foster more inclusive academic workplaces, forms of intolerance and discrimination persist. When individual identities and institutional cultures conflict, this can create a sense of torque or stress that impinges upon the well-being and career opportunities of marginalized groups. Lived experiences under torque are those of tension, of fighting to access basic rights (e.g., employment benefits for one's family) while also managing one's visibility from moment to moment, person to person. From this perspective, open visibility may position LGBTQ+ couples as incommensurable with—or a threat to—normative institutional life. Yet, invisibility may also serve as a form of coerced conformity that disqualifies such couples from the rights and privileges granted to heteronormative others. Working through this paradox of exposure calls for an acknowledgment of persistent, fundamental exclusions in academia and a move toward recognition based on relations of shared vulnerability and interdependency. Only by fostering deeper forms of recognition can academic workplaces achieve expressions of inclusivity that maintain respect for their members in their full complexity.

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