

The Social Development of Contingent Self-Worth in Sexual Minority Young Men: An Empirical Investigation of the “Best Little Boy in the World” Hypothesis

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Young sexual minority men might cope with early stigma by strongly investing in achievement-related success. Sexual minority men ($n = 136$) reported deriving their self-worth from academics ($d = 0.33$), appearance ($d = 0.33$), and competition ($d = 0.35$) more so than heterosexual men ($n = 56$). Length of early sexual orientation concealment predicted investment in these domains ($\beta = 0.19, 0.22, 0.24$) and an objective measure of stigma predicted the degree to which young sexual minority men sought self-worth through competition ($\beta = 0.26$). A nine-day experience sampling approach confirmed that investment in achievement-related domains exacts negative health consequences for young sexual minority men.

“Feeling like outsiders, they often remain peripheral to the peer groups that are so essential ... in helping them ... feel acceptable and accepted. Therefore, many are forced to become relatively free of reliance on peer approval and more reliant on their own internal resources.”

— Richard Isay, *Becoming Gay* (1996)

“Another important line of defense, the most important on a practical day-to-day basis, was my prodigious list of activities. ... No one could expect me to be out dating ... when I had a list of 17 urgent projects to complete.”

— Andrew Tobias, *The Best Little Boy in the World* (1976)

Over the course of early development, individuals learn from the social environment the standards by which their actions will be appraised (Goffman, 1963; Matsueda, 1992). The social environment communicates the behaviors that will garner esteem from others and the life domains in which it is safe to stake one’s self-esteem (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Social environmental influences on self-worth are strongest during childhood and adolescence (Twenge & Campbell, 2001). Depending on the specific expectations communicated through the social environments that one encounters across early

development, individuals will learn to maximize their self-worth by attaining success in domains such as work, academics, relationships, athletic skill, and appearance. However, the opportunities to maximize one’s self-worth are not evenly distributed across populations. Indeed, stigmatized individuals encounter restricted opportunities for fulfilling mainstream society’s expectations for esteemed and valued behavior—one of the relatively implicit, yet powerful ways in which social forces conspire to maintain social inequalities (Link & Phelan, 2001). In turn, these constraints have important consequences for the development of self-worth for members of stigmatized groups.

In this article we explore the social development of contingent self-worth among young sexual minority men

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(e.g., those who identify as gay or bisexual). Contingent self-worth refers to the beliefs that individuals hold about what they need to do and who they need to be to have value as a person; strong self-worth contingencies, especially when based on hard-to-attain standards, can have particularly negative consequences on interpersonal functioning and health (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). We extend previous research on this construct to test the “Best Little Boy in the World” hypothesis (Tobias, 1976), whereby young sexual minority men learn to deflect attention away from their concealed stigma through overcompensation in achievement-related domains. Although this hypothesis currently lacks empirical support, its central tenets are pervasive among contemporary clinical and personal accounts of gay male development (e.g., Downs, 2005; Isay, 1996; Monette, 1992; Sullivan, 1998; Tobias, 1976). In line with the opening quotation by Andrew Tobias, we explore the extent to which young sexual minority men respond to their devalued social position by investing their self-worth in achievement-related areas that are more easily guaranteed and controlled, compared to peer and parental, or even God’s, approval. Second, we examine whether early exposure to highly stigmatizing social environments and a period of lengthy concealment predict young sexual minority men’s investment in these domains, as reflected in the opening quotation by Richard Isay. In addition to empirically evaluating these hypotheses, we examine the social and health consequences of staking self-worth on these particular domains and discuss ways in which research with sexual minorities offers a critical test of the generalizability of existing contingent self-worth research.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON STIGMA AND CONTINGENT SELF-WORTH

By communicating that some subgroups of people are unequal to others, the social environment constrains certain individuals’ opportunities for seeking self-worth (Link et al., 1989). To maintain self-worth in the face of inequitable environments, stigmatized individuals might adaptively shift away from investing their self-worth in domains in which external validation is traditionally precarious for members of their group, or compensate for social devaluation by staking their self-worth in those domains that afford more assured success (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

In fact, previous research has shown that members of other stigmatized groups selectively value some domains over others for providing self-worth. Compared to members of other racial and ethnic groups, for example, Black college students on predominantly White campuses are more likely to derive their sense of self-worth from God’s

love and less likely to base their self-esteem on others’ approval, success at competitive tasks, and family’s love than White and Asian American students (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003; Wolfe, Crocker, Coon, & Luhtanen, 1999; Ziegler-Hill, 2007). In this case, disengaging self-worth from others’ approval seems to be a functional adaptation to potentially stigmatizing social environments. Indeed, Black students are less likely to report feelings of worthlessness after imagined social rejection than White students, with differences in basing self-worth on others’ approval accounting for this racial difference (Wolfe et al., 1999).

However, disengaging self-worth from certain domains may come at a cost in terms of diminished mental health and life chances. For example, African American students are also less likely to base their self-esteem on academic competence than White students (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001), with negative, potentially long-term, consequences for health and well-being. Although shifting self-worth to be more contingent on assured domains can protect self-esteem, the necessity of this shift for stigmatized individuals and the energy necessary to manage it might possibly drain mental well-being through depleting self-regulatory capacity (Crocker, Brook, Niiya, & Villacorta, 2006).

STIGMA CONCEALMENT AND CONTINGENT SELF-WORTH

Social pressures to downplay one’s stigma may be one of the primary routes through which stigma impacts the self-worth of all stigmatized populations (Yoshino, 2006). For individuals with a concealable stigma in particular, the option of stigma concealment creates a compromising predicament stemming from the ambiguity of social situations if one’s stigma remains hidden and the threat of rejection if it becomes known (Crocker & Major, 1989; Pachankis, 2007). As a result, possessing a concealable stigma can lead to heightened reliance on others’ opinions to guide disclosure decisions—psychological burdens largely evaded by those with a visible stigma (e.g., Frable, Blackstone, & Scherbaum, 1990; Smart & Wegner, 1999).

Young sexual minority men hide an awareness of their sexual orientation across most, if not all, of adolescence. In a sample of 542 sexual minority youth, the average sexual minority male recognized an awareness of his same-sex attraction at age 10 and waited until around age 17 to disclose his sexual orientation (D’Augelli, 2002), a time span that has been closely replicated in many studies of sexual minority youth (e.g., D’Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Sexual orientation concealment for many young sexual

minority men is positively related to fears of negative evaluation (Pachankis & Goldfried, 2006) and has been shown to impair many domains of well-being, including mental health (Beals, Peplau, & Gable, 2009; Frable, Platt, & Hoey, 1998; Frost, Parsons, & Nanin, 2007; Pachankis & Goldfried, 2006), social support (Beals et al., 2009; Potoczniak, Aldea, & DeBlaere, 2007), immune functioning (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, Visscher, & Fahey, 1996), and health-related behaviors (Pachankis, Westmaas, & Dougherty, 2011). Yet these studies have conceptualized concealment as a matter of degree measured after an individual has disclosed or “come out” to at least one other person. Consequently, very little is known about the consequences of entirely concealing one’s sexual orientation across an essential part of early development.

Across development, individuals come to validate themselves through receiving the validation of others (Chen & Boucher, 2008). Therefore, if a person hides a stigma for many years as a result of perceiving rejection from the social environment, he or she can never be certain whether his or her entire self, stigma and all, will be acceptable to others (Jourard, 1971). Given this uncertainty of interpersonal validation, individuals who hide a stigma might preemptively disengage from seeking self-worth from others or invest more heavily in achievement-related success, from which self-worth is more readily garnered. Unlike individuals with a visible stigma, individuals who hide a stigma starting at an early age cannot access the support, love, and approval available from similarly stigmatized others, including peers, parents, and other family members (Frable et al., 1998). This support, if gained, might otherwise offset the need to seek compensatory validation from achievement-related domains, such as school, appearance, and success at competitive tasks.

THE “BEST LITTLE BOY IN THE WORLD” HYPOTHESIS

Contemporary personal and clinical narratives of early sexual minority male identity development, starting with an autobiography by Andrew Tobias (1976) called *The Best Little Boy in the World*, consistently note that completely concealing one’s sexual orientation to avoid rejection from others in early life can produce an over-compensation in achievement-related domains, where success and validation can be guaranteed in the event that others discover and reject one’s sexual orientation (e.g., Downs, 2005; Isay, 1996; Monette, 1992; Sullivan, 1998). For example, noting sexual minority youths’ tendency to mask their stigma by investing in achievement-oriented esteem, Downs (2005) stated in his book *The*

Velvet Rage, “We survived by learning to conform to the expectations of others. ... What would you like me to be? A great student? ... The first-chair violinist? ... How would we love ourselves when everything around us told us that we were unlovable?” (pp. 15–16). This notion of avoiding discovery through achievement in domains such as academics is captured in several other personal narratives. Monette (1992) wrote in *Becoming a Man*, “With a shudder of revulsion I shut the final door ... letting no one touch me for the next five years. I was sure I could live without it. ... I grew more invisible every day. I buried myself in books” (p. 78). Yoshino (2006) expressed a similar sentiment in *Covering*:

I sensed these bodies knew other bodies the way I knew calculus or Shakespeare. ... I knew only I was asked not to be myself, and that to fail to meet that demand was to make myself illegible, my future unimaginable. ... On Saturday nights, I would sit in my cement-block dorm room with my face lit green by my IBM’s glow, agonizing not over women, or men, but line breaks. (p. 5)

Despite the ubiquity of the Best Little Boy in the World hypothesis in contemporary accounts of gay men’s social development, it has not been empirically tested. Uniting this hypothesis with theory and research on contingencies of self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001), the current study addresses this gap in the literature. We suggest that staking self-worth in achievement-related domains, such as academic competence, appearance, and skill at competitive tasks, represents a learned strategy for defending against stigma discovery and protecting self-worth in highly stigmatizing social environments. Competition, appearance, and academic competence represent achievement-oriented domains in that they involve striving toward a standard of success set by society that can be more easily attained and controlled through effort or skill, compared to parental support, God’s love, or others’ approval, which might be more elusive for those who possess a socially devalued trait frequently tied to immorality and deviance. Through shifting the relative weight given to various domains of self-worth, individuals have indeed been shown to maximize the esteem they garner, thereby protecting their self-image from deflation in precarious social environments where interpersonal approval is uncertain (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

THE PRESENT STUDY

We propose that a lengthy period of complete concealment of one’s sexual orientation in early development and growing up in highly stigmatizing social environments both exert a powerful influence on the domains through which young sexual minority men seek

self-worth. Because concealment removes a stigmatized individual from important sources of esteem (e.g., parents' love, peer acceptance), we hypothesize that the longer that one conceals his sexual orientation, the more likely he will be to invest his self-worth in achievement-related domains. For a person who conceals his sexual orientation across many years, these achievement-related domains can be more readily assured (e.g., academic competence, appearance, competitive tasks) than domains requiring the more precarious approval of others (e.g., family, God, close others) as these others may in fact reject the person upon disclosure. We also expect that young sexual minority men growing up in stigmatizing environments will invest more heavily in the more assured, achievement-related domains than those who grew up in less stigmatizing environments.

Consequently, the present study sought to (a) compare young sexual minority and heterosexual men on contingencies of self-worth; (b) establish whether a lengthy period of completely concealing one's sexual orientation across adolescence would predict self-worth contingencies among young sexual minority men; (c) examine the relationship between objectively measured societal stigma, in the form of state-level attitudes toward sexual minority individuals and the presence or absence of state-level policies negatively affecting sexual minority individuals, and self-worth contingencies among young sexual minority men; and (d) predict the behavioral and mental health costs of contingent self-worth in an ecologically valid way.

Hypothesis 1

We examined the domains in which sexual minority and heterosexual male college students seek self-worth, using a measure of contingent self-worth that has been repeatedly validated with college students (Crocker et al., 2003). Consistent with the Best Little Boy in the World hypothesis, we hypothesized that sexual minority men would be more likely than heterosexual men to report seeking self-worth from achievement-related domains. We expected to find the opposite pattern or no difference between young sexual minority and heterosexual men across those sources of self-worth that are more precarious for young sexual minority men by virtue of their social stigma, including family support, God's love, and others' approval. Given that striving in some domains does not necessarily accompany disengagement from other domains (e.g., Miller, Rothblum, Felicio, & Brand, 1995), one possibility is that rather than disengaging from interpersonal domains, a young sexual minority man might instead simply invest more heavily in relatively more assured achievement-oriented domains, a strategy initially enacted to guard against

the possibility that others might ultimately discover and devalue his sexual orientation.

Hypothesis 2

To test our theory that early concealment exacts a lasting toll on the domains through which self-worth is derived, we hypothesized a relationship between the number of years that sexual minority participants were aware of their sexual orientation yet concealed it from all others and the degree to which their self-worth is based on the three achievement-related domains. Specifically, we hypothesized that those who concealed their orientation for a longer span of time would be more likely to report contingent self-worth in academic competence, appearance, and competitive success.

Hypothesis 3

Given that individuals learn from the social environment the standards by which their actions will be appraised (Goffman, 1963; Matsueda, 1992) and that social contexts vary widely in the degree to which they stigmatize sexual minority individuals (Hatzenbuehler, Keyes, & Hasin, 2009), we predicted that young sexual minority men who spent their adolescence in social environments that were objectively less supportive of sexual minority individuals would be more likely to report seeking self-worth in more assured, achievement-related domains than those who grew up in more objectively supportive environments, consistent with the Best Little Boy in the World hypothesis. Based on recent research examining the impact of objective stigma on the mental health of sexual minority individuals (e.g., Hatzenbuehler et al., 2009; Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, Keyes, & Hasin, 2010), we characterized objective stigma as (a) environments containing supportive attitudes toward gays and lesbians and (b) the presence of policies that protect or communicate equality for sexual minority individuals in the U.S. states where sexual minority participants were living at the time they entered adolescence and, on average, first became aware of their sexual orientation.

Hypothesis 4

Although shifting domains upon which one bases his or her self-worth can be an adaptive social strategy, recent research suggests that seeking self-worth through success in certain domains can be maladaptive for health. Striving for self-worth in certain domains (e.g., appearance, competitive success) may deplete the self-regulatory capacity necessary for health and produce tension, pressure, and general emotional distress given the energy required to

assure success and self-esteem from these demanding pursuits (Crocker et al., 2006; Niiya, Ballantyne, North, & Crocker, 2008). We therefore used a 9-day daily diary approach to track the interpersonal and health costs associated with achievement-related contingent self-worth. Behavioral correlates of contingent self-worth have been shown to be largely specific to contingent self-worth domains (e.g., disordered eating is specific to appearance-based contingent self-worth; Crocker, 2002b; Niiya et al., 2008). Expanding the list of outcomes examined in previous research, we hypothesized that appearance contingent self-worth would predict unhealthy eating behaviors, academic contingent self-worth would predict cheating on academic tasks and spending time alone, and competition contingent self-worth would predict dishonesty and arguing with others. Given that achievement-oriented contingencies of self-worth have been repeatedly found to be associated with negative mental health outcomes, such as depression (Crocker, 2002a; Sargent, Crocker, & Luhtanen, 2006), we also expected that all three domains of contingent self-worth on which sexual minority men were expected to more strongly invest would predict daily emotional distress.

METHOD

Participants

Sexual minority and heterosexual men ($n = 195$) younger than the age of 29 who were enrolled as full-time students at large public and private universities participated in this study. We used publicly available data to determine the largest colleges and universities by full-time undergraduate enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Forty-five of these universities listed publicly available and active e-mail accounts for their lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) student group. Sexual minority participants ($n = 136$) responded to an e-mail sent to the listservs of LGBT student groups on those campuses advertising the study as an examination of the experiences of college-aged sexual minority men. Participants indicated their sexual orientation in response to the item, "What best describes your identity?" choosing from the following response options: gay; heterosexual; bisexual, but mostly gay; bisexual, equally gay and heterosexual; bisexual, but mostly heterosexual; queer; uncertain, don't know for sure.

Heterosexual participants from these same campuses who belonged to a political (e.g., College Democrats/Republicans), environmental (e.g., Environmental Alliance), or human rights (e.g., Amnesty International) group responded to an e-mail recruitment announcement sent to the listservs of those groups announcing a study examining the experiences of college-aged men. These

specific campus groups were chosen because they appeared to be the most similar to the LGBT groups in that they function to unite students based on shared social experiences or interests. Participants from these groups who, in the initial screening, indicated that they were not heterosexual were given the measures that included sexual minority-specific items, whereas all others were given the measures for heterosexual participants.

Three participants were omitted: one because he was the only participant to indicate being "bisexual, mostly heterosexual" and two because they indicated being heterosexual on the background assessment although they were recruited through LGBT groups and completed the sexual minority-specific background measures. No participants indicated their sexual orientation as "uncertain, don't know for sure." Participants who indicated being "bisexual, but mostly gay" ($n = 18$), "bisexual, equally gay and heterosexual" ($n = 1$), and "queer" ($n = 5$) were included in the sexual minority group and retained in all analyses. In the final sample, the participants' mean age was 20.56 ($SD = 2.13$). The distribution of races and ethnicities among the sample was as follows: African American/Black ($n = 7$), Caucasian/White ($n = 140$), Hispanic/Latino ($n = 14$), Asian ($n = 19$), Native American ($n = 3$), Pacific Islander ($n = 1$), Caribbean ($n = 2$), multiple races or ethnicities ($n = 6$). Participants attended high school across 35 U.S. states and six countries other than the United States. Participants attended college in geographically diverse regions of the United States with the following geographic breakdown across the four primary regions (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998): Northeast (gay = 27.9%, heterosexual = 25.0%), West (gay = 10.3%, heterosexual = 7.1%), Midwest (gay = 30.1%, heterosexual = 44.6%), and South (gay = 29.4%, heterosexual = 21.4%). Sexual minority and heterosexual samples did not differ in terms of proportion of White/Caucasian participants, $\chi^2(1) = .60, p = .44$, age $t(190) = 1.42, p = .16$; relationship status, $\chi^2(1) = .004, p = .95$, geographic region; $\chi^2(4) = 4.56, p = .37$; or their university's admission rate, $t(190) = 1.08, p = .28$.

Procedure

The entire study was conducted over a 6-month period. After participants contacted the project coordinator expressing interest in the study, a research assistant reviewed the study protocol with them by telephone and asked them to sign an online consent form. After receipt of consent, the research assistant e-mailed the online link for the first day's questionnaires, which included measures of demographics, concealment, contingencies of self-worth, and peer rejection. Each participant was then told that he would also receive a link each evening for the next 9 days assessing the specifics of his day, which he was to complete before going to bed each night. A

research assistant reviewed the online data entries each morning to determine whether each participant completed the previous night's measures and contacted those participants who did not complete that night's measures to encourage them to continue completing the measures the following night. Upon completion of the study, each participant received \$5 for each completed day plus a \$10 bonus for completing all days.

Individual-Level Measures

Demographics. Participants were asked to indicate their age, country or U.S. state in which they attended high school, ethnicity or race, and year in school (i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, master's, doctoral). As an approximate measure of socioeconomic status, participants also provided their parents' annual income using the following response options: < \$9,999; \$10,000–\$29,999; \$30,000–\$49,999; \$50,000–\$99,999; > \$100,000; "I don't know."

Length of sexual orientation concealment. To calculate the number of years that participants concealed their sexual orientation from all others in adolescence, they were asked two questions previously used by D'Augelli (2002): "How old (in years) were you when you first became aware that you were attracted to people of the same sex, even though you might not have labeled these feelings?" and "How old (in years) were you when you first told someone for any reason that you were not heterosexual?" We calculated the number of years across which sexual orientation was concealed by subtracting participants' answer to the former question from their answer to the latter question.

Contingencies of self-worth. The Contingent Self-Worth Scale (Crocker et al., 2003) assesses the degree to which college students base their self-esteem on seven life domains: academic competence, appearance, competition, virtue, God's love, family support, and others' approval. Each domain is assessed with five items, yielding seven subscales. Example items from each subscale include "My self-esteem is influenced by my academic performance" (Academic Competence), "My sense of self-worth suffers whenever I think I don't look good" (Appearance), "Knowing that I am better than others on a task raises my self-esteem" (Competition), "My self-esteem would suffer if I did something unethical" (Virtue), "When I think that I'm disobeying God, I feel bad about myself" (God's Love), "When my family members are proud of me, my sense of self-worth increases" (Family Support), and "I don't care if other people have a negative opinion about me" (Others' Approval).

In the present study across sexual minority and heterosexual participants, the interitem agreement for each

subscale was as follows: Academic Competence ($\alpha=0.86$), Appearance ($\alpha=0.83$), Competition ($\alpha=0.89$), Virtue ($\alpha=0.82$), God's Love ($\alpha=0.96$), Family Support ($\alpha=0.81$), and Others' Approval ($\alpha=0.86$). Given that psychometric information regarding this scale has not previously been reported for sexual minority men specifically, we list the interitem agreement for each respective subscale for sexual minority participants only: 0.85, 0.78, 0.88, 0.80, 0.95, 0.80, 0.85. Previous research shows that a seven-factor solution, with one factor representing each of the seven self-worth contingencies proposed by Crocker and colleagues (Crocker & Wolff, 2001), represents a better empirical model than several alternative models, including a solution separating some clusters of contingencies from others (e.g., those that are internally derived, such as God's love, versus those that are externally derived, such as others' approval; Crocker et al., 2003). Thus, in the present study, we treat each factor as a separate variable in all analyses.

Covariates. We entered the selectivity of each participant's college or university as a covariate in relevant analyses using publicly available university admissions rates, given a possible relationship between this factor and contingent self-worth domains (e.g., academic competence, competition). To control for possible confounding between length of concealment and interpersonal rejection directed toward young sexual minority men as children, we entered peer rejection as a covariate measured with 10 items pertaining to peer rejection (Epstein, 1983) used in a previous study with sexual minority men (Landolt, Bartholomew, Saffrey, Oram, & Perlman, 2004). Example items include, "As a child, other children were always criticizing me" and "As a child, other children would often try to hurt my feelings." Cronbach's alpha for this scale for sexual minority participants was 0.93.

State-Level Measures

Given the fact that self-report measures of stigma and prejudice are potentially confounded with psychological health outcomes (Meyer, 2003), we created an objective measure of stigma embedded in the early environment by coding (a) the standardized sum of the presence of five state policies affecting sexual minority individuals and (b) the standardized sum of answers to eight questions regarding attitudes toward policies affecting gays and lesbians in the U.S. state in which each participant attended high school. Given the high correlation between these two indexes ($r = .61, p < .001$), we created one composite representing their mean.

State policies affecting sexual minority individuals. We summed the number of policies protecting sexual minority individuals, out of five relevant policies, for

each of the U.S. states in the year 2000, using publicly available information (Human Rights Campaign, 2010). These policies were constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage (absence of measure = 1), sexual orientation employment nondiscrimination laws (presence of law = 1), statutes recognizing sexual orientation as a protected category in hate crimes reporting (presence of statute = 1), nondiscrimination laws extending to sexual minority students and/or a statute banning bullying based explicitly on sexual orientation (presence of law or statute = 1), and statutes that do not restrict same-sex couples from adopting or make it difficult for non-married couples to adopt (presence of statute = 1). Previous studies have shown that similar measures of state policies are associated with mental health outcomes in LGB adults (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2009, Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010).

Attitudes toward sexual minority individuals. We used information from Lax and Phillips (2009) to estimate the public opinion toward sexual minorities in each U.S. state. Lax and Phillips aggregated responses from 41 national polls from the Roper Center's iPol archive, dating from 1999 to 2008. These polls, which were random national samples conducted by various organizations (e.g., Gallup, Pew), yielded approximately 80,000 responses. Policy-specific opinions were collected for the following areas: gay adoption, hate crimes, health benefits, discrimination in jobs and housing, marriage, sodomy, and civil unions (e.g., "Do you think there should be adoption rights for gay and lesbian couples?"). Authors provided a mean value for these opinions by state. We used the standardized mean as our measure of attitudes toward sexual minority individuals in each state.

State-level covariates. In analyses involving objective stigma, we controlled for median household income and population density in each state, which could potentially confound associations between objective stigma and contingent self-worth. We chose to include median household income and population density because individuals living in counties and states with lower median household income and smaller population density were more likely to oppose same-sex marriage in ballot initiatives between 2000 and 2008 (McVeigh & Diaz, 2009). Information on median household income and population density was obtained from the 2000 U.S. Census.

Daily Measures

To capture the behavioral outcomes predicted by contingent self-worth theory (e.g., Crocker, 2002b; Niiya et al., 2008), we measured the degree to which participants experienced negative affect and spent time alone each day and whether they cheated on their work, restricted their

food intake, consumed too much food, lied, or argued each day across 9 days.

Negative affect. We measured daily negative affect with the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Every day for 9 days, participants rated the degree to which they were currently experiencing each of 10 negative emotions (e.g., irritable, guilty, distressed) on a 5-point scale from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). The average Cronbach's alpha across days was 0.86.

Social isolation. Time spent alone was measured along a continuum (1 = *none of my time*, 5 = *all of my time*) in response to the question, "What proportion of your day was spent alone in private?" The intraclass correlation coefficient for this item across 9 days was 0.77.

Other behavioral outcomes predicted by contingent self-worth theory. To assess cheating, food restriction, food overconsumption, dishonesty, and arguing, we asked participants to indicate whether they had engaged in each of the following that day: "cheated on my work," "limited my eating in an unhealthy way," "ate more than I should have," "was dishonest about something important," "was dishonest about something minor," "argued with a teacher, boss, or other authority figure," "argued with someone that I'm close to." To reduce the number of analyses and therefore the potential for Type I error, we separately combined participants' scores on both eating items, both dishonesty items, and both arguing items, such that indicating neither of the two items = 0 and indicating either or both items = 1.

RESULTS

Data Cleaning and Preliminary Analyses

Fifty-six heterosexual men and 136 sexual minority men composed the final sample. One participant did not provide data for the Contingent Self-Worth Scale, four sexual minority participants did not indicate either the age at which they became aware of their sexual orientation or the age at which they first told someone that they were not heterosexual, seven sexual minority participants either did not indicate a state in which they attended high school ($n = 1$) or attended high school outside of the United States ($n = 6$) so that their state-level policies and attitudes were missing, and 19 participants indicated that they did not know their parents' annual income. Consequently, we estimated these responses as the mean of available responses for other participants of the same sexual orientation. To predict daily behavioral outcomes from contingent self-worth domains, we used hierarchical

linear modeling, which is robust against missing data at the day level. Still, 97.0% of sexual minority participants submitted at least seven daily entries for a total of 1,192 completed daily entries.

Participants indicated first becoming aware of their attraction to members of the same sex at age 11.06 ($SD = 2.99$) and first disclosing their sexual orientation to another person at age 16.51 ($SD = 2.71$). Therefore, participants concealed their sexual orientation over a mean of 5.44 ($SD = 3.34$) years across adolescence.

Between-Group Comparisons Across Contingent Self-Worth Domains

To compare sexual minority and heterosexual men on domains of contingent self-worth, we conducted analyses of covariance with each of the seven domains of self-worth contingencies as outcomes. We entered university admissions rate and ethnicity (coded as whether or not a participant indicated being White/Caucasian) as covariates given the association of these variables with contingent self-worth domains. University selectivity was significantly related to self-worth based on academic competence ($r = .16, p < .05$), and competition ($r = .16, p < .05$). Participants who indicated being a race or ethnicity other than White/Caucasian were marginally more likely to report basing their self-worth on God's love, $t(190) = 1.71, p = .09$, and appearance, $t(190) = 1.82, p = .07$, compared to White/Caucasian students. We also entered the income of participants' parents and participants' year in school as covariates. Although neither was significantly related to any domain of contingent self-worth, sexual minority participants were significantly more likely to report lower parental income, $t(192) = 2.68, p < .01$, and to be further along in their education than heterosexual participants,

$t(192) = 2.58, p < .05$. We also tested the relationship of age with our predictor and outcomes; because this factor was unrelated to both our predictor and outcomes, we did not enter age into our model.

Consistent with our hypothesis, univariate analyses of the main effect of sexual orientation across all seven contingent self-worth domains indicated that sexual minority men, compared to heterosexual men, reported self-worth that was significantly more contingent on academic competence, appearance, and competition—the three achievement-related domains. On all other domains, there were no group differences. The group means, standard deviations, and comparison statistics by sexual orientation and contingent self-worth domain are shown in Table 1.

Predicting Contingent Self-Worth From Sexual Orientation Concealment

To test our social developmental model of concealment and contingent self-worth among sexual minority men, we predicted the degree to which sexual minority participants seek self-worth from achievement-related domains based on the number of years that participants completely concealed their sexual orientation. Given our interest in the effects of sexual orientation concealment above other relevant factors that might impact contingencies of self-worth, we controlled for the effects of demographic factors, including socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and competitiveness of the college or university that participants attended, as well as childhood peer rejection. We also controlled for age given the positive association between age and length of sexual orientation concealment ($r = .34, p < .001$).

In each of these models, consistent with our hypotheses, length of concealment significantly predicted all three achievement-related self-worth contingencies,

TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Comparison Statistics for Contingent Self-Worth Domains
by Sexual Orientation

Variable	Sexual Minority ^a		Heterosexual ^b					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Appearance	4.90	.70	4.67	.67	1, 186	4.66	.03*	.33
Competition	5.60	1.05	5.23	1.12	1, 186	4.53	.04*	.35
Academic competence	5.94	.93	5.64	.90	1, 186	3.99	.047*	.33
God's love	2.76	1.87	3.18	1.87	1, 186	1.96	.16	-.22
Others' approval	4.20	1.40	4.11	1.35	1, 186	.17	.68	.07
Family support	5.32	1.05	5.42	1.12	1, 186	.32	.57	-.09
Virtue	5.31	1.05	5.24	1.12	1, 186	.16	.69	.07

Note. Group comparisons conducted with the following covariates: annual parental income, year in school, ethnicity (whether or not a participant indicated being White/Caucasian), and university admissions rate. Adjusted means reported.

^a $n = 136$. ^b $n = 56$.

* $p < .05$.

including academic competence ($\beta = 0.19, p < .05$), appearance ($\beta = 0.22, p < .05$), and competition ($\beta = .24, p < .05$; see Table 2). This effect was specific to achievement-related domains, as length of concealment did not significantly predict the four additional self-worth domains: God’s love ($\beta = 0.18, p = .06$), others’ approval ($\beta = 0.01, p = .95$), family support ($\beta = 0.01, p = .89$), and virtue ($\beta = 0.04, p = .69$).

Predicting Contingent Self-Worth From Early Objective Stigma

To examine the influence of the early objective stigma on contingencies of self-worth, we predicted the three contingencies of self-worth on which sexual minority participants scored higher than heterosexual participants from the presence of policies and attitudes toward sexual minority individuals in the U.S. state in which each participant attended high school. We predicted the influence of this objective stigma on self-worth, over and above other aspects of the states that may be related to the objective stigma surrounding gay youth, including general economic resources (i.e., median household

income) and population density. Objective stigma surrounding sexual minorities, scored with higher numbers indicating more support and less stigma, significantly predicted self-worth based on competition ($\beta = -0.26, p < .05$) but did not predict self-worth-based academic competence ($\beta = -0.06, p = .65$) or appearance ($\beta = 0.07, p = .59$; see Table 3). Consistent with our hypothesis that this effect would be specific to achievement-related domains, objective stigma did not predict self-worth based on God’s love ($\beta = -0.12, p = .35$), others’ approval ($\beta = -0.04, p = .77$), family support ($\beta = 0.13, p = .31$), or virtue ($\beta = -0.10, p = .44$). Objective stigma demonstrated a marginally significantly bivariate relationship with length of concealment ($r = .14, p = .10$), which dropped to nonsignificance in the context of our two state-level covariates.

Predicting Daily Outcomes From Contingent Self-Worth Domains

We used HLM v. 6.0 (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) to analyze our multilevel model of repeated measures nested within participants across 9 days. We limited our analyses

TABLE 2
Summary of Linear Regression Analyses Predicting Contingent Self-Worth Domains (Academic Competence, Appearance, and Competition) From Number of Years That Sexual Minority Participants Concealed Their Sexual Orientation

Variable	Academic Competence				Appearance				Competition			
	β	SE	t	p	β	SE	t	p	β	SE	t	p
Parents’ income	.07	.08	.73	.47	.03	.06	.34	.73	.09	.09	1.04	.30
Ethnicity ^a	.04	.18	.47	.64	-.12	.12	-1.34	.18	.00	.21	-.04	.97
School selectivity ^b	.18	.00	2.02	.04*	.11	.00	1.25	.21	.13	.01	1.48	.14
Age	-.09	.04	-.98	.33	-.08	.03	-.92	.36	-.08	.05	-.84	.40
Peer rejection	-.07	.09	-.76	.45	.11	.06	1.31	.19	.05	.10	.52	.60
No. of years concealed	.19	.03	2.04	.04*	.22	.02	2.35	.02*	.24	.03	2.56	.01*

Note. n = 136.

^aReference category is White/Caucasian. ^bCoded such that larger numbers indicate a lower admissions rate.

*p < .05.

TABLE 3
Summary of Linear Regression Analyses Predicting Contingent Self-Worth Domains (Academic Competence, Appearance, and Competition) From the Social Climate Toward Sexual Minority Individuals in the States in Which Sexual Minority Participants Attended High School

Variable	Academic Competence				Appearance				Competition			
	β	SE	t	p	β	SE	t	p	β	SE	t	p
Median household income	-.01	.00	0.08	.94	-.13	.00	-.86	.39	.27	.00	1.86	.07
Population density	.07	.00	.63	.53	.04	.00	.38	.71	-.03	.00	-.27	.79
Climate toward sexual minority individuals ^a	-.06	.15	-.45	.65	.07	.10	.54	.59	-.26	.17	-2.01	.04*

^aComposite of the standardized sum of state-level policies and sum of attitudes toward policies affecting sexual minority individuals, calculated such that higher scores indicate more support for sexual minority individuals.

*p < .05.

TABLE 4
Predicting Relevant Interpersonal and Health Outcomes From Contingent Self-Worth Domains

Predictor	Outcome	β	SE	OR	95% CI	t	p
CSW academic	Cheating	-.21	.12	.81	.64, 1.02	-1.81	.07
	Social isolation	.14	.05			2.58	.01*
	Emotional distress	-.01	.04			-.32	.75
CSW appearance	Problematic eating	.31	.15	1.36	1.01, 1.84	2.04	.04*
	Emotional distress	.06	.05			1.18	.24
CSW competition	Dishonesty	.24	.10	1.23	1.04, 1.54	2.37	.02*
	Arguing	.28	.09	1.32	1.10, 1.59	2.98	.00*
	Emotional distress	.07	.03			2.41	.02*

Note. $n = 136$. CSW = contingent self-worth; dichotomous outcomes were coded so that 0 = *did engage in the behavior today* and 1 = *did not engage in the behavior today*; OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval.

* $p < .05$.

to predicting relevant behaviors from those three domains of contingent self-worth on which sexual minority participants scored significantly higher than heterosexual participants (i.e., academic competence, appearance, and competition with others). Specifically, from self-worth contingent on academic competence, we predicted cheating and social isolation. From self-worth contingent on appearance, we predicted food restriction and overconsumption. From self-worth contingent on competition with others, we predicted dishonesty and arguing with others. Across all three contingent self-worth domains, we predicted emotional distress. Although cheating is a form of dishonesty, we found empirical evidence for at least a partial distinction in participants' understanding of these two events, as 37.5% of participants' cheating events did not co-occur with their dishonesty events. Thus, we conceptualized cheating and dishonesty as distinct outcomes.

For dichotomous behavioral outcomes (e.g., cheating, dishonesty), we predicted the likelihood of engaging in that behavior from the relevant contingent self-worth domain. For analyses with these dichotomous outcomes, we specified a Bernoulli outcome with LaPlace estimation given the binary nature of these outcomes (e.g., whether a participant was dishonest on any given day). This yielded an odds ratio of performing this behavior conditional on participants' scores on the relevant contingent self-worth domain. For the continuous outcomes (i.e., amount of time spent alone in private, emotional distress), we calculated the t ratio to indicate the magnitude of the relationship between these outcomes and their relevant contingent self-worth domain.

The number of sexual minority participants who engaged in each of the examined behaviors at least once over the daily diary period is as follows: cheating ($n = 14$), food restriction or overconsumption ($n = 100$), dishonesty ($n = 93$), and arguing ($n = 76$). The mean score on the social isolation scale aggregated across days was 2.55

($SD = 0.64$). The mean negative affect score aggregated across days was 1.61 ($SD = 0.40$).

Consistent with our hypotheses, the more that students staked their self-worth on academic competence, the more time they spent alone (see Table 4). Academic contingent self-worth, however, did not predict cheating over the course of the study. Basing one's self-worth on appearance significantly predicted participants' likelihood of engaging in problematic eating behaviors. Finally, participants who indicated that their self-worth was particularly tied to successful competition with others were more likely to be dishonest over the course of the study and more likely to argue with others. Only competition contingent self-worth was associated with emotional distress over the course of the study. To ensure that these negative outcomes were specific to the more assured, achievement-related domains as hypothesized, we tested whether each of our six outcomes could be predicted from the four more precarious domains. Of these additional 24 analyses, only one yielded a significant result: staking self-worth in others' approval was significantly associated with cheating (odds ratio = 1.80), 95% confidence interval [1.38, 2.34].

DISCUSSION

Consistent with the Best Little Boy in the World hypothesis, young sexual minority men more heavily invested in achievement-related domains than heterosexual men, possibly a learned strategy to deflect attention from their concealed stigma and assure validation if it is discovered and devalued. Sexual minority and heterosexual participants did not differ in the extent to which they based their self-worth on the domains that are more precarious for sexual minority men, including family support, God's love, others' approval, and virtue. The fact that length of sexual orientation concealment predicted all three achievement-oriented self-worth

contingencies for sexual minority men also supports our social developmental lens for viewing the ways that hiding an important aspect of oneself can powerfully shape the sources of young stigmatized individuals' self-worth. Also consistent with the Best Little Boy in the World hypothesis, objectively measured social stigma in the geographic locale of sexual minority participants' adolescence predicted basing self-worth on competition with others.

Young sexual minority men reported daily costs associated with the domains in which they were particularly likely to base their self-worth. Specifically, the more that sexual minority participants reported basing their self-worth on academic competence, the more likely they were to find themselves alone across the 9 days of the study; the more they invested their self-worth on the way they looked, the more problematic their eating; and the more they based their self-worth on besting others, the more likely they were to find themselves being dishonest, arguing, and experiencing emotional distress. In this empirical extension of the colloquial model being tested (Tobias, 1976), therefore, being the best little boy in the world seems to come at a cost.

Of interest, previous research has shown that the trait self-esteem of sexual minority men, although inversely related to perceptions of social stigma (Frable, Wortman, & Joseph, 1997; Luhtanen, 2003; Savin-Williams, 1989a, 1989b), is not necessarily lower than that of heterosexual men (Balsam, Beauchaine, Mickey, & Rothblum, 2005; Consolacion, Russell, & Sue, 2004). Although the present study did not compare individuals' self-worth contingencies to a measure of their trait self-esteem, the findings here offer a possible explanation for why sexual minority men do not necessarily experience impoverished global self-esteem. Similar to findings for other stigmatized groups (Crocker & Major, 1989), the results of this study suggest that rather than diminishing one's overall self-concept, the experience of stigma, such as concealment and being surrounded by objective stigma in the early environment, might instead lead to an adaptive shifting of domains in which one stakes his self-worth. For the young sexual minority men in this study, shifting self-worth toward those domains in which self-worth is more assured than interpersonal acceptance may represent such an adaptation. However, unlike African American college students on predominantly White campuses who disengaged in one domain while overengaging in another (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001), the sexual minority men in this study did not disengage from any examined domains but rather reported only overengaging in achievement domains, where success, although not guaranteed, may be less precarious than acceptance by others. Research and theory on stigma and contingencies of self-worth leaves room for the possibility that domain disengagement does not necessarily accompany domain overengagement,

although both can lead to negative life consequences (e.g., Miller et al., 1995).

GENERALIZABILITY OF CONTINGENT SELF-WORTH THEORY ACROSS SOCIAL GROUPS

Although the results of previous research have demonstrated that contingent self-worth is best conceptualized as seven discrete domains (e.g., family support, academic competence) rather than higher order factors and that this discrete factor structure is invariant across gender and racial groups, other research has shown that social identities like gender and race consistently influence various contingent self-worth domains as clusters (Crocker et al., 2003). The clusters of contingent self-worth domains that are elevated or depressed for members of some social groups and not others cohere with socialization models specific to members of those groups. For example, previous research has shown that young women are particularly likely to derive their self-worth from domains such as academic competence, appearance, others' approval, and family support relative to young men (Crocker et al., 2003). This finding is consistent with developmental models of gender socialization (e.g., Gilligan, 1982) and the differential validation that peer and family members place on these factors according to children's gender (Adler, Kless, & Adler, 1992). As another example, young Black women place less importance on appearance and competition than young White women when deriving their self-worth, consistent with racial differences in social developmental notions of beauty and peer comparison (Duke, 2000; Parker et al., 1995). The degree to which members of these social groups draw on some clusters of self-worth domains more than others, therefore, can be explained by the socialization experiences unique to those groups.

The socialization experiences of young sexual minority men, captured in the Best Little Boy in the World hypothesis, can similarly explain the sources from which young sexual minority men are particularly likely to draw their self-esteem, thereby further expanding the relevance of contingent self-worth theory and research to the early socialization processes specific of this specific group. For young sexual minority men who hide their sexual orientation across adolescence, acceptance from family, God, or others upon disclosure is quite uncertain, regardless of the true attitudes toward sexual minorities held by these entities. Compared to others' acceptance of a presumably devalued stigmatized self, academics, appearance, and competition may be safer domains in which young sexual minority men can invest their self-worth and represent means for young sexual minority men to gain esteem even within the threatening environment surrounding many sexual minority youth. Successful performance in these

domains can garner social and economic capital, which one can subsequently spend to change or escape a given geographic locale. Although most adolescents cannot select the environments in which they live, yoking self-worth to competition may drive some sexual minority adolescents to accumulate the necessary capital for relocating to more supportive environments once they reach young adulthood, whether through excellent grades, scholarships, or recognized success at extracurricular activities. In fact, sexual minority men report more years of education and higher college grade point averages than heterosexual men (Black, Gates, Sanders, & Taylor, 2000); they also report more active participation in college activities and assign greater importance to their academic work than their heterosexual peers (Carpenter, 2009). Succeeding in achievement-related endeavors in order to change one's surroundings may be quite adaptive given that objectively stigmatizing social environments exact serious health tolls on sexual minority youth (e.g., Hatzenbuehler, 2011; Hatzenbuehler, Pachankis, & Wolff, 2012). Yet, overstriving in achievement-related domains can also deplete health and interpersonal functioning if sexual minority men are particularly likely to stake not only their self-worth but also their future contentment on outperforming others, given that the stakes are so high and success so uncertain.

Competition with others represented the self-worth domain most strongly predicted by sexual orientation concealment and the only domain predicted by our objective measure of stigma surrounding sexual minority individuals. As previously discussed, besting others at competitive tasks represents one way for young sexual minority men to control a threatening environment, although not without cost. Stigma, as communicated through the social environment, robs its targets of both a sense of belonging and a sense of control (Link & Phelan, 2001). Beating others at a competitive task may be one way to exert control, in line with the replicated finding that social exclusion yields interpersonal aggression, that is, "if you can't join them, beat them" (Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001, p. 1058). In fact, the sexual minority participants in this study who were particularly likely to base their self-worth on competition were also more likely to go to interpersonally consequential lengths to do so (e.g., being dishonest, arguing). Previous research suggests that competition restricts sources of support (Crocker & Park, 2004), and feelings of superiority are associated with poor mental health for sexual minority individuals (Balsam & Mohr, 2007).

Limitations

Despite its strengths, this study is limited in methodology and scope. Because all participants were recruited from student groups on U.S. university and college campuses,

the results of this study cannot be generalized to individuals who are not in school. Further, by not recruiting both our sexual minority and heterosexual participants from an identical source, our sampling approach may have introduced a difference that could theoretically be related to self-worth contingencies. Specifically, as the sexual minority participants were recruited from LGBT campus groups while heterosexual participants were recruited from groups serving other social or ideological functions, it is possible that the type of student group to which each participant belonged, not their sexual orientation, influenced their responses to the study's measures. In addition, the participants in this study are younger, more educated, and from higher socioeconomic backgrounds than the general male population. In addition, because the data from this study were part of a larger study on young sexual minority men's health, we could not include women in our analyses. Existing research shows that investment in gender-specific goals, such as conforming to ideal presentations for one's gender, predicts poorer well-being for both men and women through external contingencies of self-worth (Sanchez & Crocker, 2005). However, how sexual orientation and gender might interact with such domains remains to be tested.

Future Directions

In addition to including both overall and domain-specific measures of self-esteem, future investigators of self-esteem among sexual minority individuals ought to supplement measures of personal self-esteem with measures of group-based self-esteem, such as attitudes about being a member of the LGBT community (Katz, Joiner, & Kwon, 2002; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Future research is also needed that investigates the extent to which clinical interventions can be developed or tailored to alleviate the negative psychosocial correlates of contingent self-worth, or to attenuate contingent self-worth at its developmental source, not only among young sexual minority men but among all individuals, as no investigation to our knowledge has attempted to do so.

Conclusions

This study represents the first examination of the life domains from which sexual minority men derive self-esteem. In being such, the findings reported here advance recent endeavors to uncover sources of resilience among sexual minority youth. Far from universal victims of stigma, the majority of sexual minority youth display impressive mental health (Savin-Williams, 2006b). However, efforts to uncover sources of resilience in this population have frequently stalled, while either conceptualizing resilience as the opposite of unhealthy outcomes or upholding the healthy as exemplars of resilience at the

expense of implicitly blaming those who suffer from stigma for not being able to demonstrate positive adaptation. The relative importance that sexual minority men give to various self-worth domains in early development may represent a key, but underrecognized, route by which those who face stigma, whether because of concealment or objectively stigmatizing environments, show the capacity to cope effectively with it. Shifting one's self-worth toward more assured, achievement-related domains when family support, others' approval, God's love, and personal virtue are uncertain shows an implicit, but significant, form of resisting stigma (Thoits, 2011), although not without potential interpersonal and health consequences.

As social acceptance of sexual minority individuals continues to increase among the general U.S. population, our social developmental theory suggests that the forces, such as objective stigma and concealment, affecting the sources of self-worth for this population will also decline. The Best Little Boy in the World theory, then, is a product of a singular account of sexual minority male development ensconced in a unique socio-historical context. However, even the most progressive accounts of sexual minority male development—for example, those suggesting that with greater social acceptance will come a recession of sexual identities altogether (Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Savin-Williams, 2006a)—recognize that at a point across development for sexual minority adolescents comes a recognition of being attracted to members of the same sex and that this recognition happens, at least for a period, in isolation. Empirical research suggests that the awareness of even ambiguous personally relevant information challenges one's self-worth (Fishbein & Laird, 1979). Possibly, then, this initial recognition of difference in isolation for a period before it is finally disclosed represents the psychological challenge facing sexual minority youth that will linger longest across changing time, place, and social attitudes. Far from the propositions of earlier psychological theories suggesting that “homosexuality is a miscarried attempt at compensation [for] a distinct inferiority feeling” (Adler, 1956, p. 425), the results of this study suggest that young sexual minority men adaptively compensate for the stress of socially imposed inferiority by staking their self-worth in superior achievement. Still, the costs imposed by this striving represent a remaining challenge for future researchers and clinicians to address in order to simultaneously enhance the health and preserve the self-esteem of this population of men.

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