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EXTENDED ABSTRACT SUBMISSION

The Educational Premium of LGB students in Context: Mechanisms and Change across Two UK Birth Cohorts

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Short abstract

While prior research consistently identified an educational premium among older generations of LGB individuals, recent evidence uncovered variations by gender, identities, contexts, and cohorts. This study investigates how the relationship between sexual identity and education has evolved over time in the UK and aims to explain variations in this premium by contextualizing the mechanisms outlined in previous literature. Using data from Understanding Society, we found support for a stable educational premium over time for gay men and a decreasing one for lesbian women. Subsequently, we used two birth cohort studies (BCS70 and Next Steps) to gain insight into how the school, family and individual context during adolescence changed across cohorts and may have affected the attainment of various groups differently. Based on these observations, we suggest that the diminishing educational premium among lesbian women could be linked to increased visibility combined with the persistence of traditional gender norms.

A first generation of pioneering quantitative studies relying on data on the sex/gender of individuals and their partners found that individuals in same-sex couples are higher educated than individuals in different-sex couples across a variety of countries (Andersson et al., 2006; Arabsheibani et al., 2005; Black et al., 2000; Laurent and Mihoubi, 2012; Verbakel, 2013; Waite & Denier, 2015). Yet, a second generation of studies using direct information on sexual identity has refined this general picture and found how an educational premium is not universally observed across non-heterosexual groups and differs by gender, cohort, and ethnicity (Fine, 2015; Mollborn and Everett, 2015; Mittleman, 2022). For instance, educational attainment was found to be *lower* among bisexual men, bisexual women, asexual individuals and younger cohorts of lesbian women (controlling for covariates) as compared to their heterosexual counterparts in the US (Mollborn and Everett, 2015; Mittleman, 2022) while queer individuals have higher education than heterosexual individuals in the US (Goldberg et al., 2020; Poston & Baumle, 2010).

Previous research has offered various explanations for the supposedly higher educational attainment of LGBTQ* individuals. Firstly, there might be selection into who reports an LGBTQ* identity in a survey, which suggests a spurious relationship between identity and attainment (Mollborn & Everett, 2015). Secondly, LGBTQ* people can have higher incentives to attain resources that can help deal with or prevent entering discriminatory environments (Black et al., 2003). Thirdly, academic success can be a way of deriving self-worth within exclusionary and stigmatizing environments (Pachankis & Hatzenbuehler, 2013).

Whereas these explanations could explain a general educational premium among LGBTQ* individuals, it is hard to understand the variation in premiums and penalties that emerged across gender, cohorts, and identities in more recent research. Our understanding of how the importance of these universal mechanisms, vary across time and space, is still limited. One exception is formed by Mittleman (2022) who argued that deriving self-worth from academic effort is a route that is more readily available to gay boys than to lesbian girls due to the persistence of gender-specific norms regarding academic effort within school contexts.

In this paper, we aim to take a further step by contextualizing the various mechanisms that have been presented in earlier research. We ask the following research questions: Did the relationship between sexual identity and educational attainment change across birth cohorts in the UK? How did the school and family context, as well as other predictors of educational attainment, change across birth cohorts for LGB youth?

To answer these questions, we first present a theoretical framework that helps contextualizing findings about the relationship between sexual identity and educational attainment. Second, we provide empirical estimates of how the relationship between sexual identity and educational attainment changed over time and the role of selection into LGB identities based on social background. Third, we describe how the individual context of LGB people changed during adolescence across two birth cohorts in the UK.

We developed hypotheses by putting the mechanisms formulated by previous literature into the context of cohort change. Hypothesis 1 posits a potential decrease in educational premiums across all LGB identities as increasing social integration of LGB individuals reduces the incentives to focus on academic effort. Hypothesis 2 suggests that premiums will remain stable as discrimination and stigma are still present. We also

hypothesized that differences exist by LGB identities: Hypothesis 3 predicts a declining premium for lesbians, but not for gay men, as the visibility of lesbian identities increased and are often penalized by teachers and peers. Hypothesis 4 predicts a greater persistence of the premium for bisexual individuals compared to lesbian or gay individuals due to the specific stereotypes faced by the former and low levels of disclosure which might lead bisexual pupils to withdraw from social networks and focus on academic performance.

Data and Method

We use three datasets. First, we use a large representative survey of the UK population to document changes in educational attainment across birth cohorts of LGB people (Understanding Society). This dataset includes information on sexual identity (Bisexual, Gay, Heterosexual, Lesbian or Other) and educational attainment for 36 748 individuals out of which 926 persons identify as LGB. This dataset also contains information on parental education and occupation, which allows us to explore selection into LGB identities based on socioeconomic advantage or disadvantage and how this varies across birth cohorts in the UK.

Subsequently, we use two birth cohort studies to describe change in the individual contexts of LGB youth: The British Cohort Study including people born in 1970, and Next Steps including people born in 1989/1990. These allow us to describe the context at school and at home for LGB people when they were aged 14-16, a crucial stage in the educational career of young people in the UK. The British Cohort Study 1970 includes 260 LGB individuals whereas the Next Steps survey includes 356 LGB persons. Our main goal is to describe differences in educational attainment and individual context during adolescence. We therefore rely on simple regression techniques (OLS regression, logistic regression, or multinomial logit regressions) and present results in terms of predicted values with confidence intervals to facilitate comparisons across groups.

Preliminary Findings

To address our first research question, we used Understanding Society data to compare the proportion of LGB and heterosexual individuals with college education by birth cohort (Figure 1). Similar to findings in the USA, heterosexual men consistently exhibit the lowest proportion of college education across all identities and cohorts, even though this percentage increases steadily across time. In contrast, older cohorts of both lesbian and gay men (i.e., born in 1965), have higher levels of education compared also to heterosexual women. The share of highly educated gay men increased across cohorts to 70% among those born in 1980 – a share approximately 15 percentage points higher than that of both heterosexual and lesbian women. This result confirms the strong educational advantage found in previous literature for gay men. Yet, interestingly, the advantage found in older cohorts of lesbian women over heterosexual women seems to decrease over time. In the youngest generation, the share of college-educated lesbian and heterosexual women is comparable in our UK sample, as also found by Mittleman (2022) in the USA. While the trend found for heterosexual girls is constantly increasing over time, the same is not observed for lesbian women. The trends for bisexual women and men are less straightforward, but, overall, they seem to be highly educated, even though attainment more or less converged with that of heterosexual women. Findings from UKHLS, thus, support the stability (and

even an increase) of the educational premium across cohorts for gay men (H2) and bisexual people (H4) and a decrease in premium for lesbian women (H3).

Similar trends, particularly among lesbian women, are also found when comparing the educational attainment of the two birth cohorts of the BCS70 and Next Steps data – i.e., those born in the 1970 and those born in the 1990. We used these birth cohorts to examine how various sexual identities in these two cohorts relate to predictors of educational attainment that have been central in previous research. We believe that this approach – building on the understanding of mechanisms as contextually and socially embedded – could shed a light on the mechanisms that moderate the relationship of sexual identity with educational attainment across time.

We highlight several important differences in the individual context of gay and lesbian adolescents from the different cohorts as well as differences between the various groups studied. Results for bisexual individuals are not discussed here due to their very small sample size, which makes it hard to make any informed statement about changes across cohorts. However, they are presented and thoroughly discussed in the paper.

The stability of the premium observed for gay boys may be explained by the lack of decline in bullying across different cohorts (Figure 2), suggesting that gay men still often have to rely on academic success as a strategy to derive self-worth. Similarly, gay boys are likely to declare a high likelihood to go to university in both cohorts (Figure 3). This could indicate that gay men still expect high discrimination in the market and hold high incentives to invest in education, also in younger cohorts.

More changes across cohorts are observed for the experiences of lesbian girls. We observe that lesbian girls in the older cohort did not report higher levels of victimization than heterosexual adolescents (Figure 2). This stands in contrast to what is observed for the younger cohort where all LGB groups report high levels of victimization. We also observe considerable changes in teacher treatment (Figure 4). Lesbian girls report exceptionally high levels of being picked on by teachers in the younger cohort (as also observed by Mittleman, 2018 in the US), but this was not the case in the older cohort. Simultaneous to these changes, we also observed increases in the social integration of lesbian girls, with decreases in time spent at home and increases in time going out with friends, but these changes were less pronounced (not shown).

These results create the impression that the environment for lesbian girls has changed considerably across cohorts, whereas fewer changes are observed for gay boys. Hence, the key to understanding variation in educational attainment across LGB groups and cohorts appears to lie in the changes in the individual context of gay boys and lesbian girls during adolescence. The decline in the educational premium for lesbian girls has been attributed in previous literature to a significant increase in the proportion of heterosexual women pursuing tertiary education. While we acknowledge this influence, we propose an alternative explanation. Lesbian women face not only stigma related to their sexual identity likely, but also misogyny. We contend that as LGB individuals acquired more visibility over time, the (partial) persistence of traditional gender norms may have intensified this intersectional stigma, significantly impacting their educational outcomes.

Figures

Fig. 1: Educational attainment by cohort and sexual identity (UKHLS)

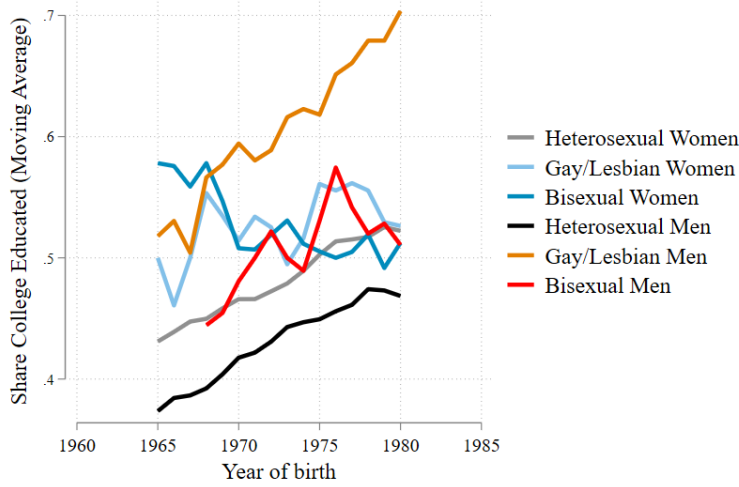


Fig. 2: Victimization by sexual identity (bcs70 vs. Next Steps)

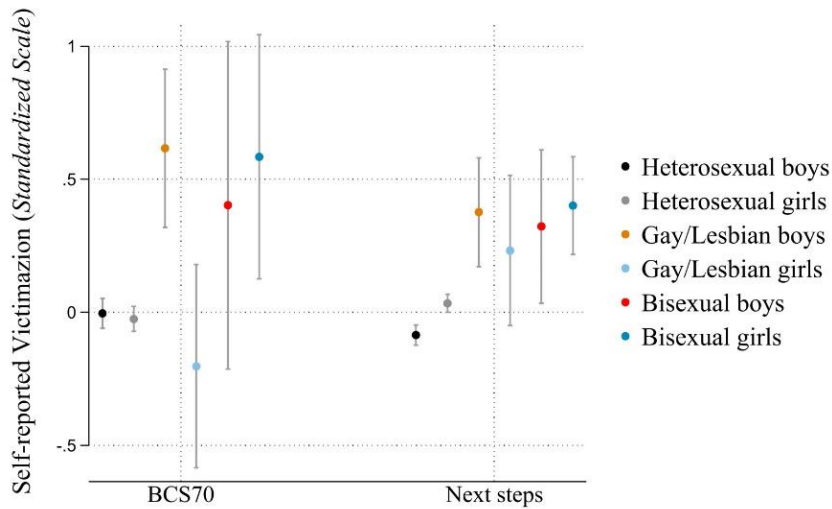


Fig. 3: Likelihood to go to university by sexual identity (bcs70 vs. Next Steps)

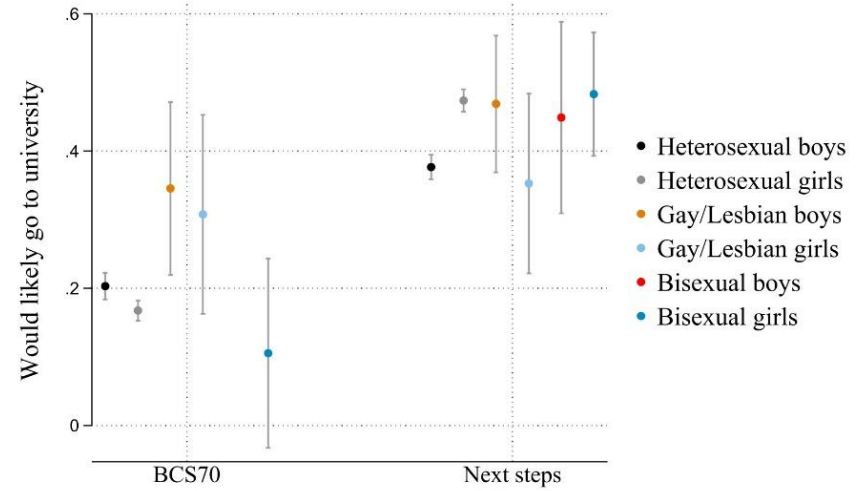
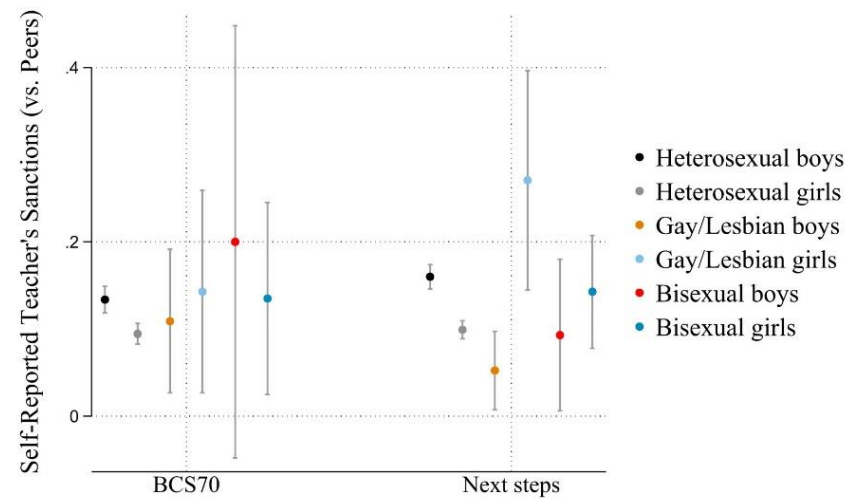


Fig. 4: Sanctions in two cohorts by sexual identity (bcs70 vs Next Steps)



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