Predicting the Timing of Coming Out in Gay and Bisexual Men From World Beliefs, Physical Attractiveness, and Childhood Gender Identity/Role¹

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In a questionnaire study, we examined the age of “coming out” (i.e., acknowledging one’s sexual identity) in gay and bisexual men as predicted by belief in a just world (BJW), personal efficacy (PE), physical attractiveness, childhood gender identity/role, and demographics. As hypothesized, men with a higher BJW, greater physical attractiveness, greater degree of same-sex behavior, and younger age reported an earlier age of coming out. An interaction between BJW and childhood gender identity/role showed, as expected, that the relation with BJW only occurred among men with greater childhood femininity. Unexpectedly, PE was unrelated to age of coming out. Results add to previous studies on the coming-out process and to work suggesting a buffering effect of BJW in other contexts.

Most researchers studying “coming out” in sexual minorities have suggested that it is a complex, multifaceted process. The process includes recognizing one’s own same-sex attractions; exploring same-sex sexual experiences; identifying oneself as lesbian, gay, or bisexual; making public disclosures; and developing identity pride (e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Floyd & Stein, 2002; Troiden, 1989). The entire developmental process is usually referred to when theorists discuss identity formation and coming out in sexual minorities, although public disclosures—or the establishment of a public identity as a gay or bisexual person (e.g., coming out to parents or coworkers; see Cass, 1996)—is what most gay and bisexual people typically mean when they say they have come out (e.g., Floyd & Stein, 2002; Miranda & Storms, 1989).

Most theorists (e.g., Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989) have suggested that public disclosures occur in the mid to later stages of the coming-out and identity-

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integration process. For example, Cass suggested that major disclosures occur primarily in the fifth stage (i.e., identity pride) of her six-stage model. Similarly, Troiden (1989) has suggested that major disclosures typically occur in the last stage (i.e., commitment) of his four-stage model. Research has also suggested that the coming-out process likely differs for men and women (e.g., Diamond, 2006; Rust, 1993; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). For example, Diamond has suggested that women with same-sex attractions often have fluctuating attractions to both sexes, re-identifications (i.e., changing of self-identifications), and some avoiding of a fixed identity label altogether (e.g., lesbian, bisexual). There is also evidence that men and women with same-sex attractions may have different patterns of disclosures to parents (e.g., Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). In addition, recent research has suggested that a linear or sequential process of coming out, with well demarked steps/stages, may not occur in all gay, bisexual, and lesbian people, particularly in women or those exhibiting bisexual attractions (Diamond, 2006; Rust, 1993; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994).

In summary, the coming-out process is complex. Our understanding of this process would benefit from research that examines novel predictors of various aspects of coming out. The present study is an example of such research.

Coming Out, Risk, and Victimization

The coming-out process is usually seen as a sign of psychological adjustment and identity integration (e.g., Martin, 1982; Miranda & Storms, 1989; cf. Diamond, 2006). However, coming out (e.g., public disclosure) can also entail, particularly initially, certain risks, including potential victimization (e.g., Burn, Kadlec, & Rexer, 2005; D’Augelli, 1996; Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995).

Homosexuality is still stigmatized in many parts of the world, and sexual prejudice and violence directed against sexual minorities are social problems in many countries (e.g., Berrill, 1992; Herek, 2000, 2002). There is also evidence that sexual prejudice toward sexual minorities is, to some degree, gender-biased. For example, although lesbians may have to deal with both homonegativism and sexism, gay and bisexual men seem to bear more of the burden of violence, possibly because heterosexual men’s antigay sentiments are often directed more at gay men than at lesbians (Berrill, 1992; U.S. Department of Justice, 2002; cf. Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005). Gay men are also more likely to engender negative personal reactions and to be perceived as mentally ill, in comparison to lesbians (Herek, 2002).

These negative societal attitudes and reactions, and the anxieties they engender in those engaged in coming out, spill over into interpersonal and
family relations for both lesbians and gay men. D’Augelli (1991) found that nearly all college men (> 90%) were somewhat to extremely troubled about coming out to their parents. In addition, gay men, more than lesbians, fear negative reactions from parents if and when they disclose their orientation to their parents (e.g., Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). These fears are not without foundation. For example, Ryan (2001) argued that coming out to one’s parents often creates a family crisis. Thus, the risk of victimization and stigmatization if and when a gay person comes out—to family, friends, or to society in general—is real.

Factors Predicting the Timing of Coming Out

A number of factors have been shown to predict the timing of coming out in gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. For example, those with exclusive same-sex attractions, relative to those with bisexual attractions, tend to come out earlier (see Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Floyd & Stein, 2002; Fox, 1995; Grov, Bimbi, Nanin, & Parsons, 2006). Bisexual people may be slower to come out because they first establish, like the majority of people around them, a heterosexual identity (Weinberg et al., 1994). Fox argued that identity confusion can occur in bisexual people because they have weaker social support than do gay and lesbian people. In a related matter, degree of social contact and support (within the gay/lesbian community) has been linked to earlier coming out in gay and bisexual people (e.g., Floyd & Stein, 2002).

Age is also a factor in the timing of coming out, with older gay/bisexual people reporting this milestone later in life (e.g., Floyd & Bakeman, 2006). Older gay/bisexual people may have encountered more stigmatization and perceived less acceptance from society than younger cohorts of gay/bisexual people. Thus, they may have delayed their coming out because they had more to fear than do younger cohorts of gay/bisexual people.

Given the possibility of victimization and stigmatization, psychological constructs related to the perceived risk of victimization may also be relevant in predicting the timing of the coming-out process in sexual minorities. World beliefs relating to risk and victimization may be particularly relevant. Even if gay and bisexual people’s well-being can improve when they are out, they might hold certain world beliefs relevant to risk and victimization that lead them to think otherwise, preventing or delaying them from undertaking this developmental milestone. Yet, world beliefs have not been examined previously within the context of the coming-out experience. This is a main focus of the present study. Another goal is to examine the additional novel predictors of physical attractiveness and childhood gender identity/role.
World Beliefs

One world belief of relevance is the belief in a just world (BJW). Lerner (1980; Lerner, Miller, & Holmes, 1976) argued that people have a need to believe that the world is just in that people get what they deserve and, often, deserve what they get. Research has supported the basic notion of BJW (Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Lerner & Miller, 1978) and has shown that individuals differ in the strength with which they hold this belief (for reviews of the individual-difference literature, see Furnham, 2003; Furnham & Procter, 1989; Rubin & Peplau, 1975).

Individual differences in BJW have been related to perceptions of threat and victimization in a number of contexts (Dalbert, 2001; Hafer & Bègue, 2005). For example, a higher BJW has been shown, under certain conditions, to be related to lower perceived risk of being a future victim of serious negative events (Lambert, Burroughs, & Nguyen, 1999), as well as to gay and bisexual men’s greater participation in high-risk sexual behavior (Hafer, Bogaert, & McMullen, 2001). Presumably, these relations occur because, as suggested by Dalbert (2001), BJW gives people confidence that they will be treated fairly (i.e., in accordance with what they deserve) in the future (see also Hafer, 2000): Given that people generally think of themselves in a relatively positive light (e.g., Miller & Ross, 1975; Taylor & Brown, 1988), confidence in “fair” treatment likely often translates into confidence that one will be the recipient of a positive fate and will not be the victim of negative treatment and outcomes (because good behavior and character are seen as deserving of positive outcomes and undeserving of negative outcomes; Feather, 1999).

Gay and bisexual people who come out put themselves at risk for unfair treatment in the form of discrimination. A high BJW in this context, however, might mean that one feels less vulnerable to discrimination. Although, to our knowledge, individual differences in BJW have never been related to one’s perceived chances of being a victim of discrimination in the future, a high BJW has been shown to be associated with lower perceived current and past discrimination against various groups of people and against oneself (Hafer & Choma, 2009). More specific to sexual orientation and victimization, evidence exists that gay people with a higher BJW report lower discrimination toward gay people as a group than do those with a lower BJW (Birt & Dion, 1987). Given the research on BJW discussed in this introduction, one should expect that gay and bisexual people higher in BJW will be less likely to fear the coming-out process and more likely to achieve this developmental milestone sooner than those lower in BJW.

Individual-difference variables related to beliefs about personal control and personal efficacy (PE) are another type of world assumption (e.g.,
Janoff-Bulman, 1992) that might be relevant to the coming-out process in gay and bisexual people. Individuals who believe that they control their fates or that they have the requisite qualities to perform a desired task are more motivated to pursue their goals, exert more effort toward goal attainment (even in the face of adversity), and show higher expected and actual success in pursuit of their aspirations (see Bandura, 1977; Taylor & Brown, 1988). The relation between PE and expected success has been found in many achievement domains, including achievement of a hoped-for vision of one's future self (Robinson, Davis, & Meara, 2003), a domain particularly relevant to the coming-out experience for gay and bisexual people. Given this literature, one might expect that high PE will relate to an early coming-out experience because gay and bisexual people higher in PE will be more motivated to pursue and will expect more success in this challenging identity task than those lower in PE.

**Physical Attractiveness**

Aside from world beliefs, we also examined physical attractiveness and childhood gender identity/role as potential predictors of the timing of coming out. To our knowledge, these constructs have never been examined within the context of when (and if) gay and bisexual people decide to come out.

There are at least four reasons why physical attractiveness should relate to the coming-out process. First, physically attractive people, relative to physically unattractive people, are less likely to be victims of negative treatment, are punished less harshly for perceived wrongdoings, and are perceived and treated more positively (for reviews, see Langlois et al., 2000; Mazzella & Feingold, 1994). To the extent that physically attractive people expect such favorable responses from others, they likely feel less threatened about a variety of potentially risky social circumstances, including, for gay and bisexual people, coming out.

Second, greater physical attractiveness is related to better social skills and greater confidence (for reviews, see Feingold, 1992; Langlois et al., 2000). Thus, physically attractive gay and bisexual people, like those high in PE, might have higher expectations for their success at the socially challenging task of coming out.

Third, there is evidence that more attractive people get more dates and have more sexual partnerships (e.g., Bogaert & Fisher, 1995; Langlois et al., 2000). A related finding is that people high in physical attractiveness and body satisfaction tend to be more sexually assertive (e.g., Bogaert, 1993; Schooler & Ward, 2006). In addition, although body image and appearance (e.g., clothing, presenting a “look”) are relevant to both a gay and lesbian
identity (e.g., Atkins, 1998; Clarke & Turner, 2007), physical-attractiveness (e.g., youthful appearance, body satisfaction) issues have been reported to be particularly relevant for the development and maintenance of gay male sexual partnerships (e.g., Sergios & Cody, 1986). Thus, physically attractive gay and bisexual people—and attractive gay and bisexual men in particular—might feel that they have much to gain (or at least less to lose) from being out, as their romantic and sexual partnerships, relative to less attractive people, might be more easily achieved.

Finally, physical attractiveness may partially relate to internalized homonegativity in gay men. Internalized homonegativity refers to the acceptance (and possible approval) of society’s negative attitudes toward homosexuality by gay/lesbian and bisexual people (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980). Internalized homonegativity is a complex phenomenon, likely related to a number of factors in sexual minorities. One of these factors may be body image. Reilly and Rudd (2006) reported that men who perceive their bodies as unattractive may be uncomfortable adopting a homosexual identity. As such, those who perceive themselves as physically unattractive may delay the coming-out process partially because of their discomfort with adopting a homosexual identity. In sum, for one or more of these four reasons, one should expect physically attractive gay and bisexual men to come out earlier than less physically attractive gay and bisexual men.

Childhood Gender Identity/Role

The final novel variable we examined as a potential predictor of the timing of coming out is childhood gender identity/role. On average, gay men and lesbians are sex atypical in their gender identities/roles, including in childhood. Gay men tend to be more feminine and lesbians more masculine, relative to their heterosexual counterparts. Although not all gay people are nonconforming in their childhood gender identity/role, this average difference between gay and heterosexual people seems to be a reliable finding in the developmental literature (Bailey & Zucker, 1995; Rieger, Linsenmeier, Gygax, & Bailey, 2008; cf. Savin-Williams, 2005).

For those gays and lesbians evincing gender atypicality, this is often a source of stress and stigmatization (e.g., Friedman, Koeske, Silvestre, Korr, & Sites, 2006; Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999; Skidmore, Linsenmeier, & Bailey, 2006; Young & Sweeting, 2004). For example, boys and young men who are feminine are often victims of teasing, name calling (e.g., “fags”), and other abuse by gender-conforming boys (e.g., Young & Sweeting, 2004), with the connotation that they are, or will be, gay and that this orientation is worthy of derision. Individuals who have experienced this abuse might expect
victimization in the future. Consequently, they might have a strong fear that feminine behavior—and being out as a gay or bisexual man generally—leads to negative social consequences, leading them to delay coming out (perhaps avoiding it altogether). On the other hand, feminine boys or young men might feel (or be pressured by others who suspect their orientation) that there is very little that can be done to hide their sexual identity from the world. Thus, they might come out earlier because they perceive they have little choice. In summary, somewhat contradictory hypotheses can be forwarded with respect to childhood gender identity/role and the timing of coming out.

*Interactions Between Predictors*

We also examined possible interactions between predictors. Given our primary focus on world beliefs, we limited this part of our investigation to interactions between the two world beliefs (i.e., BJW, PE) and the other predictors in the study. We thought that some of the other constructs might set the conditions under which world beliefs predict the timing of the coming-out experience for gay and bisexual men.

Our investigation of interactions was exploratory. However, at least two interactions seem possible, given prior research by Lambert et al. (1999) and Hafer et al. (2001). These authors found evidence that a high BJW predicts less perceived risk and greater high-risk behavior only for individuals who see the environment in general as relatively threatening. For example, Lambert et al. found that a higher BJW predicted less perceived risk only for individuals who were high in right-wing authoritarianism (i.e., generally see the world as a threatening place).

The interactions in Lambert et al. (1999) and Hafer et al. (2001) probably occurred because protective factors (e.g., BJW) have their greatest buffering effects against perceived vulnerability to negative events and injustice when there is a certain baseline level of perceived threat (or potential threat) in the environment. If the general environment is entirely nonthreatening, the buffering effects of protective factors like BJW are less relevant (see Lambert et al., 1999). With respect to the present investigation, more feminine gay and bisexual men probably face a more stressful environment than those who are less feminine, as discussed earlier. Thus, the baseline level of perceived threat in the general environment is probably relatively high in this group. According to the arguments put forth by Lambert et al. (1999), to the extent that world beliefs (i.e., BJW, PE) act as buffers of stressful events, the predicted relations between these beliefs and the timing of coming out should be especially strong for more feminine gay and bisexual men. Thus, one might expect significant interactions between BJW or PE, and childhood gender identity/role.
Previously Investigated Predictors of the Timing of Coming Out

Along with the four novel constructs discussed in detail in this introduction, we examine two factors that have been shown in previous work to relate to the timing of coming out: age and degree of same-sex orientation (i.e., gay vs. bisexual). As indicated, older gay people and those who are bisexual report coming out later (e.g., Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Fox, 1995). We attempt to replicate these relations in the present study. Including these factors, along with other basic demographics (e.g., income, education), can demonstrate that the novel constructs used here (i.e., BJW, PE, physical attractiveness, childhood gender identity/role) relate to the timing of coming out unconfounded by basic demographic and sexual orientation variables.

In the present study, we examine the timing of coming out in gay and bisexual men in relation to the predictors of BJW, PE, physical attractiveness, and childhood gender identity/role. We predict that higher BJW, higher PE, and greater physical attractiveness will be related to an earlier coming-out experience. The role of childhood gender identity/role in coming out is less clear. In addition, we attempt to replicate past relations between the timing of coming out and both age and degree of same-sex orientation. Finally, we investigate possible interactions between world beliefs and the other predictors, such as interactions between BJW or PE and childhood gender identity/role.

Method

Sample

The participants comprised two community samples of gay and bisexual men (see Bogaert, 2006, 2007; Hafer et al., 2001). For one of the samples, we recruited mostly gay and bisexual men from the Toronto and the Niagara region of Canada, with the primary aim of investigating sexuality and health issues (N = 282). However, this study was revised during data collection to include the measures of world beliefs (i.e., BJW, PE). Thus, only the latter portion of these participants (n = 101) completed these scales.

The second sample was a community sample of gay, bisexual, and heterosexual men (N = 521) raised in nonbiological or blended families (e.g., raised with half- or step-siblings, or as adoptees). These men were recruited from various regions of Canada (Toronto and surrounding regions, Montreal, Vancouver). This second community sample was gathered for a variety of research purposes, including investigation of the origins of sexual
orientation (see Bogaert, 2006, 2007). All of the participants in this second sample completed the measures of world beliefs.

Gay and bisexual men represent a smaller percentage of the population than do heterosexual men. Therefore, a number of gay-oriented publications (e.g., magazines, newspapers) were used to advertise for study participants. A small number of men from Sample 1 completed questionnaires at Brock University in the Niagara region of Canada, but the majority of the men in Sample 1 and all of the men in Sample 2 received and returned questionnaires via mail. Approximately 80% of the men responding to our advertisement for participants in Sample 2 returned the questionnaire. This information was not recorded for Sample 1, although given that the participants were mostly recruited in a similar manner and in similar regions, the return rate was likely comparable to Sample 2. For more details on recruitment and samples, see Hafer et al. (2001) and Bogaert (2006).

Measures

Demographics and sexual orientation. The men were asked for their age in years, year of birth, race/ethnicity (an open-ended item), educational level (on an 8-point scale ranging from 1 = less than Grade 9 to 8 = currently attending or completed Ph.D. or M.D.), and income (on a 12-point scale ranging from 1 = under $5,000 to 12 = $100,000 or more). Sexual orientation was determined using two questions, one concerning the participant’s sexual attraction toward men and women (i.e., sexual thoughts and feelings; on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = exclusively homosexual-gay to 7 = exclusively heterosexual-straight), and the other concerning his sexual behaviors (i.e., actual experiences) engaged in with men and women (on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = exclusively homosexual-gay to 7 = exclusively heterosexual-straight). Men scoring 5 or less on the average of these two measures were included in the present study (i.e., those reporting homosexuality or bisexuality). In the first sample, 94 men (who also completed the measures of world beliefs) satisfied this criterion; and in the second sample, 307 men satisfied this criterion. The sexual attraction and sexual behavior variables were subsequently recoded for analyses so that higher scores indicate a greater degree of same-sex attraction and same-sex behavior.

Childhood gender identity/role. The Recalled Childhood Gender Identity/Gender Role Questionnaire (Zucker & Mitchell, 2002; Zucker et al., 2006) was used to measure childhood and early adolescent gender identity/role. There are two factors to this scale, but only the large first factor, labeled gender identity/gender role, is used in the present study. The second factor
(parent identification/closeness) was less relevant to the issue of gender nonconformity and thus was not analyzed here.

The first factor contains 18 items (e.g., “As a child, I had a reputation as a ‘sissy,’” “As a child, I would tell others I wanted to be a girl”). Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (all of the time or almost always) to 5 (never). Cronbach’s alpha for these 18 items in the current study was .89. Participants’ total scores on this scale consist of their mean across all items completed (with a minimum of 5 having to be completed). Note that a low mean score indicates higher childhood and early adolescent femininity, whereas a high mean score indicates higher childhood and early adolescent masculinity.

Belief in a just world. The participants completed Lipkus’ (1991) Global Belief in a Just World Scale, which contains seven 6-point items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The scale measures beliefs about the fairness of the world in general (e.g., “I feel that people get what they deserve”). Cronbach’s alpha in this study was .84. Participants’ total scores on this scale consist of their mean score across all items completed (with a minimum of 5 having to be completed). Higher scores indicate a higher belief in a just world.

Personal efficacy. Paulhus’ (1983) subscale of personal efficacy was used. This scale contains ten 7-point items ranging from −3 (disagree) to +3 (agree), measuring degree of control and efficacy in achievement-related contexts (e.g., “When I make plans, I am almost certain to make them work”) Cronbach’s alpha in this study was .69. Participants’ total scores on this scale consist of their mean score across all items completed (with a minimum of 5 having to be completed). Higher scores indicate a greater degree of PE.

Attractiveness. We included three 7-point self-report measures of attractiveness ranging from 1 (well below average) to 7 (well above average). These measures are “How physically attractive do you think you are?”; “How sexually appealing do you think you are?”; and “How do you think a stranger would rate your physical attractiveness?” Cronbach’s alpha in this study was .93. Participants’ total scores on this scale were their means across the three items completed (with a minimum of 2 having to be completed). Higher scores indicate a greater degree of self-perceived physical attractiveness.

Timing of coming out. At the end of the questionnaire, the men indicated if and when (i.e., what year) they had come out. Age of coming out was the dependent variable in this study, and was calculated as follows. If a participant reported a specific year that he had come out (79.5%), then this year minus his year of birth was used as his score. For example, if a man reported coming out in 1998 and was born in 1970, his score would be 28.
If a participant reported always being out (11.5%), he was given a score of 16. The number 16 was chosen because it broadly represents the beginning of adult-oriented sexuality (e.g., age of first partner; see Rotermann, 2005).

If a participant reported not being out (9.5%), then his current age plus 20 was his score. For example, if a 30-year-old man reported that he had not come out, his score would be 30 plus 20, or 50. The rationale for adding 20 years to these men’s ages is that 20 years seems to capture reasonably well the variability in when (and if) this subgroup of the sample will come out. Some will never come out, and this probably becomes increasingly likely as these men get older. Indeed, the age of this portion of the sample was somewhat older (approximately 39 vs. 36 for the remainder of the sample), suggesting that their “true score” on a coming-out scale is likely very high or some maximum value (perhaps the age of their death). However, some of these men might come out relatively soon after completing the questionnaire (e.g., within 3–5 years). Thus, an estimate is needed to capture this range of possible experiences, and 20 years was chosen as a plausible value.3

Results

There were 367 men who had valid information on all measures used in the present study. Their mean age was 37.0 years. Approximately 76% (279) of the men indicated that their race/ethnicity was White or of European origin; approximately 16% (59) indicated they were of another racial/ethnic origin (e.g., Asian, Black, First Nations); and approximately 8% did not indicate a racial/ethnic origin.4 The average age of coming out was 26.3 years (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations for all variables).

Correlations among the variables are presented in Table 2. Modest relationships exist among some of the variables. For example, note that, as predicted, age, same-sex behavior, BJW, and attractiveness related to age of coming out. Participants who were younger and who engaged in more exclusive same-sex behavior were more likely to come out sooner, thus replicating prior research (e.g., Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Fox, 1995). Also, the higher the

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3Our criterion—age of coming out—has two estimates (i.e., using 16 as the beginning point for those who had always been out, and adding 20 years to the age of the men who had not come out). Although these estimates follow a priori logic, we recognize that other similar rules could have been chosen. Thus, we re-ran the analyses using the following two variations: using 12 as the beginning point for those who had always been out (i.e., the lowest age of coming out in the present sample), and adding 10 years (instead of 20) to the age of the men who had not come out. These results are presented in Footnote 5.

4As race/ethnicity (1 = non-White, 0 = White) did not relate to age of coming out, and 7% of the sample had missing values on race/ethnicity (thus reducing the power), we did not include race/ethnicity as a predictor in the main regression analysis presented here.
participant’s BJW and the higher his physical attractiveness, the earlier the coming-out experience. There were also significant relations between some of the predictors themselves (e.g., BJW and PE; income and age).

To assess relations between the predictors and the timing of coming out in a multivariate context, we conducted a hierarchical multiple regression analysis. The demographics (age, education, income, same-sex attraction, behavior) were entered simultaneously as a first block, and the novel predictors (physical attractiveness, BJW, PE, childhood gender identity/role) were entered as a second block. In a third block of the hierarchical regression analysis, we allowed a number of interactions (described later in this section) to enter in a stepwise fashion. Age of coming out was the criterion. All predictors were centered prior to regression analyses (see Aiken & West, 1991).

Table 1

Means for Study Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tr>
<td>Age (in years)</td>
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<td>10.64</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal income</td>
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<td>Same-sex behavior</td>
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<td>Belief in a just world</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal efficacy</td>
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<td>0.79</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical attractiveness</td>
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<td>1.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age of coming out</td>
<td>26.29</td>
<td>14.47</td>
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Note. N = 367. Education: 1 = less than Grade 9 to 8 = currently attending or completed Ph.D. or M.D.; Personal income: 1 = < $5,000 to 12 = > $100,000; Same-sex behavior = degree of opposite-sex or same-sex behavior on a 7-point scale, 1 = exclusively heterosexual/straight to 7 = exclusively homosexual/gay; Same-sex attraction = degree of opposite-sex or same-sex attraction, 1 = exclusively heterosexual/straight to 7 = exclusively homosexual/gay; Childhood gender identity/role = degree of femininity vs. masculinity in childhood and early adolescence, higher scores indicate greater masculinity.
Table 2

Correlations Among Study Variables

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<th>Variable</th>
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<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Age in years</td>
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<td>.031</td>
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<td>Personal income</td>
<td>.134*</td>
<td>.328***</td>
<td>.375***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Same-sex attraction</td>
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<td>.096</td>
<td>.089</td>
<td>.135**</td>
<td>.172**</td>
<td>.643***</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal efficacy</td>
<td></td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.246***</td>
<td>.233***</td>
<td>.096</td>
<td>.118*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in a just world</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender identity/role</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.115*</td>
<td>.063</td>
<td>.215***</td>
<td>.091</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical attractiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.250***</td>
<td>.214***</td>
<td>.149**</td>
<td>.117*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 367. Education: 1 = less than Grade 9 to 8 = currently attending or completed Ph.D. or M.D.; Personal income: 1 = < $5,000 to 12 = > $100,000; Same-sex behavior = degree of opposite-sex or same-sex behavior on a 7-point scale, 1 = exclusively heterosexual/straight to 7 = exclusively homosexual/gay; Same-sex attraction = degree of opposite-sex or same-sex attraction, 1 = exclusively heterosexual/straight to 7 = exclusively homosexual/gay; Childhood gender identity/role = degree of femininity vs. masculinity in childhood and early adolescence, higher scores indicate greater masculinity.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
As shown in Table 3, in the first block, as in the zero-order correlations, age and same-sex behavior were related to the timing of coming out. In the second block, as in the zero-order correlations, BJW and physical attractiveness were related to the timing of coming out. Childhood gender identity/role and PE did not relate to the timing of coming out.

We also examined two-way interactions between the two world-beliefs variables (i.e., BJW, PE) and the remaining predictors, as well as the interaction between the two beliefs. These 15 interaction terms were allowed to enter in a stepwise fashion \( p < .05 \) in a third block, after the main predictors were entered. Only one of the possible interaction terms (BJW \times \) Childhood Gender Identity/Role) entered at this step, as shown in Table 3 (see Figure 1 for the form of this interaction). Simple-slopes analyses show that a higher BJW significantly predicted an earlier age of coming out only for men with greater femininity in childhood and early adolescence \( (\beta = -.23) \), \( t(356) = -3.48, p = .001 \). The slope was nonsignificant for men with greater...
masculinity in childhood and early adolescence ($\beta = -0.03$), $t(356) = -0.53$, $p = .60$.\(^5\)

Finally, to examine more fully what distinguishes men who have not come out from those who are relatively early in their coming-out experience, we constructed two groups: one with men who had an early coming-out experience (i.e., $< 18$ years; $n = 97$), and one with men who had not come out ($n = 43$). We conducted a hierarchical logistic regression analysis predicting group membership with the same blocks of variables as for our primary analysis discussed previously. The results reveal that same-sex behavior ($p = .048$), BJW ($p = .01$), and physical attractiveness ($p = .002$)—as in the primary analysis (along with lower income, $p = .03$)—predicted membership in the early coming-out group. No other variables predicted the timing of coming out. In addition, no interactions (e.g., BJW $\times$ Childhood Gender Identity/Role) were significant. It should be noted, however, that the power was significantly reduced in this analysis relative to the full sample analysis discussed previously.\(^6\)

\(^5\)As indicated in Footnote 3, we examined the results, changing our criterion (i.e., age of coming out) by giving the men who had always been “out” a score of 12 (instead of 16) and giving the men who reported not being out a score of their age plus 10 (instead of 20). These variations produced three new analyses (i.e., 12 and 20 years; 12 and 10 years; 16 and 10 years). The significant results were the same as the results reported previously, except in the second case (i.e., 12 and 10 years) when the BJW $\times$ Childhood Gender Identity/Role interaction was marginally significant ($p = .05$).

\(^6\)We also examined the dichotomous coming-out variable using the same standard hierarchical regression approach that we used for our analysis with the full sample (except in the third step, we force-entered the BJW $\times$ Childhood Gender Identity/Role interaction). Then, we

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\textbf{Figure 1.} Age of coming out as a function of belief in a just world (BJW) and childhood gender identity/role (feminine childhood, $-1$ SD; masculine childhood, $+1$ SD).
Discussion

In the present research, we used world beliefs and other psychological dimensions (i.e., perceived physical attractiveness, childhood gender identity/role) to predict the timing of coming out in a relatively large sample of gay and bisexual men. To our knowledge, these constructs have never before been examined in this particular applied context.

The specific world beliefs that we examined in this study were BJW and PE. Although PE was not a significant predictor of the timing of coming out (alone or in interaction with other variables), BJW was related to the timing of coming out in the hypothesized manner. Gay and bisexual men higher in BJW came out sooner than did gay and bisexual men lower in BJW. These results support the idea that BJW may buffer the threat of victimization that gay and bisexual men perceive about living openly. Our results support research showing that BJW buffers the threat that one will be a victim of negative outcomes or injustice in other contexts (e.g., Dalbert & Maes, 2002; Hafer et al., 2001; Otto & Dalbert, 2005; Tomaka & Blascovich, 1994).

The association between BJW and age of coming out was qualified by an interaction between BJW and childhood gender identity/role (in our primary analysis using the full sample). A higher BJW significantly predicted an earlier coming-out experience only for men with greater childhood femininity, suggesting that BJW might buffer the threat of victimization for gay and bisexual men, particularly if the level of effeminate childhood behavior is high. Though this result should be interpreted with caution, given the high number of interactions tested, the pattern conforms to our a priori expectations.

There are a few different perspectives on this finding. First, such results may occur because effeminate gay and bisexual men are a more visible minority, have had experience with victimization, and might indeed have had strong indications that the world is not safe for them. Consequently, they might “need” high BJW in order to increase their likelihood of coming out sooner, rather than later. In a safe environment, BJW would fulfill less of a function (there being less perceived general threat or potential threat in the first place). Our interpretation of this effect is in line with previous studies by Lambert et al. (1999) and Hafer et al. (2001), which showed similar evidence that the buffering role of BJW is applicable only given a certain baseline level of perceived threat in the general environment.

calculated the effect size of the interaction. The resulting effect size can be expressed as \( r^2 = .01 \), a value equivalent to the effect size for the BJW × Childhood Gender Identity/Role interaction for our original analysis (see Table 3). Given that this interaction was significant in our original analysis (albeit for a slightly different criterion variable), lack of statistical power likely played a role in our failure to replicate a similar interaction using a reduced sample.
Another perspective on the interaction between BJW and childhood gender identity/role is that the result is driven by a tendency of individuals with low BJW to experience a heightened sense that they will be the victims of negative outcomes and injustice (given a generally threatening environment, as we argue is the case for more feminine gay and bisexual men), instead of or in addition to the protective qualities of high BJW in similar circumstances. Future research is needed to address the exact mechanisms involved.

Physical attractiveness also predicted age of coming out, such that greater physical attractiveness was related to an earlier coming-out experience. As suggested in the introduction, relative to less attractive gay and bisexual men, attractive gay and bisexual men might expect better treatment from others; might be more socially skilled and confident; might have less internalized homonegativity; might be more sexually assertive; and, finally, might have more to gain socially and sexually (e.g., more success with sexual partners) by coming out sooner, rather than later. For one or more of these reasons, they might come out earlier than their less attractive counterparts.

Aside from the novel factors of world beliefs, physical attractiveness, and childhood gender identity/role, we attempted to replicate previously found associations between age and same-sex behavior and the timing of coming out. Men in our study who were younger were more likely to come out at an earlier age, replicating earlier work (e.g., Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Fox, 1995; Grov et al., 2006). This finding lends support to the idea that recent cohorts of gay and bisexual men are more comfortable with their sexuality and identity, relative to men born during an earlier era (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Fox, 1995).

Also replicating previous work, we found that level of same-sex behavior was related to the timing of coming out, such that men with more same-sex experience came out earlier (see Fox, 1995). There are likely a number of reasons for this relation. One is that men who are exclusively oriented toward the same sex would have more incentive to be out, as their sexual lives are more exclusively defined by same-sex inclinations. Indeed, they might also find it more difficult and frustrating to conceal their identities, relative to a bisexual person, who may be more excited by and comfortable with sexual/romantic activity with members of the opposite sex. Weinberg et al. (1994) argued that bisexual people are slower to come out because they first establish a heterosexual identity. There might also be more identity confusion in bisexual people, relative to gay people, because of weaker social support (Fox, 1995) or fluctuating attractions (Rust, 1993), and identity confusion might delay the coming-out process for bisexual people.

Although many of the hypothesized relations were confirmed, PE did not relate to the timing of coming out, alone or in interaction with another
variable. We are unsure of the reason for these null effects. If gay and bisexual men feel that they have control over their fates (i.e., rewards, punishments) and believe that they have the requisite qualities to reach their goals, one might expect that they would adopt a proactive stance and assert their sexual identities in society. However, perhaps this personal-control variable is related less to the decision of coming out per se and more to the perception, contentment, and satisfaction with whichever option (i.e., being out or remaining closeted) they chose. For example, both high-PE gay and bisexual men who are out and high-PE gay and bisexual men who are not out might believe that their choice was under their control and done for their own benefit. It is also possible that different measures of control or efficacy will be more successful in predicting the timing of coming out. For example, a measure of self-efficacy that is specific to the coming-out process might be more successful than the general measure we used in our study (see Bandura, 1977). Finally, the PE measure did not show high internal consistency (.69), and this may partly explain why this measure was not predictive. It is of note, however, that modest internal consistencies (e.g., < .80) seem common with the PE subscale (see Paulhus, 1983).

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

This study has several notable strengths. First, the sample was fairly large, given that gay and bisexual men make up a relatively small percentage of the population. Second, the men in this study came from the community (and were not, for example, university undergraduates), and thus exhibited a wide range of ages, economic levels, and educational backgrounds. Third, the relations occurred controlling for potential confounding demographics and other variables. Of particular note in this regard is the ability of BJW to predict the timing of coming out, independent of PE.

Measures of individual differences in BJW and internal control beliefs are often positively correlated (e.g., Furnham & Procter, 1989). Though most researchers claim that these beliefs are different but related constructs, the two could account, at times, for similar effects. Our results indicate that the association between BJW and the timing of coming out—as well as the significant interaction between BJW and childhood gender identity/role—cannot be accounted for by the related variable of PE, strengthening the argument that BJW is a separate construct from beliefs about control.

The present study also has limitations. For example, we used a one-time survey methodology, rather than an experimental or longitudinal approach. Thus, causal directions of the relations are unclear. For example, low BJW might increase the threat of victimization and, hence, delay gay and bisexual
men’s coming-out experiences. Alternatively, increased fear and threat of victimization associated with coming out might reduce one’s BJW. In the latter case, personal experience with victimization as a result of being in a less than supportive environment (or witnessed victimization) might cause both gay and bisexual men to delay coming out and reduce their belief that the world is just. Although BJW scales show good test–retest reliability and are fairly stable across time (e.g., Bègue & Bastounis, 2003; Hafer, 2004), BJW has the potential to change as a result of extreme life circumstances (see Otto & Dalbert, 2005). Thus, the alternative explanation of the association between BJW and coming out given here is important to consider.

Another limitation is that the age-of-coming-out measure implied that coming out is a relatively circumscribed event. Most researchers, however, believe that coming out is a complicated process with a number of aspects or phases, including, as mentioned, recognizing one’s own same-sex attractions, exploring same-sex sexual experiences, and making public disclosures (e.g., Cass, 1979; Floyd & Stein, 2002; Troiden, 1989). Although the measure used in the present study, which was, in most cases, based on a person’s self-report of the year they came out (minus their year of birth) likely has a reasonable time frame to capture a number of facets of this process (i.e., a 12-month period), it probably does not capture all aspects of this process for most gay and bisexual people. Instead, our measure likely reflects the latter aspect—a public disclosure—or the establishment of a public identity as a gay or bisexual person (e.g., coming out to parents or coworkers; see Cass, 1996).

Public disclosure (e.g., to parents) is, as indicated, probably what most gay and bisexual people refer to when they say they “came out” (e.g., Floyd & Stein, 2002). As such, we believe that the present study largely captures what most gay and bisexual people mean by the term *coming out*; but we note that our measure, which is a self-definition, does not necessarily capture the same meaning for all participants, nor does it necessarily capture all of the complexity of this process for most people. In future research, it would be worthwhile to measure the coming-out process more fully to examine, for example, whether BJW relates to other aspects/steps hypothesized to comprise this process. Given that most theorists (e.g., Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989) have suggested that public disclosures occur in mid to later stages of the coming-out and identity-integration process, it would be interesting to examine whether BJW and other constructs predict the timing of early stages; for example, identity tolerance and identity acceptance (see Cass, 1979) or identity assumption (see Troiden, 1989).

Additional limitations concern some of the scales and measures that we used in this study. As indicated, the PE measure did not show high internal consistency (.69). Also, our measure of gender identity/role was restricted to childhood and early adolescence. We felt that early gender identity/role was
relevant because those who have experienced abuse for an extended period of time (e.g., because of their gender atypicality) might have a heightened fear of victimization and, ultimately, be threatened by the coming-out process. Moreover, there is evidence that gender atypicality in childhood correlates with later (adulthood) gender atypicality in gay men (Bailey & Zucker, 1995; Hooberman, 1979; Rieger et al., 2008; Saghir & Robins, 1973). However, it is notable that we did not assess adulthood/current gender identification; and this assessment, along with childhood gender atypicality, should occur in future research.

Our measure of physical attractiveness was also potentially problematic because it was self-report (i.e., an aggregate of three self-report estimates). Self-report attractiveness correlates well with objective physical attractiveness (Weeden & Sabini, 2007), but it also reflects different aspects of the self-concept, including self-esteem and social confidence (e.g., Downs, 1991; Langlois et al., 2000; Park, 2007). For example, Downs found that social isolation was more strongly predicted by (low) self-report attractiveness than by (low) observed physical attractiveness. Thus, coming out to others, which may partly reflect a desire to integrate with others and avoid isolation may also be influenced by issues (e.g., social confidence) related more to self-reported physical attractiveness than to objective physical attractiveness. Future research in this area should assess both self-report and other-rated physical attractiveness, along with possible relevant correlates (e.g., self-esteem, social confidence).

A final limitation that we raise here is that the relations found in our data were only tested in gay and bisexual men, not in lesbians or bisexual women, and only in men from one country: Canada. Tests of the generalizability of our results are needed. Future research should, for example, attempt to replicate these findings in lesbians and bisexual women. The coming-out process likely shares some similar features across sexes; thus, one might expect similar predictors and constructs (e.g., BJW) to be important in the timing of both men’s and women’s coming-out experiences. For example, although gay men may be more stigmatized and victimized in our society than are lesbians (e.g., Berrill, 1992; Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995; U.S. Department of Justice, 2002; cf. Balsam et al., 2005), lesbians are, of course, still stigmatized, and many fear the coming-out process (e.g., disclosure to parents; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Moreover, there is evidence that lesbians, relative to gay men, perceive subtle prejudice as more objectionable, and a heightened sense of prejudice predicts a reduced likelihood of disclosure of one’s orientation to others (Burn et al., 2005).

The coming-out process itself for lesbians may also differ from gay men in a number of ways (e.g., more fluctuating attractions, less fear of negative reactions from parents; e.g., Diamond, 2006; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003).
In addition, body-image and appearance issues may play a different role in partner choice and identity formation in gay and bisexual men, relative to lesbians (e.g., Atkins, 1998; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Kozee & Tylka, 2006). Thus, the constructs relevant to predict coming out in this study might be more relevant for gay men than for lesbians and bisexual women. However, these conjectures must be tested. The results also must be replicated in other countries, as gay and bisexual men raised in different parts of the world have very diverse coming-out experiences and might also respond differently to the potential threat of victimization.

Several other ideas for future research are suggested by our study, four of which we highlight here. First, researchers have suggested that BJW can have different forms. Some forms of BJW might be stronger predictors of coming out than the general belief in a just world that we assessed in our investigation. For example, Dalbert (2001) distinguished between a belief that one’s personal world is just (e.g., a belief that one gets what one deserves) and a belief that the world in general is a just place (e.g., a belief that, in general, people get what they deserve). There is increasing evidence that a personal BJW is more predictive of well-being and related constructs, both globally and in response to specific stressful events, than is a general BJW (e.g., Dalbert, 1999; Dzuka & Dalbert, 2002; Otto, Boos, Dalbert, Schöps, & Hoyer, 2006). Perhaps a personal BJW is also more relevant to people’s stressful life choices (e.g., choosing whether or not and when to come out). Personal versus general BJW and other distinctions in the just-world literature (e.g., Maes & Schmitt, 1999) warrant further investigation within the context of the coming-out process.

Second, future research on gay and bisexual people’s coming-out experiences should investigate the impact of other world beliefs, aside from the two examined in this article. A number of authors have hypothesized a finite set of assumptions about the world that people hold to varying degrees (e.g., Epstein, 2003; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Apart from BJW and control-related beliefs, authors have proposed, for example, belief in the benevolence of other people and of the world, and belief that life has meaning. The role that many of these proposed world assumptions play in the coming-out process is a potentially very fruitful and interesting avenue of further inquiry.

Third, future research should examine other factors that may contribute to variation in the timing of coming out (e.g., disclosure). For example, one factor could be perceived closeness to one’s family members. If one is not close to or does not have a stake in telling family members, such as one’s parents (e.g., Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003), there may be less incentive to come out (i.e., disclosure).

There are also other factors (e.g., personal resources, social support, depression; see Meyer, 2003, for the relation between sexual orientation and
depression) that might directly predict the timing of coming out or indirectly predict this criterion, perhaps through some of the other constructs that we assessed in the present study. For example, greater depression is related to lower BJW, albeit inconsistently (at least for general BJW scales; cf. Benson & Ritter, 1990; Dalbert, 1999; Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996; Otto et al., 2006; Ritter, Benson, & Snyder, 1990). Thus, depression could lead to lower BJW (thus, greater perceived probability of victimization), which predicts a later age of coming out. More research should examine these factors, perhaps in conjunction with BJW and other beliefs.

Finally, future research should test for mediators or intervening mechanisms. For example, we suggested that BJW predicts the timing of coming out because strong BJW lowers the perceived probability that one will be victimized. We also proposed that physical attractiveness is related to an earlier coming-out experience for one or more reasons, including that attractive gay and bisexual men feel less vulnerable to negative treatment in response to their coming out, are more confident and socially skilled, and believe that they have much to gain by coming out. However, these mediating mechanisms were not tested because measures assessing them were not available in the present dataset.

Other potential mediators may need to be examined as well. For example, Dalbert (1999) suggested that BJW increases perceptions that the world is not only fair, but also controllable. Thus, higher BJW, in addition to reducing the perceived risk of victimization, might also increase confidence that one could successfully deal with discrimination or other negative consequences of coming out, should they arise. Although the relation between BJW and control might help account for the buffering effect of BJW in certain situations, we think that this mechanism was unlikely to be at play in the present research. If personal-control issues were, in part, responsible for the results involving BJW, one might have expected significant results for PE (which is more directly indicative of feelings of personal control). Once again, though, it is up to future research to test potential mechanisms.

**Implications**

The present results have implications for adjustment issues in gay and bisexual people. Clinicians might need to understand that the coming-out process is particularly difficult for those who perceive themselves as less attractive or those who lack strong BJW (especially for men with relatively high femininity in childhood). On the other hand, gay and bisexual people high in BJW might have an overly optimistic view of the social world they will encounter when they come out. Therefore, making young, closeted gay
people aware of the potential threats that can emerge when being out might be appropriate.

It should be noted that as the present results on coming out are likely limited to public disclosures (e.g., to parents) in gay people, these results may be less helpful in understanding other aspects of coming out and identity integration in gay people (e.g., self-identification). But this is an empirical question. Perhaps BJW and other factors (e.g., physical attractiveness) do relate to the timing of self-identification and other aspects of identity integration, particularly if they are associated with perceived threat and potential victimization. If so, these aspects may need to be targeted by clinicians as well. Additional implications for adjustment would accrue once the mediators or intervening mechanisms of the relations found here are demonstrated. If, for example, physical attractiveness operates in part through its association with greater social skills (or confidence in those skills), then targeting such abilities—either through improving individuals’ relevant skill sets or increasing their confidence in skills they already possess—might make the adjustment process easier for sexual minorities.

The results of the present investigation have implications for important life decisions other than the decision to come out as a gay or bisexual person. Factors such as world beliefs, especially BJW, and physical attractiveness might similarly provide the confidence and trust in others to pursue other risky life decisions (for better or worse), such as certain drastic career shifts, long-distance geographical moves, and relationship decisions (see Hafer et al., 2001). We believe that the role of these and related factors in major life decisions is worthy of further consideration.

In summary, coming out is an important process in many gay and bisexual people’s lives. Open acknowledgement of one’s sexual identity, which is one key aspect of this process, has been related to adult adjustment; but it also entails, particularly initially, certain risks and the potential for victimization. As such, the timing of coming out can vary for gay and bisexual people and is likely related to various individual-difference factors, especially those that are potentially relevant to perceived risk and victimization. The present study demonstrated that several of these factors—belief in a just world, physical attractiveness, and childhood gender identity/role—are indeed related to the timing of the coming-out process in gay and bisexual men.

References


