

There may be some truth to the ‘gay jobs’ stereotype

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There is an unusually high concentration of gay or lesbian workers in certain occupations. For example, both gay men and lesbians are overrepresented in psychology, law, social work, and university teaching. And there are real occupational patterns behind some popular stereotypes, from the gay flight attendant to the lesbian truck driver.

Where does this kind of occupational segregation come from? This question has puzzled social scientists for nearly a century, but it is not simply an academic problem. Occupational segregation matters because it can lead to inequality between workers and limit the talent pool for employers trying to fill a position.

To understand the occupational segregation of gay and lesbian workers, we examined two hypotheses. The first one was about task independence—the ability to perform one’s tasks without substantially depending on coworkers. Task independence at work makes it easier to conceal one’s sexual orientation and reduces the negative repercussions of “coming out.” So we predicted that gay men and lesbians would be more likely to work in occupations with higher task independence (e.g., massage therapists and fire safety inspectors) than in ones with lower task independence (e.g., construction workers and fire fighters).

Our second prediction was about occupations that require a high level of social perceptiveness — that is, the accurate anticipation and reading of others’ reactions. Since gay men and lesbians tend to experience the threat of discrimination from a young age, knowing how to read social cues might be an important acquired skill for these individuals. Thus we expected that gay men and lesbians would be more likely to be in jobs that require high levels of social perceptiveness (e.g., psychologists and teachers) rather than in ones where such a skill is less needed (e.g., laboratory scientists and actuarial analysts).

Overall, our prediction is that gay and lesbian workers will tend to concentrate in occupations that provide a high degree of task independence or require a high level of social perceptiveness, or both. To the casual observer, these hypotheses may appear contradictory. It might seem that task independence implies limiting social interactions, while a need for social perceptiveness implies an emphasis on social interactions. In reality, these occupational characteristics are not necessarily at odds. Task independence refers to limited dependence on coworkers and supervisors. In contrast, occupations that require social perceptiveness tend to involve interactions with customers, for example, patients, clients, or students.

To test our hypothesis, we analyzed data from two datasets. One was the [2008-2010 American Community Survey \(ACS\)](#), which provides a nationally representative sample of nearly five million people in the United States. We also tested our hypotheses on a second sample, the fourth wave of the [U.S. National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health](#), collected in 2008-2009. Consistent with our predictions, both gay men and lesbians tend to concentrate in occupations that provide task independence or require social perceptiveness, or both.

Table 1 lists occupations with the highest joint proportion of gay and lesbian workers. Table 2 separately lists female-majority occupations (i.e., those in which more than 50 percent of all workers are women) and male-majority occupations (i.e., those in which more than 50 percent of all workers are men) with the highest proportion of gay workers and the highest proportion of lesbian workers. In both tables, almost all occupations are associated with above-average task independence or social perceptiveness or both.

Table 1. Occupations with the Highest Joint Proportion of Gay and Lesbian Workers

1. Psychologists (S, T)
2. Training and development specialists and managers (S)
3. Social and community service managers (S, T)
4. Technical writers (T)
5. Occupational therapists (S, T)
6. Massage therapists (S, T)
7. Urban and regional planners (S, T)
8. Producers and directors (S, T)
9. Postsecondary teachers (S, T)
10. Probation officers and correctional treatment specialists (S, T)
11. Morticians, undertakers, and funeral directors (S)
12. Physical therapists and exercise physiologists (S, T)
13. Computer and information systems managers (S, T)
14. Lawyers, and judges, magistrates, and other judicial workers (S, T)
15. Web developers (T)

S = Occupation requires above-average social perceptiveness

T = Above-average task independence is associated with the occupation

Figure 2. Female- and Male-Majority Occupations with Highest Proportion of Gay or Lesbian Workers

	Highest proportion of lesbians among female workers	Highest proportion of gay men among male workers
Female-majority occupations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Psychologists (S, T) 2. Probation officers/correctional treatment specialist (S, T) 3. Training and development specialists and managers (S) 4. Sociologists (S, T) 5. Social and community service managers (S, T) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Flight attendants (S) 2. Hairdressers, hairstylists, and cosmetologists (S, T) 3. Nurse practitioners (S, T) 4. Transportation attendants, except flight attendants (S) 5. Travel agents (S, T)
Male-majority occupations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bus and truck mechanics and diesel engine specialists 2. Elevator installers/repairers (T) 3. Heating, A/C, and refrigeration mechanics/installers (T) 4. Home appliance repairers (T) 5. Security and fire alarm systems installers (T) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Actors (S, T) 2. News analysts, reporters, and correspondents (S, T) 3. Artists and related workers (S, T) 4. Agents/managers of artists, performers, athletes (S, T) 5. Producers and directors (S, T)

S = Occupation requires above-average social perceptiveness

T = Above-average task independence is associated with the occupation

Our findings suggest that gay and lesbian workers might be drawn to a different set of occupations than heterosexual workers and perhaps bring with them a distinct set of skills to these occupations. Gay and lesbian

workers probably developed some of these skills as a result of social adaptation to discrimination. As societies become more tolerant of same-sex relationships, however, the need to conceal one's sexual orientation in everyday social interactions might fade over time. As a result, gay men and lesbians may lose their skill for social perceptiveness, which may make them less distinct in the labor market. But we expect that the patterns we observed will remain in place for the foreseeable future. Occupational patterns are usually slow to change because they continue to reflect earlier educational and career choices and because the gay- or lesbian-friendly reputation of an occupation can persist for a long time and continue to draw gay and lesbian workers.



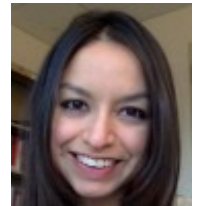
Notes:

- This article is based on the authors' paper [Concealable Stigma and Occupational Segregation: Toward a Theory of Gay and Lesbian Occupations](#), *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 2015, 60(3): 446-481.
- This post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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