

Wanted: LGBTQ+ Allies

It's time to act on changing workplace climates that are hostile to LGBTQ+ physicists.

By Timothy Atherton and Ramón Barthelemy

This article is part of a series of pieces publishing today on the experiences of LGBTQ+ physicists. See also: [Viewpoint: Making Physics Inclusive to LGBTQ+ Folks](#); [Q&A: Seeking Diversity When Faced with Adversity](#); and [Podcast: Life as an LGBTQ+ Physicist](#).

Today, we, along with seven colleagues, published a [study](#) looking at the experiences of people with marginalized sexual and gender identities in physics (see [Viewpoint: Making Physics Inclusive to LGBTQ+ Folks](#)). Our study suggests that there exist several concerning issues for LGBTQ+ physicists, including exclusionary behaviors and workplace climates where LGBTQ+ people feel uncomfortable being out. An alarming finding is the crucial impact of workplace climate on the retention of LGBTQ+ physicists. From our own experiences, we know that most of our LGBTQ+ physics colleagues have left the field for other jobs, representing an enormous loss of talent. It's time for the physics community to take serious steps toward reversing that trend by creating a workplace environment that actively welcomes and supports the participation of LGBTQ+ people.



LGBTQ+ people bring important resources to the physics enterprise, but many leave the field due to exclusionary behaviors. Credit: Viktoriia/stock.adobe.com

We and our colleagues have been studying the experiences of LGBTQ+ physicists for well over a decade. In 2016, we all helped put together a report that analyzed data from a survey of 324 LGBTQ+ and ally members of the American Physical Society that included scientists from different institution types and career stages. Our new study carefully re-analyzes that dataset, looking at the impacts of exclusionary behaviors on the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Interestingly, our analysis finds no significant difference between the impact of observing exclusionary behavior and the impact of experiencing it directly: Both are equally likely to cause an individual to want to leave the field. Tacit acceptance of exclusionary behavior by those in leadership roles, as well as by other members of a department or institution, causes damage to more than just the immediate target of the behavior and can create a hostile workplace climate.

So, what does exclusionary behavior look like? We two are both members of the LGBTQ+ community—I (Tim) identify as gay, queer, and binational; and I (Ramón) identify as a queer man of Cuban heritage—and we can both attest that exclusionary behavior can take on many forms. These forms can be indirect actions such as an unwillingness to discuss LGBTQ+ issues in the workplace or a lack of presence of LGBTQ+ individuals in faculty and leadership positions. I—Tim—recall bringing my partner to a workplace event where several important people had great difficulty in understanding that he was not also a professor and needed me to explain what being my partner meant. These people assumed that all the professors were straight men with wives; they also asked the women professors whose wives they were.

Exclusionary behaviors can also be more direct. Participants in the 2016 APS survey reported being misgendered, harassed,

and even sexually assaulted by their colleagues. Everyone would agree that such behavior is unacceptable, but in the absence of a supportive workplace climate, it can go unreported. Exclusionary behavior can also be related to the hierarchical structure of the workplace. I—Tim—have found myself avoided by a senior person in my field since that person learned that I am queer. Given that the gatekeepers of physics research—those who write letters of recommendation for career advances—are generally the most senior in the field and the least diverse, such behaviors can rob junior LGBTQ+ physicists of opportunities for career progression. This issue is particularly salient for me—Ramón—as I currently hold a tenure track position.

Another key finding of our study is that there is an uneven level of exclusionary behavior felt by different members of the LGBTQ+ community. An LGBTQ+ physicist with multiple marginalized identities—LGBTQ+ and a woman, a person of color, and/or a person with a disability, for example—experiences a more hostile workplace climate and is more likely to be subject to exclusionary behavior. Trans people, especially, face particularly hostile climates. This finding has important ramifications: Measures that attempt to address the negative effects of exclusionary behavior need to be designed so that they consider all the marginalized identities that a person may have.

Being “out” or open about one’s sexuality or gender identity is something that heterosexuals and cisgender people routinely do with little thought, happily sharing details of family weekend plans over coffee, for example. But for LGBTQ+ people, being out is an ongoing and conscious choice about how and with whom to share their gender and sexual identity. Our study shows a strong correlation between outness and workplace comfort. But the direction of cause and effect is unclear. Does a hostile workplace climate force a person to keep their identities

secret? Or does being out contribute to a comfortable climate?

While our study provides important insight into the experiences of LGBTQ+ physicists, much still remains to be understood. A dedicated research program is urgently needed to explore in more depth the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and to design programs to increase LGBTQ+ inclusion. The different experiences of people under the LGBTQ+ umbrella also suggest that more focused studies, especially around trans people and people of color, that look at the experiences of different identities are needed. Other studies are needed, for example, to look at the impacts of the pandemic-induced virtual workplace on the experience of LGBTQ+ individuals. Together, these studies will require major resources and federal funding.

We believe that LGBTQ+ people bring important resources to the physics enterprise, providing diverse perspectives that can lead to better science and that can enable teams to tackle the most pressing challenges faced by humanity. To keep LGBTQ+ physicists in the field, we need allies—people who actively work to reconstruct physics culture. We hope those reading today’s stories in *Physics* will become active allies to the LGBTQ+ community and help us in this work. The potential payoff is huge: Retaining LGBTQ+ physicists will enable the whole field’s success, lead to greater visibility of LGBTQ+ people in physics, and hopefully create a virtuous cycle that makes physics workplaces positive places for everyone.

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