



(When and How) Do I Tell?: Disclosing Social Identity in Personal Relationships

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Jayla Brown sighed as she closed the door to her suite in the first-year students' residence hall. She was relieved that her roommate Lisa wasn't there; she could have some time to herself. Lisa was such a ball of energy that Jayla barely had time to hear herself think. But, that didn't really bother Jayla because Lisa was such a positive person and basically a sweet girl. So far, she had been a great roommate, especially compared to other roomies she'd heard about. Jayla plopped on her bed and began to reflect on her first two and a half months at Northeastern State University. She and Lisa had hit it off from the very first day they moved in. They had so much in common it was crazy. They both were middle children, and had been on the honor rolls and the cheerleading squads at their high schools. Plus, they both had a sick sense of humor, which meant that they laughed a lot, and had similar taste in movies and TV shows. They even had the same favorite color: purple, which meant that their bedding and accessories complemented each other. In fact, they both had bought the exact same lavender desk set from Target! They each had gone with one guy during their last two years of high school, and had broken up with them right before coming to college. Most important of all, they both were reluctant pre-med majors, mainly because of parental pressure. Jayla was glad to have a roommate who really understood her ambivalence about becoming a doctor. Some days she felt positive that's what she wanted to do; other days she wished she felt free to choose her career path. But her older sister Leila already had disappointed her folks by choosing to become a professor, and Jayla knew they were counting on her. The way things were going, she and Lisa might become best friends.

Sure, they also were different from one another. For one thing, Lisa was white and Jayla was black. That didn't bother Jayla. She had gone to a predominantly white private

school, and some of her best friends were white. Jayla smiled at the cliché. “Really, they were,” she said aloud, and laughed to herself. Lisa, on the other hand, had never been friends with anyone black, and she sometimes relied on stereotypes when she talked with Jayla. She assumed that Jayla liked hip hop, which she did, but she also liked other types of music, as the playlist on her iPod showed. During the first few days, she had tried to “talk black” to Jayla, using slang and phrases from mainstream media like “Yo! What up?” Jayla was frustrated at first, but she decided to be patient. She felt like Lisa was trying too hard to relate to her based on her race. She gently explained that all young blacks didn’t use that type of language. Lisa seemed to understand, and she apologized to Jayla. To be fair, Jayla acknowledged that she also had stereotyped Lisa because she was a white girl from California. She had figured that Lisa would talk like the Valley Girls she saw on TV and in the movies, and Lisa hadn’t met that stereotype. But, she sometimes teased Lisa: one time when Lisa asked her opinion about an outfit, Jayla replied in her best Paris Hilton impression: “That’s hot.” She and Lisa had cracked up. Every now and then, Lisa would still use slang, but Jayla knew she was just playing around.

Jayla didn’t think their racial difference was a big deal in their budding friendship. They had confided in each other about topics like being homesick, and their apprehensions about their careers. However, Jayla never felt fully open with Lisa because she was holding back an important piece of information about herself that she’d told only one other person. And, she didn’t know if, when, and how she would ever tell Lisa.

Jayla exhaled deeply as her thoughts turned to the main reasons she had come to NESU. In addition to having a great pre-med program, NESU touted its racially diverse student body. This appealed to Jayla because she wanted to develop more friendships with students of color. More important to Jayla, NESU was listed online as a “gay-friendly campus.” Jayla had struggled for years with her sexuality, and she had only recently become comfortable with being attracted to females. No one in her family but her older sister Leila knew about that. And, she had promised not to tell Jayla’s secret, even though she had encouraged Jayla to tell their parents. Jayla just wasn’t sure how her parents would react, since their church had such a strong stance against homosexuality. Indeed, one reason Jayla had tried to suppress her feelings and to be “normal” was because she didn’t want to be a sinner, and she didn’t want to disgrace her parents. Thanks to Leila, she didn’t feel like a bad person, but she still couldn’t face her parents yet.

When Jayla was a junior in high school, she visited her sister Leila at her college. They were walking on campus when two girls passed them, walking hand-in-hand, and gazing at one another lovingly. “That is so cool,” her sister said. “I’m glad they feel comfortable enough to show their relationship in public.” Jayla seized the moment. “I hope I can show that side of myself one day, too,” she murmured. Leila stopped abruptly. “What did you say?” she gasped. “You heard me,” Jayla said more firmly. “I’m pretty sure that I’m gay.” “Oh, Jay,” Leila said softly, as she gathered her sister in her arms. “That must be so hard for you.” Jayla choked back tears as she nodded slowly.

They talked all night about Jayla's feelings and fears, and her sister had totally supported her. Since that night, they had talked many times. And, Leila had given Jayla lots of resources, including books and articles about black lesbianism. Jayla especially cherished a book by Audre Lorde called *Sister Outsider* because it discussed challenges of being female, black, and lesbian. Some authors referred to a "triple consciousness" of these three oppressed identities that made it hard for black lesbians to find a community of people who would accept them fully. They also wrote about how members of these various social identity groups sometimes forced them to choose or rank these three aspects of their identity. Jayla also had found a wealth of information online, including blogs and discussion groups written by young gay people of varying races. She realized that she wasn't alone and that she wasn't some kind of freak. She hadn't found the nerve yet to form friendships or to explore intimate relationships online, but she was comforted to have those options. Thank goodness she had come out to her sister.

Jayla wished that everyone she would come out to would be so supportive and caring. But, based on what she'd read, she knew it would be hard to predict how people would react. "It's just not fair," she sighed. She knew that she would have to come out again and again and again and again, for the rest of her life. She hoped only that the process would get easier as she repeated it.

Jayla sighed loudly again. "How naïve was I?" she thought. She had fantasized about having a multiracial network of gay and straight friends at NESU with whom she could be herself. She had read that many young people came out when they went to college. And, she figured that once she established an "out" life at school, it would be easier to tell her parents about her sexuality. She was desperately tired of feeling guilty about passing as straight. Her mom asked her almost every time they talked if she had met a nice young man, and Jayla would say she was too busy studying to think about dating. Jayla knew that her parents wanted her to have a positive, loving marriage like theirs, and they were looking forward to becoming grandparents. She dreaded letting them down, and she hated feeling like she was leading them on. She was feeling more and more urgency to tell them the truth.

Her dad had really wanted her to go to his alma mater, a black university. She had decided against that, because she had read online about challenges that some black gay students experience at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). And, she had witnessed homophobia and heterosexism in their family's church, which was mainly black. She knew that not all black folks were against homosexuality, and she had read that some HBCUs were becoming more welcoming. However, she hadn't found anything on her dad's college's website that led her to believe that they would welcome her. In contrast, NESU's site included sexual orientation in its diversity statement, and they had a GLBTQ student service center, which her dad's school didn't. However, Jayla felt conflicted about not going to an HBCU, because she also realized that the odds of her finding a black girlfriend would probably be higher at her dad's alma mater. But, she was open to dating women outside of her race. Jayla smiled at the

thought, since she hadn't dated ANY woman yet. She basically had pretended to be heterosexual throughout high school, and she'd had a boyfriend during her junior and senior years. Mark hadn't pressured her for sex because he had taken an abstinence pledge in his church. They had kissed a few times, and she had pretended to enjoy it, but she had known since at least middle school that she was attracted to females. She and Mark had agreed to remain friends after they both decided to go to colleges that were far away from each other. Mark was one of her best friends, and he was high on her "coming out" list.

However, her plan to begin a new life by being out at NESU wasn't working out at all. She hadn't anticipated the complex web of challenges that now confronted her. For one thing, she was having a hard time finding signs of that so-called gay-friendly environment at NESU. During orientation, the Director of Jayla's residence hall cautioned girls about having boys in their rooms. She seemed to be trying to be inclusive when she said, "The same rules apply for heterosexuals and homosexuals." However, she blew it by adding: "No one wants to wake up seeing two girls in bed where a man is supposed to be." In Jayla's Intro to Communication class, all of the examples of intimate relationships in the textbook referred to heterosexual couples, and whenever her professor gave examples, she used male and female names. She hoped that the communication and diversity class she was taking next semester would be more inclusive. Most discouraging of all, every time she walked by the GLBTQ center, she saw only white males. She didn't feel comfortable entering that space to talk about her sexuality. She wondered if white lesbian students felt the same way.

Then there was the race thing. Jayla had been so optimistic about meeting students of varying races, especially other black students. When she attended a Black Student Alliance meeting, a guy had smiled at her, and said, "Welcome, my sister." Jayla wondered if he would be so warm if he knew she was gay. She met another black girl named Erika who seemed nice. Erika was a sophomore, and she told Jayla that she would help her get acclimated to NESU. Jayla wanted to take her up on the offer, but she was unsure of how and if she should tell Erika about her sexuality. She noticed another girl at the meeting with a short-cropped haircut who was dressed in masculine clothes, and she wondered if she was gay. "Shut up" she told herself. "You know you shouldn't assume." After all, she certainly didn't "look gay." Her relaxed hair was shoulder length, and she wore the latest fashions. She even had been named "Best Dressed" in high school. After attending the first BSA meeting, Jayla wasn't sure if she would become an active member. Most of the students seemed to know one another very well, even though they were friendly to Jayla and the other new students who were there. However, during the meeting, someone responded to a suggestion by saying, "That's so gay," and almost everyone laughed.

Despite the high percentage of students of color on campus, Jayla often was the only black student or student of color in her classes. Some of the white students seemed awkward around her, and some of her professors seemed to single her out when race-related topics arose. She found herself feeling self-conscious about her race

in ways that she'd never experienced, although some of her black friends at church had accused her of being an Oreo because she went to a private high school. They really got on her case when she first started dating Mark, who was white. Fortunately, Lisa was receptive when Jayla expressed some her frustrations about race. She seemed genuinely concerned about Jayla's feelings, which she didn't dismiss or downplay. Jayla was learning that she could depend on Lisa to try to understand her. She had reciprocated when Lisa talked about being one of only two females in a science class where the professor seemed sexist.

Jayla exhaled deeply once again as she turned her mind to her current dilemma. Should she or should she not come out to Lisa? She had been hopeful that her roommate would be open to her sexual identity. After all, Lisa had grown up near San Francisco, which Jayla had heard was one of the most gay friendly cities in the world. Following advice from one website, Jayla had tried to gauge Lisa's attitudes toward homosexuality by asking her about her interests and experiences. During one of their first conversations, she had said, "Sooo, I understand that San Francisco is a really diverse city." Lisa had replied, "Yes, it is. We have so many different cultures there, and the city is so dynamic." "What do you mean," Jayla probed. "Oh, you know," Lisa said, "a lot of different ethnic groups and all kinds of food and music." Jayla wanted to push further, but she didn't want to seem too obvious.

Jayla knew that if she was going to come out to Lisa, her timing was crucial. From what she'd read, if she waited too long, Lisa might feel hurt and betrayed that Jayla had withheld something so important from her. Lisa might not trust her as much. But, if she had told her too soon, Lisa might not have gotten to know other things about Jayla. "It's just not fair," Jayla groaned. Why did she have to worry about disclosing her sexual identity when straight people don't have to even think about it? Of course, Lisa assumed she was straight because Jayla had a boyfriend in high school. One day when they were walking across campus, Lisa had pointed out a tall black guy, and said, "Ooooh, look at him, Jayla. You should try to get with that." Jayla sucked her teeth, and replied, "Lisa, how many times do I have to ask you not to talk like that?" Lisa grinned, and said, "OK. Sorry, girl, but you know I'm right." Jayla shook her head. In a way, she was glad that she could focus on Lisa's lame attempts to talk black as a way to deflect responding to her logical assumption that she would be interested in a guy—a black guy at that. She hadn't told Lisa yet that her high school boyfriend was white. Lisa had gone out on a couple dates since they had become roommates, and she always wanted to talk about them with Jayla. Jayla had managed to avoid or minimize talking about dating, boyfriends, and sex, but she knew that she couldn't do that much longer. After all, these were "normal" topics for female friends their age.

She exhaled deeply again. So, what might happen if she told Lisa? Lisa might be so repelled that she would ask for another roommate. Or, she might shrug it off as no big deal. Or, she might act like it was no big deal, but then become chilly. Or. . . . Jayla knew that guessing was fruitless. However, she then started thinking about the consequences of NOT telling Lisa. How could they deepen their friendship and

freely discuss important topics like dating and intimate relationships or other topics that Jayla would have to either avoid or flat out lie about?

Jayla pounded her fist on her pillow. She knew she shouldn't let much more time pass. She had read lots of advice about how to have a "coming out" conversation, and she had rehearsed a couple of opening lines. She even had printed out an article about living with a gay roommate to give Lisa. Lisa was going home for Fall Break, so this would be a good time to tell her and give her time to think about it away from campus. Hmmm. Maybe she could email Lisa while she was gone, instead of talking to her face-to-face. That might be easier for both of them. "Nah," she thought. That didn't seem right. As Jayla asked herself one more time, "What should I do?" the suite door opened, and Lisa bounded in. She smiled broadly and said, "What up, Jay?"

For Further Thought and Reflection

1. What communicative challenges does Jayla face in developing new relationships at college and in maintaining relationships in her family?
2. Are there certain topics that friends should expect to discuss and confide in one another as they develop a friendship? If so, how might those topics vary according to the friends' age, race, sexuality, and other aspects of social identity? Why or why not?
3. How do you decide when is "the right time" to disclose personal, private information to a new friend?
4. Should Jayla tell Lisa about her sexuality? Why or why not? If she should, how should she tell her? Should she already have told her? Explain.
5. Should Jayla tell her parents about her sexuality? Why or why not? If so, how should she tell them? Should she already have told them? Explain.
6. Do you agree that Jayla has an especially complex challenge with forming friendships at NESU (and other contexts) because of her social identity (i.e., female, black, and lesbian)? Why or why not?

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