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OUT: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF COMING OUT

by

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ABSTRACT

This study uses a constructivist grounded theory approach to investigate the meaning of "coming out" for LGBQ individuals. Analysis of open-ended interviews with 30 LGBQ persons revealed three main themes. First, coming out does not have a universal meaning among LGBQ persons; rather, it varies on the basis of an individual's experiences, social environment, and personal beliefs and values. Coming out is a transformative process, and an important element in identity formation and maintenance. Second, despite being attracted *only* to members of the same sex, ten interviewees engaged in a *queer apologetic*, a kind of identity compromise whereby individuals disclose a bisexual identity that they believe satisfies their personal attractions for only members of the same sex and society's expectation that they be attracted to members of the opposite sex. Third, both gender conformity (e.g., female=feminine) and gender non-conformity (e.g., female=masculine) present unique challenges to coming out. Because they are assumed to be straight, gender conformists must make a more concerted effort to come out. Gender non-conformists may experience greater ease coming out broadly because they are "assumed gay," but they also experience greater opposition from family and friends who resist gender non-conformity. This study provides important insight into the meaning of coming out as well the influences of heteronormativity and gender presentation on coming out. Implication and recommendations for future research are included.

To my partner, Stephanie, thank you for being you. Without your constant support and encouragement, my education would have stalled long ago.

To my parents, Mary and Ronald Guittar, thank you for raising me with love and guiding me to become such an inquisitive, empathetic, and passionate human being.

This project is also dedicated to those whose voices are not heard, and anyone whose sexual orientation has been ignored, challenged, or trivialized.

"Words offer the means to meaning, and for those who will listen, the enunciation of truth."

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LIST OF ACRONYMS / ABBREVIATIONS

LGBQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer
LGBT	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender
LGBTQQIA	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, ally

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Heterosexuality is still very much the norm in contemporary life throughout the

United States (Katz 2007). As such, individuals who identify as having a sexual orientation

that falls outside of this dominant heterosexual framework face myriad difficulties in

identifying and maintaining a sexual identity. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ)

individuals are tasked with many difficult and often ambiguous challenges associated with

maintaining a healthy sexual identity. Central to these challenges is the process of coming

out, which has been identified as one of the most crucial elements in the development of a

healthy sexual identity (McLean 2007).

Much research on coming out has been directed at labeling stages in the coming out

process (Coleman 1982; Carrion and Lock 1997), discussing the impact of coming out at

work and school (Appleby 2001; Griffith and Hebl 2002; Liddle 2009), uncovering health

and mental health outcomes related to coming out (Garnets and Kimmel 1993; Savin-

Williams and Rodriguez 1993), and identifying the impact on family dynamics (Waldner

and Magruder 1999; Jenkins 2008). Recently, qualitative researchers have begun to analyze

narratives of individuals' coming out processes in order to explore the factors that affect

these processes (Waldner and Magruder 1999; Merighi and Grimes 2000; Grierson and

Smith 2005; Gorman-Murray 2008). However, most studies on coming out are based on the

assumption that "coming out" means the same thing to everyone, and that the entire

experience is likely to fit a series of formulaic stages. The assumption of a shared, singular

meaning for coming out is challenged in the present study. Is there a predictable and

common "coming out" experience or does the meaning of, and experiences associated with,

coming out vary substantially from person to person? It would be to our benefit to take a more inductive approach to exploring the unique experiences of those with an LGBQ identity in order to explore what coming out means to those who have taken this step. The current study takes a constructivist grounded theory approach to exploring the coming out process for 30 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ)[1] individuals. Open-ended interviews were conducted in order to explore the central research question of this study: What does coming out *mean* for LGBQ persons who have engaged, or are currently engaging, in coming out?

Coming out is a very personal matter, and at the same time, a process that has the potential to impact and even reshape one's social network. In the simplest terms, coming out has been defined as the public sharing of one's sexuality (Waldner and Magruder 1999). However, this overly simplistic definition does not take into account that, among other things, coming out means sharing one's history and "working to avoid stereotypic clarity about the messier parts of [ones'] lives" (Crawley 2009:214). Coming out does not have a universal meaning among LGBQ persons; rather, it varies on the basis of individuals' experiences, social environment, and personal beliefs and values. All 30 participants in this study agree that coming out is a transformative process, and an important element in identity formation and maintenance. For some participants coming out is more of a

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[1] Although this study is designed around the use of these labels, study participants may very well identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning, pansexual, poly-sexual, fluid, or they may prefer to abstain from attaching any such label to their sexuality. Essentially, I am interested in anyone who engages in a process of coming out related to their sexual orientation, so the participants need not self-identify as LGBQ.

personal journey of self-affirmation, while for others it is about the sharing of their

sexuality with others—and oftentimes a combination of these two characteristics.

Most research maintains a decidedly narrow focus on coming out, scrutinizing a

single, predetermined element of coming out (e.g., the influence of family formation,

religiosity, etc.). Rather than self-imposing a series of research questions or hypotheses,

beyond exploring the meaning of coming out, this research project is based on openly

inducing theory from the interview data. The major themes included in this manuscript

were extracted from the interview data. I did not set out to "unearth" these particular

themes via specific questions related to these topics. Rather, I employed a very open set of

interview questions, and then allowed the interview data to dictate the results of the study.

The most important themes in this study include the influence of heteronormativity and

gender (non)conformity on coming out.

Heteronormativity sometimes influences people who have same-sex attractions to

feel that they must somehow hold on to heterosexuality—at least to a degree. Despite being

attracted *only* to members of the same sex, ten participants in the current study came out

initially as bisexual. I call this interaction the *queer apologetic*. The queer apologetic is a

form of identity compromise whereby individuals disclose a bisexual identity that they

believe satisfies: 1) their personal attractions for only members of the same sex, and 2)

society's expectation that they be attracted to members of the opposite sex.

Gender presentation can have a major influence on the coming out process. Gender

conformity (e.g., a feminine female) and gender non-conformity (e.g., a masculine female)

each present unique challenges to coming out. Gender conformity may lessen the frequency with which an individual is compelled to come out because acquaintances and peers assume that an individual is straight. On the other hand, gender conformity makes coming out more difficult because those who wish to come out have to make a more concerted effort to do so. Gender non-conformity is often less well-received by family and friends, so non-conforming LGBQ persons often experience additional opposition upon coming out. However, gender non-conformists are sometimes "assumed gay," and this assumption eases the process of broad public disclosure.

Our attitudes, beliefs, and values play a major role in many life processes (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975), and the same is true of the coming out process. The attitudes, beliefs, and values held by family members, close friends, and the broader society also impact this process (Gorman-Murray 2008). When taking these influences into consideration, it is easy to see that coming out is far from being a simple, individual decision. Rather, it is more of an intricately detailed social process involving many different levels of interactions. Coming out rests not only on the individual, but also on the perceived reactions of others; family, close friends, co-workers, and even distant acquaintances and the society at large.

Significance of the Problem

A realistic construction of the meanings and experiences associated with coming out relies on a heavily inductive research methodology. In order to gain a fuller understanding of the experiences of LGBQ individuals, we need to abandon assumptions and allow the

unique narrative of each interviewee to emerge. Coming out is sociologically important. An improved understanding of the coming out process will contribute to research on gender and sexuality. It also has the potential to improve the awareness and empathy of the general public on matters related to sexual orientation—a topic that is becoming increasingly salient in contemporary society. This project, then, is driven by what Denzin (1992) calls a critical pedagogy. The undercurrent of this project places emphasis on progressive politics and social justice, so it relies on an insistence that constructionism and postmodernism are mutually contributory.

Qualitative research on coming out has made strides over the past two decades. However, much of this research has been positioned over finite populations such as college students, or employees of a particular company. Even those studies that have broadened their sample to a wider array of potential participants have emphasized one specific aspect of the coming out process. Aspects have ranged from how coming out affects the family to how people come out as work, yet none has stepped back and taken a social approach to the coming out process as a career that is unique to each individual. It is my goal to uncover a more organic understanding of coming out, including the meanings of the concept itself.

The study of coming out has implications that are much more far-reaching than simply advancing research agendas. The questions investigated by this study have the ability to promote a greater public understanding of the lives of LGBQ individuals in a time of heightened moral panic (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009) over matters of sexuality. Numerous studies have hinted that much of the intolerance toward non-heterosexual identities comes from a simple lack of understanding and empathy. This current line of

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research also has the potential to be expanded to other matters involving LGBQ individuals and coming out. For example: What kinds of cohort differences are there in the meaning of coming out? How does coming out vary by region or culture? What kinds of environments are more/less conducive to coming out? Is there really a coming out imperative?

My research contributes to our understanding of what coming out means, what the experience of coming out is like, and what factors contribute to the coming out process. The findings from my research should serve as the first sociological analysis of the root of the coming out process: what coming out *means* to individuals. Although this study is sociological in design and execution, the implications are relevant to all social sciences as well as groups and institutions in the public sphere.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The Meaning of Coming Out

The body of empirical research on issues involving the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities has been growing considerably over the past 20 years. Of all the literature concerning LGBQ persons, coming out and the development of an LGBQ identity are probably the two best developed concepts (Shallenberger 1996). However, most studies on coming out are based on the assumption that "coming out" means the same thing across individuals. Further, it is assumed by the psychological community that the experiences associated with coming out are likely to fit a series of formulaic stages (Savin-Williams 2001). Sociological research is still underdeveloped in terms of taking a more inductive approach to exploring the unique experiences of those with an LGBQ identity. Even qualitative studies that employ an objectivist take on grounded theory typically assume that respondents share their meanings (Charmaz 2000). As long as research relies on the assumption that coming out means the same thing to everyone, how can we really begin to explore individual variations in all things related to coming out?

The ambiguity of meanings related to matters of sexuality is not a new phenomenon. In her book *Virginity Lost*, sociologist Laura Carpenter (2005) set out to investigate virginity loss as a cultural phenomenon that is important to study in its own right. To her surprise, Carpenter quickly came to recognize that perhaps the most challenging element of her study would be the dearth of research on the meaning of virginity loss:

> Once I began to research the topic, I found that the scholarship on early sexuality was largely silent on the meaning of virginity loss, and even more

so about its definition. This silence surprised me, given how consistently American institutions—mass media, medical science, schools, religious institutions, public policy organizations, and the government—depicted virginity loss as one of, if not *the*, most meaningful events in an individual's sexual career (Carpenter 2005:5).

By simply rereading Carpenter's passage while replacing the term "virginity loss" with "coming out," we see that the rest of her statement seems to hold true. Coming out is often touted as central to identity formation, and its relevance is echoed throughout American institutions, yet we have exerted little effort on discerning the meaning of the concept.

I have yet to identify a single study where one of the primary research questions is focused on exploring the meaning of coming out. Fortunately, by scrutinizing the details of previous studies, it is possible to construct somewhat of a mosaic of meanings that have been attributed to coming out. Some of these meanings are extracted from the narratives of participants within the given studies, although most of them are definitions proffered by researchers at the onset of their manuscripts. For example, according to Waldner and Magruder (1999), coming out refers simply to the acknowledgement of a gay identity to others. A slightly more specific rendition of this was shared by Merighi and Grimes (2000) who summarized coming out as the disclosure of one's sexuality to family members. These studies, along with others (Griffith and Hebl 2002; Johnston and Jenkins 2003; McLean 2007), typically maintain that coming out includes 1) disclosure of a sexual identity, 2) the involvement of family, friends, or coworkers, and 3) a transformative nature to the exchange. Considering the variation in definitions, it is essential that we gain an understanding of how those individuals who are engaged in coming out define this concept.

Appleby (2001) offers a unique approach to defining the concept. Rather than proposing an explanation for what coming out means, he holds off on disclosing a meaning until reporting the findings of his ethnographic study. He interviewed 39 working-class gay and bisexual men in order to better understand their reactions to homophobia and heterosexism, among other things. Some definitive themes emerged from his interviews with these men. In addition to talking about how they disclosed their sexual identities to family members and close friends, the men talked about coming out as an ongoing process. This is an element not examined in much research on coming out. Rather than recalling a singular event, participants spoke of coming out at different times to different people and how they struggled with whom to share their gay or bisexual identities.

> My closest friend asked me if I was gay. Yes, I came out. I was blunt about it. However, I made it very clear that I did not want him to spread this around school. I told him that if anyone asked me, I would admit the truth (quoted in Appleby 2001:57).

This young man recalled the early events of his coming out process. Although he was prepared to come out to his best friend, this event was nowhere near a definitive disclosure to everyone of his sexual orientation. Experiences such as this will be discussed in greater detail below. The important point here is that through interviews, these men contextually conveyed a modified definition of coming out that included an emphasis on how it is an ongoing process. Unfortunately, few studies have offered participants this sort of opportunity to contribute their own input into the conceptualization of the term "coming out."

Many researchers altogether avoid defining the concept. For example, in his studies on coming out to parents, Savin-Williams (1989; 1998) discusses how the disclosure of one's sexuality to family members is a pivotal and often neglected part of the process, yet an explicit definition of coming out is not completely stated. In his work, there is occasional mention of how the psychological community relies of a rigid definition to explain coming out (Savin-Williams 2001). However, he rebukes such a practice citing how it does not adequately explain most individuals' lived experiences. Perhaps the lack of definition in his writings then is simply a reflection of how the author wishes to avoid placing a definitive label on people's rather unique experiences related to sexual orientation and identity.

Still, many researchers rely on their own definitions of coming out while interviewing LGBQ persons. In a study of young lesbian and bisexual women, Oswald (1999:66) states that "coming out is a process of significant change for women who accept and disclose bisexual or lesbian identities, and for those to whom they come out." Although Oswald's definition is an example of circumventing the question of what coming out means and defining it for oneself, her definition of coming out is unique in that it explains coming out as both self acceptance and public disclosure. Oswald (1999:67) later states how each participant in her study "was interviewed about how she *came out to herself* and the most important people in her life" (emphasis added). Oswald's statement begs the question of whether self-acceptance alone might even constitute coming out. Plenty of people engage in self acceptance yet have no interest in disclosing their sexuality to other people. Any finding that self acceptance *is* coming out for some people would problematize the work of researchers who insist on defining coming out as a process rooted in public disclosure.

Perhaps self acceptance is simply a prerequisite to coming out as opposed to being part of the process. All of these questions will remain unanswered so long as we fail to explore what coming out means to individuals.

At some juncture we need to stop and ask ourselves if the meaning we ascribe to a concept is similar to the meanings held by individuals outside of academia. In the case of coming out, this remains to be seen as very few studies have given participants the opportunity to weigh in on its meaning. Granted, some studies on coming out are written by scholars who themselves identify as having an LGBQ identity. In these cases, it is possible that the researchers simply use the definition that most aptly describes their own experiences. This is an approach most often used in autoethnographic works of coming out at work or school. Since the author is the central figure in these narratives, it makes sense to use one's own definition of coming out (see: Coming Out in the Higher Education Classroom, a special feature in *Feminism and Psychology* 2009).

As for studies where the researcher is interviewing or surveying a chosen population, the question remains: is the author's definition of coming out in congruence with that held by each of the participants? Scholarship in research methodology has devoted a great deal of time and effort to investigating how researchers and study participants construct different meanings of a concept or question (Groves et al. 2009). In many cases there remains an assumption of shared meaning between the researcher and the participants. This assumption of shared meaning even permeates many carefully constructed qualitative studies that use various incarnations of grounded theory in their coding and analysis (Charmaz 2000). This brings me back to my first research question:

What does coming out mean to different people? Does telling a close friend constitute coming out, or is it a matter of disclosing one's sexual orientation to a parent? Is it a matter of full disclosure to all family, friends, and acquaintances? Does self acceptance constitute coming out? Is coming out really a process? Does one ever truly come out? Is coming out even relevant as a contemporary concept related to identity formation?

Prior to discussing literature on experiences associated with coming out, a few things should be said about the use of blanket terms such as "coming out." Seidman et al. (1999) asserts that the use of blanket concepts like "coming out" itself constructs LGBQ persons as suffering a common fate or similar circumstance. A postmodern take on the use of such categories or labels is that they are unfit to describe the varied life experiences of different people. The same goes for the use of the "closet" metaphor. An example of this shortcoming was encountered by Crawley and Broad (2004) in their study of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community panels. Although community panels are intended to showcase the unique experiences of LGBT people, "the auspices of the setting and the coming-out formula story call on panelists to typify what it means to be LGBT, albeit in ways that contradict popular stereotypes" (Crawley and Broad 2004:39). So, although contemporary sexual identity categorization and storylines associated with coming out are intended to bring attention to individual variation, they still serve to undermine these very differences. Through the use of constructivist grounded theory I dig below the surface of typical "storytold" meanings and work with participants to uncover meanings that are relevant to their social worlds.

Researchers make many assumptions regarding the meaning of coming out. In terms of coming out, studies fail to develop the concept in a logical fashion. In a few select cases, the meaning is extracted from the narratives of participants within the given studies. However, most researchers simply proffer a definition, or cite another source that uses an ambiguously-defined term. As Charmaz (2000) has pointed out, most researchers assume that research participants share (i.e., the researcher's) meaning. These sorts of assumptions and vagaries are problematic in terms of gaining a better understand of what coming out really means to individuals. In reviewing the literature on coming out, the only conclusion I have come to is that perhaps there are so many definitions for coming out simply because "coming out" is not a concept with a singular, shared meaning. The primary research question in the current study focuses on exploring the meaning of coming out. Throughout the remainder of this literature review, the meaning of coming out will be based on the stated or implied meaning found in each study discussed.

The Coming Out Experience

Coming out is not a simple linear, goal-oriented, developmental process (Rust 1993), and the experiences associated with coming out are as numerous as the number of people who have taken their lesbian, gay, or bisexual identities public. As far as literature on *experiences* associated with coming out, it appears that relatively little sociological research has been conducted on this phenomenon. Historically, most research on coming out has been written from a psychological perspective, much of which has been based around identifying the "stages" of coming out.

More recently, sociologists, educators, and social workers have realized the value of learning from people's unique lived experiences. Qualitative studies based around interviews with LGBQ persons have begun to reveal more about what types of experiences people have when disclosing their sexual identities. This includes new insight on the social and psychological stresses of maintaining an LGBQ identity, and changing relationships with family and friends (Waldner and Magruder 1999; Merighi and Grimes 2000; Gorman-Murray 2008). Moreover, studies have begun to focus on previously undocumented experiences such as those of people who come out in mid-adulthood (Appleby 2001; Johnston and Jenkins 2003) and those who come out at school or work (Griffith and Hebl 2002).

Research on the stages of coming out are generally aimed at identifying a standardized series of stages that each individual purportedly moves through (Coleman 1982; Carrion and Lock 1997). Frequently cited stages include exploration and experimentation, meeting other LGBQ persons, coming out to oneself, telling family and friends, and publicly acknowledging one's sexual orientation (Cass 1979; Martin 1993). In addition to focusing purely on the individual coming out, other scholars have attempted to identify stages experienced by the family members of those who are coming out (Mahoney 1994; Ben-Ari 1995; Savin-Williams and Dube 1998). Savin-Williams (2001) discusses the rigid coming out process proposed by developmental psychologists, and he is quick to point out how these models do not adequately characterize the lives of real people. They fail to take into account the unique circumstances faced by each person who discloses her sexual identity to family, friends, or anyone else for that matter. These models typically

assume unidirectional movement through a series of stages until one ultimately achieves a level of sexual identity-based self-actualization. Is coming out really just a means to an end, or is it a process that one continues to maneuver and manage throughout the life cycle?

Sexual identity formation and maintenance is a process of "describing one's social location within a changing social context" (Rust 1993:50). In Appleby's (2001) study of working-class gay and bisexual men, the men indicate that managing a non-heterosexual identity is more of an on-going process, or career, than a straightforward progression through a series of finite stages. The term "career" can be used to refer to any portion of one's life in which as ebb and flow can be seen. For example, someone may come out to her entire network of friends only to be relocated to another city by her employer. The individual will likely establish a new network of friends, after which she will face a similar decision of whether or not to come out to others. There is a sense of both progression and regression that can be seen in these processes. Goffman (1959) originally spoke of careers as they refer to the stigmatized identities of mental health patients. However, the term has since been used to refer more broadly to any social strand in one's life course.

> One value of the concept of career is its two-sidedness. One side is linked to internal matters held dearly and closely, such as image of self and felt identity; the other side concerns official position, jural relations, and style of life, and is part of a publicly accessible institutional complex. The concept of career, then, allows one to move back and forth between the self and its significant society, without having overly to rely for data upon what the person says he thinks he imagines himself to be (Goffman 1959:125).

In the mid 1970s, some researchers began to recognize the "homosexual career." Plummer (1975) stated that homosexuals experience four different stages as it relates to their sexual

orientation: sensitization, signification, coming out, and stabilization. He also recognized

that not everyone experiences all of these contingencies, and that each individual will likely

experience these stages in very different ways. Plummer acknowledged the unique

experiences of homosexuals, and recognized that maintaining a non-heterosexual identity

is a career. Of course, use of the term "homosexual" in this body of work predates the

contemporary use of more appropriate labels for non-heterosexual identities (gay, lesbian,

bisexual, queer, questioning, etc.). More recent research has continued to recognize coming

out as a life-long process (Johnston and Jenkins 2003).

Coming out is central to identity formation (Grierson and Smith 2005; McLean

2007). Therefore, it is important to investigate the types of experiences LGBQ people have

upon deciding to come out. Situations involving family members are frequently cited as the

most difficult and instrumental experiences of disclosing one's sexual identity. However,

there are vast differences between the experiences of adolescents, young adults, and

middle-aged adults. For adolescents, LGBQ identity formation and coming out are

complicated by social pressures to conform to a heterosexual identity and the internal

desire to express homo-erotic drives (Waldner and Magruder 1999). Many youths

experience alienation upon disclosing an LGBQ identity, and this is exacerbated by having

few connections to supportive resources or other LGBQ individuals with which to interact.

Since the pressures are multifold, many youths simply withdraw from their families,

schools, and peer-groups. The decision to withdrawal can also be based purely on fear of

parental rejection. Although many adolescents have a fear of rejection, parents report being

much more accepting of their LGBQ children than the youths perceive them to be (Savin-

Williams & Dube 1998). It is worth noting that social desirability may make parents appear more supportive in survey data than they actually are. Nonetheless, family acceptance is very important, and this is especially true of adolescent populations who lack other forms of extra-familial support.

Young adults report a surprisingly similar concern over acceptance by family members prior to coming out. For both adolescents and young adults, pressures caused by fear of rejection contribute to anxiety, depression and suicidal tendencies (Jordan and Deluty 1998; Hegna and Wichstrom 2007). Hegna and Wichstrom (2007) studied 407 LGBQ youths (aged 16-25) in Norway and found that attempted suicide was related to lack of parental contact, depression, low self-esteem, and victimization. Coming out was seen as a way to enhance psychological well-being; however, it also served as a major stressor. Social support in the form of family and peer relationships mediated whether coming out improved or devastated one's psychological health. Jordan and Deluty (1998) looked at the relationship between anxiety, self-esteem and social support in their study of 499 lesbians in the U.S. They found that the more widely people disclose their sexual orientation, the more likely they are to have less anxiety and greater self-esteem especially for those under 25 years of age. However, these positive outcomes are also closely tied to the level of social support one receives throughout the process. Therefore, having limited social support, or even little perceived social support, constrains many people from coming out, especially on a broad level.

Although the relationships young adults have with their parents often deteriorate shortly after coming out, the relationships improve significantly thereafter (Cramer and

Roach 1988). This is due in part to parents' initial shock after having a child disclose a non-heterosexual identity. Shock is often replaced by eventual understanding and acceptance, which allows for parents and their children to make amends and reaffirm their supportive ties (Savin-Williams and Dube 1998). Both adolescents and young adults are more likely to come out to friends before discussing matters with their families. Close friends are often more supportive and less judgmental. Even when coming out to family, most people, regardless of gender, are likely to tell mothers or siblings over fathers (D'Augelli 1998). This is somewhat connected to the traditionally gendered nature of parenting by which mothers are seen as the nurturers and fathers the providers and disciplinarians. Incidentally, compared to women, men consistently hold more negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men (Wills and Crawford 1999; Hicks and Lee 2006; Roper and Holloran 2007), and this holds true across racial groups (Bonilla and Porter 1990; Jenkins et al. 2009).

Gay men find it particularly difficult to come out to their fathers (Cramer and Roach 1988). This may be explained by heterosexual males' attitudes being much more negative toward gay men than lesbians (Herek 1988). Walls (2008) even found that, as a function of defending their masculinity, heterosexual men hold more stereotypical views of gay men and lesbians. As people are becoming more accepting of LGBQ identities, family members, including fathers, are increasingly open to and supportive of LGBQ identity disclosure (Gorman-Murray 2008). This last point should not overshadow the fact that many LGBQ youth and young adults still grow up in families that are unsupportive of non-heterosexual identities.

In addition to dealing with family members and friends, many adults struggle with the decision to come out at work. Although coming out at work is extremely underrepresented in the literature, Griffith and Hebl (2002) offer a rare glimpse at such experiences. In their survey of 379 gay men and lesbians, they sought to explore disclosure behaviors of adults aged 21 and older. The average age of their sample was 39, therefore covering the disclosure experiences of young adults and middle-aged adults. Many gay men and lesbians refrain from disclosing their sexualities at work out of fear; fear of negative reactions, fear of exclusion, and fear of job-loss. Identity disclosure at work is related to both job satisfaction and job anxiety. Just as in the case of families, the existence or lack of a supportive work environment is the decisive factor in the outcome of the disclosure process. The process of coming out at work seems to be similar for both women and men (Griffith and Hebl 2002).

It should come as no surprise that experiences of coming out among middle-aged adults are substantially different from those of adolescents and most young adults. Very little empirical research exists on people who come out in mid-adulthood. However, it is apparent that those who come to realize and disclose a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity in adulthood face unique challenges, not the least of which is to counter a history of living under the auspices of a heterosexual visage. Johnston and Jenkins (2003) took an exploratory look at people who came out in mid-adulthood by interviewing 30 gay men and lesbians between the ages of 31 and 60. They found that the experiences of middle-aged adults appear different from younger populations primarily in that they have appeared publicly heterosexual for a longer period of time.

Middle-aged adults have more long-term relationships with friends and colleagues under the assumption that they are actually heterosexual (Johnston and Jenkins 2003). Also worth noting is that 90 percent of the participants in the Johnston and Jenkins (2003) study had been in at least one heterosexual marriage prior to coming out. These two facts made it very difficult to come out to family and close friends. Consequently, not only did the participants report difficulties in coming out, but they often felt an extreme sense of selfishness in doing so. Coming out caused substantial turmoil, especially with spouses and children. One participant was told by his sister-in-law, "I don't care if you prefer camels, you made a commitment to your wife and you need to honor that. You are so selfish" (quoted in Johnston and Jenkins 2003:23). Most of these middle-aged gay men and lesbians experienced a great deal of guilt and shame as a result of the conflict caused by their coming out.

The emotional pain experienced by many gay men and lesbians who come out in mid-adulthood leads to coping via self-destructive behaviors. Participants reported alcohol abuse, illegal drug use, over-eating, compulsive lying, reluctance to honestly express emotions, and thoughts of suicide (Johnston and Jenkins 2003). Having been born in the '40s, '50s and '60s, they grew up in a time where non-heterosexual identities were severely less accepted than they are now. This serves as another explanation for why middle-aged people recall spending decades suppressing sexual urges that didn't conform to heteronormative behavioral expectations. Participants acknowledged feeling different since childhood and believing that something was wrong with them. They reflected on intense pressure to hide their true sexual orientation, and acknowledged how this

prevented any discussion of attractions they had toward others during adolescence. Even as adults this made dating difficult since they had little to no experience dealing with and talking about attractions and their related emotions. Ultimately, most participants stated that the main motivation for coming out was simply because they could not stand to continue living a lie.

One major limitation to both Griffith and Hebl (2002) and Johnston and Jenkins (2003) is the lopsidedness in the demographics of the participants. Whites are by and far the most widely sampled racial group in most studies on coming out. The percentages of White participants in the two aforementioned studies were 82 percent and 90 percent respectively. Compared to studies with heterosexual participants, studies on LGBQ populations tend to contain samples that are more white, more educated, and of a higher socioeconomic status (Griffith and Hebl 2002). This has obvious implications in a quantitative study intended to generalize to the larger gay and lesbian communities. Being a much smaller qualitative study, Johnston and Jenkins (2003) had no intention of generalizing their findings. Since it serves as one of the only sources for information on coming out in mid-adulthood, it is important to iterate that the resoundingly white, well-educated, middle-class sample may not allow one to relate their findings to other gay men and lesbians who are of a different racial/ethnic group, educational level, or class.

With the exception of Appleby (2001) and Gorman-Murray (2008), most literature has been directed at the experiences of gay men and lesbians. The experiences of bisexual men and women bear certain similarities with those of gay men and lesbians; however, there are some drastic differences as well. For bisexuals, "coming out is a complex process

that involves revealing not just that one is attracted to the same sex, but that one is also, or still, attracted to the opposite sex" (McLean 2007:152). Furthermore, McLean contends that coming out may not be as much of an imperative for bisexual men and women. Another interesting dynamic in it of itself is how the term "lesbian" implies both gender *and* sexuality (many people use "gay" as a gendered term as well), while the label "bisexual" refers only to sexuality. The term "gay" is increasingly being used to describe same-sex identities regardless of gender, but for many people "gay" is used to describe only men.

Many gay men and lesbians recall when they first recognized feeling "different" from other adolescents. The realization of a bisexual identity is much less direct, and early experiences are associated with a great deal of complexity and confusion over having sexual, affectual, and/or emotional attractions for both men and women. In her study of 60 Australian bisexual men and women, McLean (2007) found that over 60 percent had not revealed their sexual orientation to one or both parents, and 40 percent had not even told a sibling. These rates of non-disclosure are much higher than those of people who identify as gay or lesbian. Weinberg (1994) also acknowledges that bisexuals are much less likely to come out to others. Part of the difficulty associated with disclosing a bisexual identity is that few people understand bisexuality. Even among bisexuals, the meaning of bisexuality varies from person to person. For one person, it means having concurrent attractions for members of both sexes, while for another it simply means having episodic interest in relationships with one sex or the other (McLean 2007).

Considering the variety of definitions for bisexuality within even the bisexual community, it should come as no surprise that people's reactions to individuals disclosing

bisexual identities are equally varied. Responses like "you're just confused" or "pick a side and move on" are common reactions to people disclosing such an identity. Most of us insist on assigning people to the neatly labeled boxes of heterosexual or lesbian/gay. "If conforming to gender norms means doing heterosexuality and deviating from gender norms is assumed to mean that one is gay or lesbian, then there is no way for an individual to assign their bisexuality, nor is there a way for others to assign bisexuality to them" (Lucal and Miller; 2010:145). Traditionally, western dualistic thought has dictated that people are categorized into one of two boxes in terms of sex category (female/male), gender (woman/man), and sexual orientation (desires men/desires women). Intersexuality, transgender, and bisexuality challenge these artificial binaries (Lucal 2008). So, it is essential to consider the interrelatedness of sex category, gender, and sexuality when analyzing experiences related to bisexuality.

Many people fail to recognize bisexuality as a viable sexual identity on its own, and this further complicates the coming out process for bisexual persons. To understand how and why people neglect bisexuality, one must first look at its relation to sex and gender. In our heteronormative society, to have one's gender questioned is to have one's sexuality questioned, and vice versa. For example, a woman whose femininity is called into question will quickly find that her sexuality is suspect as a result. Lucal (1999) recalls her frequent failure to meet the cultural expectation of appearing as a feminine female, which often results in others greeting her as a man or occasionally a lesbian. This overly simplistic interaction between sex category, gender, and sexuality was well explained in *Gendering Bodies* (Crawley et al. 2008). Crawley et al. (2008) built upon the work of scholars such as

Lorber (1994) and Lucal (1999) in order to create their Gender Box Structure which is a model detailing the relationship between sex category, gender, and sexual orientation. The model demonstrates how these three concepts are fused. By *fused* I mean that we believe that to know someone's sex category is to know her gender and sexual orientation as well. At least this is our expectation. In reality, many people challenge this structure (i.e., sex category ≠ gender ≠ sexuality). We are held accountable concurrently on all three levels, and if any one level is called into question, so are the other two. This interaction shows the intimate connection between "doing gender" and "doing sexuality," or rather just "doing difference" (West and Zimmerman 1987; West and Fenstermaker 1995).

Although sexual orientation is less about gender identity and more about for whom an individual has sexual or affectual attractions, its relation to doing gender is very clear (Jackson 2006). People are seen as female or male, feminine or masculine, heterosexual or homosexual (Garfinkel 1967). Anyone falling outside of these boxes is considered "unnatural" or "abnormal" and treated as an outlier in order for others to maintain their original understandings of sex, gender, and sexual orientation (Lucal 2008; Crawley 2009). The maintenance of these boxes is hurtful to bisexuals as well as anyone else who falls between our dualistic expectations (Lucal 2008), and it poses a major challenge for bisexuals who wish to disclose their sexual identities.

Up to this point, I have discussed very little about the notion of *passing*. In the most general sense, passing is the process through which someone whose social stigma is invisible to others simply outwardly appears as someone who does not bear the stigmatized characteristic (Goffman 1974). The bisexual participants in McLean's (2007)

study indicated that they were very private about their sexual identity, while often passing as heterosexual. Sensing that people would not understand their true identities, this passing was associated with high levels of guilt and fear. Due to these feelings, many bisexuals do not view coming out as overly important and therefore opt for non-disclosure. While engaged in same-sex relationships, many bisexuals are perceived by others to be gay or lesbian, so it is apparent that myriad circumstances can easily complicate matters for those identifying as bisexual. Whether associated with disclosure or non-disclosure, feelings of guilt and fear are experienced by lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals alike.

In sum, sociological research on the experiences associated with coming out is still in its infancy. Prior studies have addressed the impact of coming out on family life, employment, relationships with friends and peers, mental and physical health, and identity maintenance. There also appears to be substantial differences in coming out on the basis of sexual orientation. Whereas lesbians and gay men face more of a disclosure imperative, bisexuals view coming out as less essential to identity formation. However, most of these studies explore a single dimension (e.g., family), and they do so within finite populations consisting primarily of fairly wealthy, well-educated, white people. Another shortcoming with investigating a single dimension is that interview and survey questions tend to be geared specifically around that dimension. If you ask an individual how her family impacted her coming out, you're bound to get an answer about just that (family). In designing my interview questions I specifically avoided the use of any of these frequently seen keywords (family, religion, etc.) in order to allow the participants to focus purely on whichever elements of their coming out experiences are truly important to them. This

format allowed for a more inductive approach that yielded a discussion of only the experiences that resonate with each participant.

Factors Affecting the Coming Out Process

Recent LGBQ studies have continued to explore the coming out process in order to identify factors that affect coming out and influence whether or not an individual comes out, and if so, when, where, how, and to whom. Across all studies on coming out it is apparent that social support is one of the most important factors associated with positive experiences in coming out. Social support includes help from family members, friends, clubs and organizations, or any other outlet that provides emotional, social, and psychological support to members of the LGBQ communities. The most frequently researched of these support networks is the family (Savin-Williams and Dube 1998; Oswald 1999; Waldner and Magruder 1999; Merighi and Grimes 2000; Johnston and Jenkins 2003; Gorman-Murray 2008).

Families have the ability to help make an individual's coming out a comforting, supportive process, or an anxiety-filled, stressful process that can end in alienation. Regardless of family structure, people who perceive supportive resources in the family are more likely to come out to their family (Waldner and Magruder 1999). As mentioned above, for gay men and lesbians, coming out is considered by many to be essential in the formation and maintenance of a healthy sexual identity. However, identity disclosure is not always the most viable option for those who identify as bisexual. Regardless of whether

people with LGBQ identities seek disclosure, partial disclosure, or non-disclosure, family

support remains an essential component in positive experiences.

Most people are raised in heterosexual households, but heterosexual households do

not necessarily foster heteronormativity or homophobia. In fact, some family homes foster

supportive environments that challenge the heterosexist underpinnings of social

institutions and the broader society (Gorman-Murray 2008). Increasingly, parents and

siblings are reporting that they were not surprised upon a family member's admission of

being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. In some cases, parents have had previous suspicions that

their daughter or son was "different," and are thereby more willing to be supportive in the

process (Savin-Williams 1998). Also, parents are much more likely to react well when they

learn firsthand about their child's sexual identity (Merighi and Grimes 2000). Learning of a

child's LGBQ identity through secondhand knowledge or personal discovery often makes

for a much more tumultuous disclosure process.

Positive relationships with parents and siblings contribute to one's decision to come

out. However, in terms of research, positive family environments are discussed much less

frequently than the negative family reactions encountered by so many LGBQ adolescents

and young adults. This could suggest that unsupportive family environments are more

numerous than healthy ones. Or, perhaps the social problems fostered by a lack of support

are simply more relevant to the research agendas of many scholars. Research on the

negative impact of unsupportive family environments is quite extensive. Adolescents and

young adults often decide not to reveal their sexual orientation due to fear of parental

rejection, abuse, and the desire to avoid disappointing or hurting their parents (Waldner

and Magruder 1999). They opt instead to withdraw from family social life. In terms of familial reactions to coming out, fear alone is enough to convince young people to leave home without a plan and without resources to fend for themselves. Further, some LGBQ youth are fearful of physical violence and even homelessness.

Adolescents and young adults with positive parental relations still often worry about stereotypical reactions such as "not in my house" and "it's my way or the highway." Gay and lesbian adolescents who claim to get along well with their parents believe it is more costly to disclose their sexual identity and violate heterosexual norms (Waldner and Magruder 1999). The fact that difficulties are experienced in both healthy and destructive families is a main reason why people have traditionally waited until they moved out of the house before coming out, although nowadays this trend is changing. Many LGBQ youths are coming out as young as 15 or 16 years of age, and the average age for gay men and lesbians has recently been identified as just under 18 and 20 years of age respectively (Grov et al. 2006). Studies on cohort differences in coming out confirm this trend in early disclosure (Grierson and Smith 2005). Decreases in the age of first disclosure appear to signify an increase in the level of support received by LGBQ youth in and around the home, and an increase in public acceptance. However, this trend should not obscure the very real challenges faced by many LGBQ youths whose families are less than supportive.

Friends often serve as the first point of contact when someone is coming out (Savin-Williams and Dube 1998). The decision to share one's sexual orientation first with a friend or peer often has to do with the lower stakes of doing so. Rejection by a friend may be much less painful than rejection by a family member, and typically comes with fewer long-

term consequences. In this respect, friends play a vital role in the coming out process of many adolescents and young adults. In their study of 499 lesbian women, Jordan and Deluty (1998) found that having a large number of lesbian friends was related to more widely disclosing one's sexual orientation. In general, lesbians depend more on their friends and peers, and less on their families than heterosexual women.

One area where studies fall short is in examining *pre-disclosure* relationships between LGBQ persons and their friends (Jordan and Deluty 1998). In order to better investigate this, it would be beneficial to obtain a sample containing some people who have not yet disclosed their sexual orientation. Granted, those who have not yet come out at all may only be reachable through passive recruitment, but snowball sampling could help researchers pool for LGBQ persons who have only come out to a single person. This would tell us much more about how friends truly contribute to coming out. It is also worth noting that although many studies discuss the role of friends in coming out, they are typically lumped into the category of "family and friends." Analysis of the dynamics between LGBQ individuals and their gay and straight friends is definitely lacking in the literature.

Colleagues and coworkers also have the potential to provide support for those coming out (Griffith and Hebl 2002; Johnston and Jenkins 2003). Having supportive coworkers and a supportive work environment drastically increases the likelihood that one will come out at work. Coming out at work among working-class men is more varied (Appleby 2001), indicating that blue-collar work environments may be less supportive of coming out. The relative lack of support could be also related to lower levels of education and socioeconomic status. Either way, the degree to which someone is "out" to family and

friends drastically limits the anxieties associated with disclosing one's sexual orientation to coworkers. Coming out at work is not considered central to the maintenance of an LGBQ identity in the same way as coming out to family and friends (Griffith and Hebl 2002). In fact, many LGBQ persons manage multiple identities in order to simplify their interactions with coworkers and the public they come in contact with while at work.

It is frequently speculated that factors associated with coming out are very different depending on one's race or ethnicity. Compared to whites, some racial/ethnic groups are considered more homophobic (Appleby 2001), but this sentiment is not always supported by research. Findings concerning racial/ethnic differences in general attitudes toward homosexuality are equally inconsistent (Finlay and Walther 2003). Although race, ethnicity, and culture may affect attitudes and beliefs about coming out, the reactions of family and friends are quite similar across racial/ethnic groups (Merighi and Grimes 2000). Merighi and Grimes (2000) conducted one of the only studies centered on investigating differences in the experiences and factors associated with coming out for people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Their sample of 57 gay men included 18 African-Americans, 25 European-Americans, 8 Mexican-Americans, and 6 Vietnamese-Americans.

Coming out is initially avoided among many African-American, Mexican-American, and Vietnamese-American men due a desire to uphold strong family relations (Merighi and Grimes 2000). For some men, the influence of culture makes it more difficult to come out. For others, having a culture that emphasizes family cohesion made it easier to come out. This finding reiterates a common theme in the literature on coming out: the same factor that inhibits one person from coming out actually serves as encouragement for another

person to come out. Merighi and Grimes (2000) conclude their study by stating that reliable differences did not emerge between racial and ethnic groups. Individual differences appear to be quite varied, so it is important to avoid making too many generalizations about how one group or another treats coming out differently.

There are some noteworthy differences in coming out based on the age at which one initiates the process. In their interviews with 32 gay men living in Australia, Grierson and Smith (2005) noted that younger men are more likely to experience "assumed gayness" which is gradually confirmed without any explicit disclosure. The state of being assumed gay has to do with gender presentation as well as overall presentation of self. For older men, gay identity formation can appear as more of a crisis that requires profound self-acceptance followed by a more explicit disclosure process. Many gay men and lesbians who come out in mid-adulthood report being more fearful of their friends' and colleagues' reactions (Johnston and Jenkins 2003). The actual reactions people receive, however, vary from total support to total rejection. Similar to younger populations, those who have a close friend in which they can confide report greater likelihood of coming out. When compared to friends, participants indicated that there was much more at stake in coming out to their children, siblings, and parents.

One of the main contributors to non-disclosure among middle-aged lesbians and gay men is the fear of losing custody of school-aged children, or being alienated by adult children (Johnston and Jenkins 2003). In Johnston and Jenkins' (2003) study this was an issue for 22 of the 30 middle-aged participants, each of which had children from a prior marriage. Although fear of rejection is always a possibility, many gay and bisexual men still

report maintaining a strong connection to their families throughout the coming out process (Appleby 2001). Despite growing up in working-class households that emphasized extreme heteronormativity, most of the men in Appleby's (2001) study reported that their families were ultimately supportive of their coming out nonetheless.

Among the 30 gay men and lesbians interviewed by Johnston and Jenkins (2003) most signaled religion as the single most oppressive force encountered. Granted, their sample was recruited through church newsletters and therefore more religious than most. Still, the participants conveyed a resounding recognition of how difficult it is to be gay or lesbian and involved in a church. The working-class men in Appleby's (2001) study were not avid churchgoers, yet they mirrored this very sense of conflict between maintaining a Christian identity and being gay. In many cases, gay men and lesbians are not welcomed in their own churches after coming out. This creates a great deal of spiritual strain, and gives some people additional reservations about coming out to others in the future. For many religious or spiritual people the coming out process is very much an internal struggle over whether they are in fact LGBQ, and if so, whether or not they should come out (Jones 2008).

As Kooden (2000) points out, the religious values we learn, even as children, affect the coming out process and often delay one's decision to come out at all. According to Shallenberger (1996), gay men and lesbians who are spiritual often experience heightened spirituality prior to coming out, followed by a distancing of oneself from religion during the coming out process, and finally a reclaiming of spirituality further along in the process. The spiritual journey just detailed refers more to people who practice Judeo-Christian religious traditions. Smith and Horne (2007) emphasize that Earth-spirited faiths, such as Paganism

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and Wicca, are much more affirming of people with LGBQ identities than Judeo-Christian faiths. In their study, half of those practicing an Earth-spirited faith reported absolutely no conflict between sexual orientation and their faith at the time of coming out.

The level of importance individuals place on religion (i.e., their religiosity) appears to affect their self-acceptance and willingness to disclose an LGBQ identity. People who report that religion is very important in their lives generally maintain more negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Herek and Gonzalez-Rivera 2006; Hicks and Lee 2006; Olson et al. 2006; Anderson and Fetner 2008; Bauermeister et al. 2008; Jenkins et al. 2009). Conversely, those who are mildly religious or not religious at all are significantly more likely to be accepting of gay men and lesbians (Hicks and Lee 2006). This trend helps explain much of the additional struggle reported by LGBQ persons who come from highly religious families.

In sum, a multitude of factors have the potential to influence whether or not an individual comes out, and if so, when, where, how, and to whom. One recurrent theme in sociological research on coming out is the essentiality of social support. For many youths, social support comes most frequently in the form of family and friends. In addition to family and friends, for young adults social support is often in the form of clubs and organizations, coworkers, and peer networks of other LGBQ persons. Of all the factors that can influence coming out, family is the most frequently cited. An interesting paradox is that close family ties and positive family relationships encourage some people to come out while discouraging others to do so. Family closeness and supportiveness intuitively seems to help many people in disclosing an LGBQ identity. However, for other people their family

ties are so strong and so important that they avoid coming out so as not to jeopardize these relationships. Those with unsupportive families often avoid revealing their sexual orientation due to fear of parental rejection, violence, and the desire to avoid disappointing their parents. They opt instead to withdraw from family social life.

Considering the high stakes associated with coming out to family members, many LGBQ persons opt instead to come out first to friends or even coworkers. Friends serve as a particularly important form of social support for young lesbians. Other factors such as race/ethnicity, age, and religion also seem to play into the coming out processes of gay men. Some studies purport that the cultures of African American, Asian American, and Hispanic men may initially discourage them from coming out. A much more consistent theme in the literature is how age affects coming out. Those who are older when they come out face some unique challenges due to having spent more time under an assumption of heterosexuality and having more long-lasting ties to family, work, and social groups such as those found at church and school. Religion and religiosity also appear to be intricately tied to coming out, but this relationship varies substantially across individuals.

LGBQ persons who have not come out

Although the body of research on coming out is continuously growing, most studies are forced to rely on samples of LGBQ people who have, at least to some extent, come out. One of the difficulties with studying a population that is not easy to locate or identify, and still frequently stigmatized, is that many segments of the population fall outside of the sampling frame and rarely make it into the research. Although there is a disclosure

imperative attached to having an LGBQ identity (McLean 2007), for a multitude of reasons people choose to keep their sexualities private. Sexuality is a private matter for most Westerners. Even many people who are labeled by themselves and others as heterosexual do not openly discuss their sexuality with just anyone. We are typically left with simple assumptions regarding whether someone maintains a gay/lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual sexual orientation. These unfortunate realities help explain our lack of accurate statistics on the number of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals in the general U.S. population.

Considering the (likely very large) number of Americans with undisclosed LGBQ identities, the scope of most research on coming out is somewhat limited. Large segments of the LGBQ population have little to no chance of being included in samples. Those individuals who have not come out continue to operate in and around a heteronormative society often under other people's assumptions that they are actually heterosexual. Since we know very little about the experiences of this "hidden" population, it is necessary to consider the attitudes and beliefs held by members of the greater U.S. population. Most attitudinal studies have concluded that substantial differences exist in attitudes toward homosexuality on the basis of gender, race, age, education, religiosity, and religious denomination. The attitudes, beliefs, and values held by family members, close friends, and the broader society impact the coming out process for LGBQ persons (Gorman-Murray 2008). Waldner and Magruder (1999) have also supported the common belief that people whose families maintain negative attitudes toward homosexuality have a more difficult time managing an LGBQ identity (Waldner and Magruder 1999). Taking all of these

influences into consideration, we see that coming out is far from being a simple, individual decision. For those who maintain a private LGBQ identity, the decision of whether or not to come out is truly a delicate social process involving many different levels of interactions.

Summary

Contemporary research on coming out often relies on a self-proffered definition of coming out, and an assumption of shared meaning between researcher and participant. Studies occasionally extract meaning from participants' narratives, but more often than not, researchers altogether overlook any question of meaning for coming out. Assumptions and vagaries about the meaning of coming out are problematic in terms of gaining a better understanding of what coming out really means to individuals. The sole predetermined research question in the current study is an exploration of the meaning of coming out. An understanding of the various meanings that LGBQ persons attribute to coming out will provide us with a better understanding of coming out as a general social process, as well as a valid point of reference for future studies on coming out.

Research on sexual identities consistently upholds that coming out is central to sexual identity formation and maintenance. Studies have explored individuals' experiences with coming out in many different arenas—most notably within the family, among friends, and in the workplace. Studies have also identified and scrutinized various factors that are said to influence coming out (e.g., social support, religion, culture). However, most of these studies explore a single dimension of coming out, and they do so within finite populations

consisting primarily of wealthy, educated, white people. Although these studies add to the literature in their respective areas, they do not allow for an open, organic analysis of coming out as a unique lived experience. The current study contains no specific focus on any of these frequently studied domains (family, religion, etc.). This format allows the participants to focus purely on whichever elements of their coming out experiences are truly important to them, thus enabling me to uncover those experiences and factors that truly resonate with each participant.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORY & METHODS

This study does not rely on any a priori theoretical backing. However, my sole initial

research question (the meaning of coming out) required that I utilize an interactionist

approach to analyzing my data. Aside from this singular research question, constructivist

grounded theory was used throughout the remainder of my study. It was employed

explicitly in regard to how my data was organized, coded, and analyzed. But, it would be a

fallacy for me to state that I am purely deriving theory from my data without any influence

from extraneous theories. After all, I did enter into this study with the explicit intent of

uncovering or inducing themes and trends from the data related to the meaning of coming

out, and experiences and factors associated with the coming out process. Therefore, my

theoretical basis is not entirely inductive. Taking a cue from Charmaz (2006:129), my

theorizing "arises from social constructionist assumptions that inform symbolic

interaction, ethnomethodology, cultural studies and phenomenological discourse, and

narrative analysis." Consequently, my research design includes elements of both inductive

and deductive reasoning.

Symbolic Interactionism

Although my research relies on a constructivist approach of grounded theory, my

study is informed by symbolic interactionism. In an effort to investigate the meaning of

coming out, much of my theoretical framework is directed at the creation and evolution of

meaning and how these concepts contribute to one's personal and sexual identity. Personal

identity refers to the way individuals define, locate, and differentiate themselves from others (Hewitt 1992). George H. Mead, often considered one of the fathers of social psychology, emphasizes how objects or concepts are given meaning only through social processes. The social situation provides the context within which meaning is derived, and therefore meaning is achieved only through a reciprocal process of communication (Mead and Morris 1934). Most of Mead's work on meaning relates to the situational use of language, symbols and gestures. However, according to Mead, it is through these situational interactions that broader meanings are created and maintained.

Building upon Mead's work, Herbert Blumer developed symbolic interactionism, which is a theoretical approach to studying the formation and maintenance of meanings among individuals. According to Blumer (1986), an individual's social self is based in three core principles: meaning, language, and thought. Meaning is at the center of socialization in that all interactions are reliant on our ability to convey shared meanings in order to communicate with one another. Without a doubt, the meaning of coming out is reliant upon socio-political contexts, and these contexts are facilitated by the negotiation of symbols through language. Language is rooted in identifying or naming different phenomena in order to facilitate constructive interaction. The final principle in Blumer's analysis of social interaction is individual thought. As meanings change, so do our language, and ultimately our thought processes toward different phenomena. This process explains a great deal about how societal reactions to sexualities continue to change across time and place. The goal then, in terms of employing an interactionist perspective on coming out, is to

understand the socially situated meaning of the concept (i.e., coming out) at a given moment in order to investigate how it shapes individuals' lived experiences.

Through the symbolic meanings attached to metaphors like "the closet," we derive other terms and concepts such as "coming out." Heterosexuality is still the normative sexuality, which contributes to the purported disclosure imperative placed upon LGBQ persons. The language of "the closet" and "coming out" implies a certain level of secrecy. But, the notion of hiding part of oneself in order to maintain a discreditable rather than a discredited identity is not specific to sexuality. Goffman (1974) relates this concept to any stigmatized characteristic one may have (e.g., a disability, a criminal history, or even social class). The prospect of hiding one's sexuality versus disclosing one's sexuality naturally lends itself to the concept of passing. In terms of sexuality, passing has much to do with appearance, particularly as it relates to gender presentation. As Schutz (1943) acknowledges, we accept appearances unless we are provided with evidence to the contrary. Gender is intimately tied to sexuality, and this interaction is discussed in greater detail below.

An overstated focus on the visible element of coming out—that is the public disclosure of a sexual identity—can skew the achievement of a full understanding of the concept of coming out. Public media and the heterosexual majority often frame coming out entirely as a matter of "outing" oneself to others. But, presuming such a thing would limit the scope of this research. Kitsuse (1980) warns against the conception of coming out as being rooted only in secrecy and disclosure. Although Kitsuse is speaking of "coming out" as it relates more broadly to anyone defined by another person as a deviant, his point

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resonates with the current study. His contention is that, in order to study coming out, special attention must be granted to "the issue of the social affirmation of self" (Kitsuse 1980:1). Coming out is not simply about satisfying the moral majority. Rather, coming out serves as a way to challenge social conventions and expert opinions, and affirm a positive sense of self. Kitsuse refers to this process as *tertiary deviance.*

Although coming out may be rooted in self-affirmation, concepts such as "the closet" and "coming out" have had real social effects on modern sexuality (Seidman et al. 1999). Their meanings influence our conceptions of sexuality, and therefore have a real impact on how we handle matters of sexuality. As such, it is essential that I approach this project with the awareness that LGBQ persons are frequently coerced into conforming to the common, heteronormative social assumption that to be gay is to experience secrecy and isolation. This assumption is the essence of the apparent disclosure imperative placed upon non-heterosexual persons in contemporary society.

Foucault and Discourse

Equally important to any contemporary discussion of sexuality is a reference to Foucault's poststructural notion of discourse. Systems of power/knowledge are responsible for constructing subjects, ideas, symbols and language (Foucault 1972). By extrapolating Foucault's theory, we find that language, discourse, and the media confine and shape people's discussions of concepts such as coming out. In essence, the interpretations we make of our social worlds and our lives within these social worlds are

bound by the discourses that are at our disposal. Discourse is pivotal in guiding the

meaning of words and concepts in our language. Foucault was emphatic that certain social

arrangements at the losing end of power formations (sexuality, prisons, hospitals, etc.) are

subject to the imposition of negative definitions and perceptions by those in power. The

acknowledgement of power structures makes it important to analyze not just the "what"

but the "how" in terms of participants' discussions of coming out. Discourses on sexuality

have changed since the separation of sexual orientation from definitions of mental illness.

Additionally, feminists such as Smith (1987) insist that, however constraining discourses

may be, within discourse individuals still have *play and interplay*. In other words, people

have the agency to make their own choices and even challenge the discourse. Although this

may be true, power still plays a considerable role in guiding conceptions of coming out

among LGBQ persons.

Doing Gender / Doing Sexuality

Doing gender very closely relates to contemporary research on "doing sexuality."

West and Zimmerman (1987) opened the door for scholars to take a much more informed,

ethnomethodological approach to studying gender by viewing it as something that is done

or accomplished through routine interaction. Of course, gender is intimately tied to

sexuality, so their theoretical approach to "doing gender" easily translates into "doing

sexuality." A large part of doing gender is associated with conforming to the behaviors and

characteristics that are believed to be associated with one gender or the other. But, as West

and Zimmerman (1987) point out, being a man or a woman is much more than performing

gender displays such as when a woman allows a man to light her cigarette or open her car

door. "Doing gender consists of managing such occasions that, whatever the particulars, the

outcome is seen and seeable in context as gender-appropriate or, as the case may be,

gender-*in*appropriate, that is *accountable*" (West and Zimmerman 1987:135).

Sexuality scholars have recently begun to recognize sexuality or sexual orientation

as something that is accomplished rather than purely innate. Granted, the nature versus

nurture argument continues to this day, but scholars such as Kimmel (2008) have thwarted

the "either/or" approach to this argument and replaced it with an "and/also" alternative.

It's not a matter of nature versus nurture; it's how your nature is nurtured. As a result,

literature on sexual orientation now emphasizes how sexuality emerges from social

interaction rather than focusing purely on innate personal characteristics. What we are left

with is a new understanding of sexuality as a routine accomplishment embedded in

everyday interaction. Use of West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of doing gender allows

sexuality scholars to better investigate LGBQ interactions in everyday situations. It has

contributed to our understanding of how LGBQ persons who wish to keep their sexual

identities private must "do heteronormativity" in the workplace, in social situations, or

perhaps even around family. Although scholars such as Schilt and Westbrook (2009)

challenge the necessity of doing heteronormativity, many LGBQ persons simply opt for the

path of least resistance (Lucal 1999). Unfortunately, the path of least resistance often

involves what Garfinkel (1967) calls "passing," but as Seidman et al. (1999) emphasize,

many LGBQ persons are growing up without the use of a "closet" and are rather choosing to *do difference* from the beginning.

In cases where LGBQ persons wish to avoid sexual conformity, they may opt instead to publically express their sexuality. Like gender, sexuality emerges from social situations and serves as a means of legitimating the division of society on the basis of this characteristic. It is through social situations that we rationalize and duplicate our understanding of sexuality as a divisive characteristic. Power typically lies in the hands of the privileged, which in this case are heterosexuals. Stemming from the pre-1973 status of LGBQ persons as disordered persons, much about doing LGBQ (that is, doing difference via sexuality) is about shedding the past and working toward liberation (for some, this means inclusion, others separatism, and still other transcendence). It is therefore plausible that while societal consensus has not been reached on what sexuality is, for LGBQ persons there is no singular way to do sexuality except to do difference or undo heteronormativity. Sexual identities are less about expressing an essential truth and more about mapping out difference and diversity (Weeks 2003).

Constructivist Grounded Theory

In addition to employing a theoretical framework based in symbolic interactionism, grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was used for all analyses outside of the meaning of coming out. Grounded theory, a theoretical framework frequently employed in exploratory qualitative studies, emphasizes the discovery of theory from raw data. It is based on the notion that much social science research is improperly focused on verifying

theories, rather than letting the data dictate the particular concepts and themes that are relevant for a given area of research. Grounded theory serves as an ideal theoretical and methodological guide for this study in that it maintains an emphasis on context and the emergence of theory (Goulding 1998).

The systematic qualitative research method known as grounded theory was originally formulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967). However, since grounded theory was first introduced, numerous schools of thought have attacked the method from both within and without. Many scholars argue that true grounded theory is unachievable since researchers obviously enter into their projects with some sort of a priori theoretical foundation (Allan 2003; Charmaz 2007). The existence of any initial theoretical framework challenges the notion that grounded theory truly allows the data to speak for itself. A further challenge is that grounded theory relies on the assumption of an objective, external reality that can be discovered by a *neutral* observer or interviewer (Charmaz 2000). The approaches to grounded theory advocated by Glaser (1992) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) are both saturated with positivism, and heavily objectivist (Lincoln and Guba 2000). Charmaz (2000) offers a solution to the limitations associated with the aforementioned forms of grounded theory: constructivist grounded theory.

"Constructivist grounded theory celebrates firsthand knowledge of empirical worlds, takes a middle ground between postmodernism and positivism, and offers accessible methods for taking qualitative research into the 21st century" (Charmaz 2000:510). More specifically, constructivist grounded theory recognizes that knowledge is mutually created between researcher and research participant (Lincoln and Guba 2000).

Gubrium and Holstein (2002) consider the interview to be a contextually-based and mutually accomplished story created through the collaboration of researcher and participant. It appears then, that interviews are naturally well-suited for a constructivist approach to grounded theory.

Constructivist grounded theory, as set forth by Charmaz (2000) is rooted in three criteria: 1) grounded theory need not be rigid or prescriptive, 2) focusing on meaning while employing grounded theory furthers interpretive understanding, and 3) grounded theory can be adopted without relying on positivist leanings. The beauty of constructivist grounded theory lies in its emphasis on seeking meaning. Considering the fact that the sole research question of this study is concerned with exploring the *meaning* of coming out, this method is invaluable. Other, objectivist, grounded theories rely on an assumption of shared meaning between researcher and participant. More specifically, most grounded theorists conducting research assume that respondents share *their* meaning (Charmaz 2000). This assumption is exactly what I wish to depart from.

Sampling & Recruitment

A total of 30 participants were sought for this study. This sample size was instrumental in allowing me to gather rich data on the meaning of coming out as well as other themes that arose during my grounded analyses. Participants for this study were recruited by employing both snowball and purposive sampling techniques. Considering the methodological challenges of obtaining a diverse sample of LGBQ individuals, most of

which have taken their sexual identities public to some extent, snowball sampling is the most viable sampling choice. Snowball samples, although ideal for recruiting highly "invisible" populations, are associated with a variety of methodological concerns, not the least of which is potential homogeneity (Groves 2009). For example, referrals from a single LGBQ organization would be likely to share many traits with one another. But, by initiating 4-5 different trails of snowballing, I worked to minimize this effect and reach populations who may not be accessible through any other means.

Quantitative researchers are quick to point out that qualitative studies based around a relatively small sample size are limited in terms of their generalizability to a larger population. Snowball samples make it even harder to make broader assertions about the chosen population due to the reasons listed above. My interest is not in generalizing the experiences of the participants in this study, but in scrutinizing variability. I am concerned with delving into and learning about the unique meanings and experiences associated with individuals and their coming out processes.

My primary research question involves looking at the variety of meanings and definitions different LGBQ individuals attribute to coming out. As such, I feel it is necessary to refrain from choosing a very finite sample to interview. Were I to limit my study to, for example, traditional college-aged students or African American men, I would be severely limiting the potential findings and biasing my outcomes in the direction of a certain group's unique life circumstances. Coupled with a relatively small sample size, the decision to keep my sample open does limit my ability to make any in-group comparisons. However, the openness of the sample is essential in order for me to gain a comprehensive understanding

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of the potential variability in meanings attached to coming out by people with differing characteristics.

Most previous studies on coming out have emphasized a specific segment of the population such as adolescents, college students, young professionals, or people in mid-adulthood. Additionally, participants in studies on coming out tend to be white, highly educated, and of a high socioeconomic status (Griffith and Hebl 2002). These sorts of samples allow the authors to make more direct within-group comparisons; however, they limit the scope of any interesting findings. Contrary to this common practice, I chose not to limit my sample by any particular criteria. In order to minimize the homogeneity of the sample I employed some purposive sampling techniques, and this move was directed at gaining diversity on the basis of gender, race, age, education, orientation and "degree of outness." Collecting data across multiple dimensions allows for greater representativeness and it helps capture the overall texture of the topic (Corsaro 1985). Gender, race, age, education, and orientation are straight forward, but my decision to purposively sample people who a varied in terms of outness could be problematic if not conceptualized carefully. My goal here was simply to obtain a sample that included both: 1) individuals who have only come out to one or two people, as well as 2) other people who have come out to a greater degree.

Another reason for my purposively broad sample is that it helps me fill a void in the research. In reviewing the literature on coming out, prior studies have limited their focus to specific populations such as those listed above. Therefore, the body of existing research is underdeveloped on the exploration of coming out as a general social process entered into

and experienced by people from all walks of life. Purposive sampling techniques also present me with the opportunity to locate and contact participants who have come out to varying degrees, and perhaps only disclosed their sexual identity to a single individual. Locating and including individuals who are very early in their coming out processes is important in terms of truly understanding the full gamut of meanings, experiences and factors related to coming out. Research is lacking on those who have just begun to come out, so these individuals offer the unique opportunity to learn about coming out as a fresh and emergent theme in their lives. Without purposive snowballing, it would have been unlikely that any such individuals would have made their way into my sample.

With such an open sampling frame I knew it was entirely feasible that I would come across distinct and interesting differences between study participants on the basis of certain characteristics such as race, religious affiliation, family makeup, etc. Since marked differences appeared during the course of my data collection that really begged further exploration, I chose to employ theoretical sampling (Strauss and Corbin 1998) in order to further investigate the variation. Although I initially chose not to limit my sample by any other criteria, I did engage in some theoretical sampling over the course of my data collection.

I started by pursing a wide range of ages in my sample. For example, half of my first 14 interviewees were born between 1956 and 1978, while the other half were born between 1986 and 1990. While completing the transcription and open coding of these early interviews I realized that I needed to focus more on exploring what coming out means to those who are newly engaged in the process. Simply put, younger populations are growing

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up in an environment of increasingly open dialog concerning sexuality (especially since 1993, when sexual orientation increasing entered mainstream conversations) and this came through in the data. I had already decided to theoretically sample individuals who were early in their coming out processes. But now I had a theoretical basis for sampling individuals who are also quite young. I still completed my data collection with 10 participants over the age of 25, but having 20 participants under 25 enabled me to further explore the contemporary meanings of coming out, and gain more insight on recent developments in identity formation and maintenance.

Based on my limited sample size, I had to be careful not to employ too much theoretical sampling without increasing my sample size. Essentially, my theoretical insights guided my sampling decisions initially as well as throughout the study. Theoretical sampling adds an additional challenge to obtaining representativeness (Gobo 2004). The purpose of theoretical sampling, however, is not to be representative, but rather to build a sample that is wholly relevant to the phenomena under study. Theoretical sampling is particularly useful with new or under researched topics because it enables the researcher to "choose those avenues that bring about the greatest theoretical return" (Strauss and Corbin 1998:202). My goal then as a constructivist researcher is to "be sensitive to theoretical leads as they emerge, and pursue them through theoretically directed sampling procedures" (Corsaro 1985:34). This approach increased my ability to observe coming out as a general social phenomenon rather than a single social practice.

Sample Characteristics

There is a fair amount of diversity among the 30 participants in this study. As Table 1 shows, this sample is diverse in terms of age, gender, race, sexual orientation, education, and social class. As I mentioned above, there was a greater degree of age diversity early on in my data collection. But, after theoretically sampling those under the age of 25, my sample grew younger and younger. The current mean age of participants is 26 years of age, while the median age is closer to 24. The sample consists of 12 men and 18 women (two of which maintain a decidedly fluid gender identity). The racial/ethnic composition of the sample, although more diverse than in most research on coming out, still lacks the degree of diversity sought. Important to note is that I did not impose a discrete list of racial/ethnic identities from which participants had to choose. I opted instead to allow participants to define their race/ethnicity for themselves. This same logic was followed for sexual orientation, social class, and religion. Considering how most studies on coming out are about 90 percent white, the participants in this sample are relatively diverse. Of the 30 participants, 18 are white, 4 Latino, 2 bi-racial, 2 Jewish, 1 Indian, 1 Muslim Arab, 1 Mediterranean, and 1 Viking. Missing from this sample are any individuals who identify as black, African American or Caribbean American. I actively sought participants in each of these groups but was unsuccessful in gaining any such participants.

Table 1 - Participant Characteristics

NAME/ PSEUDO	AGE	GENDER	RACE/ETHNICITY	SEXUAL ORIENTATION	EDUCATION	CLASS	RELIGION
Cindy	27	Woman	White/Italian	Lesbian	B.A.	Middle	None
Athena	54	Woman	White/Irish	Lesbian	Ph.D.	Middle	Christian
Renee	29	Woman	White	Lesbian	M.A.	Middle	None
H.G.	52	Man	White	Queer	M.B.A.	Middle	Christian
Ram	21	Man	Indian	Gay	Some College	Lower-Middle	None
Ari	28	Woman	Latina/Mestiza	Lesbian	B.A.	Middle	None
Janice	22	Woman	Peruvian	Lesbian	Some College	Middle	Agnostic
Jim	46	Man	Caucasian/White	Gay	Ph.D.	Middle	Quaker
Ruby	24	Woman/ Fluid	Sicilian/ Mediterranean	Does not Identify	B.A.	Middle	Zen Buddhist
Eden	22	Woman	White	Does not Identify	Some College	Lower-Middle	Spiritual
Kelly	22	Woman	Caucasian	Pansexual	B.S.	Middle	None
Kyle	21	Woman	Viking	Lesbian	Some College	Middle	None
Richard	24	Man	Caucasian	Gay	B.A.	Upper Middle	Atheist
Brian	20	Man	White	Queer	Some College	Middle	None
Carly	22	Woman	White	Queer	Some College	Middle	None
Rachel	20	Woman	Jewish/ Caucasian	Gay	Some College	Middle-Upper	Agnostic (culturally Jewish)
Arielle	24	Woman	Israeli	Lesbian	B.A.	Middle	Jewish (culturally)
Michelle	25	Woman	Irish & Mexican	Gay	B.A.	Middle	None
Gabrielle	22	Woman	Latino	Lesbian	Some College	Wealthy	Agnostic (culturally Jewish)
Alex	24	Woman	White Bread	Gay	B.A.	Middle	None
Nathan	21	Man	Bi-racial	Gay	Some College	Upper Middle	Christian: non-denominational
Veronica	20	Woman/ Fluid	Caucasian	Lesbian	Some College	Middle	Jewish
Brandon	19	Man	White	Gay	Some College	Lower-Middle	Agnostic (Humanist)
Adam	20	Man	White	Gay	Some College	Lower Class	Roman Catholic
Hannah	18	Woman	White	Gay	High School	Middle	Jewish
Lee	20	Man	White	Gay	Some College	Middle	Agnostic
Pao	24	Woman	Latino	Gay	B.A.	Middle	Agnostic
Steve	32	Man	White	Gay	High School	Middle	Agnostic
Chris	26	Man	White	Gay	High School	Lower-Middle	None
Hamed	30	Man	Muslim Arab	Gay	Some College	Upper Middle	Muslim (non-practicing)

In terms of their present sexual orientation, 15 participants identify as gay, 9 as lesbians, 3 as queer, 1 as pansexual, and 2 prefer not to identify. As is the case with other studies on coming out, this sample is highly educated. As far as highest education obtained, 2 participants have earned doctorates, 2 have master's degrees, 9 have bachelor's degrees, 15 have "some college," and 2 have high school diplomas. As far as social class, this sample is much more diverse than most. Rather than having an overabundance of people with high socioeconomic statuses, the average participant is middle class. As far as social class, the sample breaks down as: 1 upper, 4 upper-middle, 20 middle, 4 lower-middle, and 1 lower. The final demographic category is religion. Although the modal group (12 people) consisted of those who designated "no religion," this sample still yielded a fair amount of religious diversity. Six participants are agnostic, 3 are practicing Christians, 3 are Jewish, 2 are atheistic, 1 is Muslim, 1 is Roman Catholic, 1 is Zen Buddhist, and 1 Quaker.

Data Collection

All data were collected via face-to-face open interviews conducted by me. The application of open interviews allows me to investigate how participants construct their reality, and how this reality affects whether they come out, and if so, when, where, how, and to whom. This approach gave me the ability to collect narrative accounts that detail the meaning of coming out, how participants disclosed their LGBQ identity to others (or not), and whether and how different factors affected the coming out process. The use of open interviews also enabled me to inductively uncover any other phenomena that may not have

been discovered under the use of a more rigidly structured interview format. Open interviews gave me the freedom to use additional prompts in order to clarify the purpose of each question and dig deeper when a respondent discussed anything that needed clarification or further explanation. I anticipated that some elements of the interview would not apply to each person, so I did not insist that participants provide detailed answers to every question. After all, the primary focus of my study is to locate clear trends and patterns and recognize individual differences, so it only makes sense to allow the participants to concentrate on the parts of their coming out process that are the most profound in their lives.

Consistent with the aims of grounded theory, my "questions are sufficiently general to cover a wide range of experiences and narrow enough to elicit and elaborate the participant's experience" (Charmaz 2006:29). Each interview was guided by simple, open questions. All question items intentionally contained very few contextual clues in terms of what to speak about aside from the obvious fact that the topic of the day was coming out. The openness of my questions allowed me to truly see which elements of coming out are the most distinct and meaningful for each participant. Although open in design, the questions were mostly centered on the participants' experiences associated with coming out. I took great care in crafting questions that would not artificially lead participants to speak about any of the topics that research traditionally associates with coming out (religion, family makeup, etc.). Logic tells me that if any of these topics are important to an individual's coming out, they should emerge organically during the course of the interview.

A central question asked of each participant involves the meaning of coming out: What does coming out mean to you? Although this question is central to my research project, I chose to leave it until near the end for the simple reason that it is preceded by a 60-90 minute conversation about coming out. Were I to simply ask someone about the meaning of coming out right at the onset of the interview, I would likely get a stereotypical, storytold response. However, by placing this topic at the end of the interview, each participant was able to construct a richer, more tailored response.

In order to investigate the meaning that individuals attach to coming out, I did not want to rely on a single question like the one seen above. Thankfully I learned this early on while conducting practice interviews. This methodological decision proved to be very important in gathering appropriate data. I chose instead to utilize a series of questions along with some inductive analyses of the remaining interview transcript. As a result, I was able to sift through pages of data, rather than just the response to a single question. The openness of my interviews also enabled me to clarify any ambiguity about the scope and purpose of my questions.

Each interview was audio recorded, giving me the opportunity to dedicate all of my attention to the participant and the content of the interview. I had a notepad handy for the purposes of writing down points for clarification, topics to be revisited, and general comments about the demeanor of the participant. Location is important in terms of ensuring that each participant is at ease and in a position to openly share her coming out process. As such, I left it entirely up to each participant to determine where the interview would take place. Undoubtedly, one of the major goals during my interviews was to

establish and maintain a comfortable level of rapport. Rapport often requires reciprocity. While I wanted to create a sense of equity in the interview I also sought to keep the data as unscathed as possible. So, I tended to share more about myself at the conclusion of the interview as opposed to during the interview. I made it clear to the participants that I am an advocate and partner for equality on the basis of sexual orientation rather than a researcher studying a "condition" or "circumstance" (Fontana and Frey 2002).

Data Analysis

Although the theoretical underpinnings of constructivist grounded theory match up well with the purpose and intent of my study, my sole research question (the meaning of coming out) was guided by an interactionist approach as well. Keeping in line with the general postmodernist view that no single approach or method is independent of others, I utilized both symbolic interactionism and constructivist grounded theory in terms of my coding procedures and analysis. Initial or open coding was conducted through line-by-line coding, which kept me focused on the data and therefore left less opportunity to impose extant theories or personal beliefs on my data (Charmaz 2000). Sensitizing concepts (such as influence of family, support from friends, etc.) provided the starting points for organizing some of my analyses, but they did not serve as ending points to which I forcibly directed my data analysis.

Charmaz's original vision for constructivist grounded theory uses a coding procedure that is somewhat counter to Corbin and Strauss' (1998) more objectivist grounded theory. Coincidentally, computer-assisted analysis programs such as NVivo use a

structure that more closely mirrors an objectivist approach to organizing and coding data. After careful consideration, I chose not to employ any computer-assisted analysis programs in order to maintain the purity of my constructivist approach.

Following line-by-line coding I engaged in focused coding that is similar in some respects to axial coding (Charmaz 2006). Focused coding was more conceptual than my initial coding, and therefore allowed me to categorize initial codes into broader conceptual themes. In many circumstances, these selective codes became the parent codes under which more detailed items from initial coding fell. Further focused codes were also generated in order to specify the details of my more thematic initial codes. Put more simply, rather than developing a top-down or bottom-up coding model, I created a bi-directional growth model. Imagine a seed that is planted in soil, watered, and placed out into direct sunlight. The growth of the seed happens in two directions; upward growth comprises the stem, foliage and fruit of the plant, while downward growth comprises the root system of the plant. The end result resembles axial coding, but my process was more organic and less focused on scientific terms and categories.

Another important element of my coding procedure is my decision to continuously revisit and refine my codes throughout the project. "During the open coding period the very directed axial coding alternates with looser kinds of open coding, especially as the analyst examines new aspects of the phenomena under study" (Strauss 1987:32). Of course, rather than axial coding I engaged in selective and focused coding, but the general concept described by Strauss is still relevant. To aid in this process, during open coding I kept an eye toward how my codes might appear related to one another. The emergence of more

abstract concepts and theories from my data took place continuously as my coding and analyses progressed (i.e., the constant comparative method). Items that had previously been coded were compared to new codes, along with items that have yet to be coded, thus allowing me to derive theory from the data. Constant comparative techniques are perhaps the most difficult to enact (Kearney 2010), and thus garnered much of my attention.

Throughout my entire coding process, I followed the recommendations of both Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2000) to participate in memo writing. In terms of grounded theory, memo writing can be seen as the intermediary between my coding and the first draft of a completed analysis. By writing memos such as code notes and theoretical notes, I reduced the likelihood of getting lost in mountains of data. Code notes enabled me to lay out the details of what a code really means and encompasses, and theoretical notes allowed me to more easily link ideas and themes found across interviews. Memos also serve as the written record of my analysis, similar to the syntax file in STATA or any other statistical program.

Ethical Concerns

The primary ethical concerns involved in my research are threefold. The first and most obvious concern was one of confidentiality. It is my responsibility to ensure that the true identity of each research participant is held in confidence. To my surprise, many of my participants insisted that I use their actual names as opposed to pseudonyms. Still, approximately one third of the sample chose to use pseudonyms, and all notations made

during these interviews included no mention of their actual names. The interviews were audio recorded for transcription. Since these audio recordings contain personal information and potentially the names of those who must be kept confidential, they will continue to be secured under lock and key. All computer-based audio files are saved in encrypted files on a computer that cannot be accessed without a secured username and password. All written documentation (interview transcripts, contact information, notes, etc.) are also secured under lock and key. Sexual minorities in the United States still face a great deal of sexual prejudice and discrimination. It is therefore paramount that I ensure the confidentiality of each individual who desires confidentiality to be maintained.

The second ethical concern is that of the health, mental health, and general well-being of research participants. The discussion of personal matters can have potentially profound effects on the participants of any study. Sexuality and sexual orientation are two of the most personal matters in anyone's life, and the sensitivity of such topics is often even greater for sexual minorities in the United States. Study participants were made aware that, should they choose, they could discontinue the interview at any time. While conducting the interviews, I remain cognizant that I was interviewing people about a sensitive topic: their coming out processes. The recollection of past trials and tribulations as well as joyous moments associated with coming out can be quite an emotional journey for study participants, and I needed to be constantly aware of that.

A final concern, which is closely tied to the ones stated above, is that I am researching groups of people who are frequently marginalized in contemporary society. Further complicating this is the fact that, in terms of sexual orientation, I am part of the

non-marginalized majority. When information is conveyed to me from someone in a marginalized position, I need to be careful to relay the information without casting it through my non-marginalized lens. The use of a constructivist epistemology insists that researcher and participant mutually develop data, so I had to be careful about the extent to which I affect the data. Clearly, there are issues of power in conducting interviews, and I could not ignore the power differential between myself and the participants of this study. Instead of ignoring or blurring the line in power positions, as an ethical researcher, I had to pay special attention to it (Edwards and Mauthner 2002).

Reflection and Disclosure

Although I am attempting to remain true to the inductive foundation of grounded theory, I have remained honest in disclosing that I am bringing some theory and potential expectations to the table. Early foundations in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) would emphasize the trouble associated with using any particular theoretical framework to guide my research. In my estimation, any study in which the researcher chooses the topic cannot rely entirely on inductive reasoning. Although I can appreciate the need in qualitative research for data to dictate the theory, I also believe it is natural and unavoidable that researchers incorporate their perspectives into the work. As is the case with many research studies, a series of seemingly unrelated events brought me to this course of study. It is helpful, if not necessary, that the reader understands my motivation for conducting this study. The remainder of this passage is dedicated to describing the

process and events through which I arrived at my decision to explore the coming out process, and anything that could potentially bias my research.

Over the course of my academic career, which began nearly 12 years ago, I have become increasingly interested in studying many aspects related to sexual identity and sexual orientation. I spent my undergraduate years in a large public university with a very active social sphere. During these years, I found myself employed in a variety of leadership positions across campus, each of which was centered on welcoming and mentoring first-year students. These included serving as an orientation leader, an admissions counselor, a health and wellness peer-educator, and a resident assistant (RA) in on-campus housing. Each of these roles brought me in contact with young people going through the exhilarating, transformative, and oftentimes tumultuous life transition to becoming a college student. Needless to say, most college students refer to this transition as a liberating, life-altering process.

During my frequent interactions with in-coming and first-year college students I had the opportunity to serve as the "parent away from home" for many students. I was only one to three years older than most of these students, but in a college environment the difference in exposure and maturity between a first-year student and even a second-year student can be quite large. Most of my "heart-to-heart" conversations occurred during my tenure as an RA. Aside from helping students with homesickness or the general sharing of campus wisdom, one of the most frequent topics among both residents and other RA's was that of sexual orientation and sexual identity. Students would often discuss with me how liberating it was to speak about and share concerns about their sexuality with a trusted

person. Up to this point I had honestly never truly recognized the challenges and difficulties associated with being asked to publicly disclose one's sexuality. Further, I had not yet realized that the disclosure imperative seen throughout the U.S. was reliant upon our society's social construction of heterosexuality as the only widely "acceptable" sexuality.

This is probably an opportune moment to share that I, myself, do not identify as having an LGBQ identity or orientation. This last admission is where I might lose a reader or colleague whose loyalties rest with a true standpoint perspective on conducting social science research. Among the many tenants of standpoint feminism is that women's and men's voices are truly unique (Smith 1987; Lorber 1994), and the same can be said of the voices of people with diverse sexualities. In terms of life experiences, I see great merit in this statement. I could even take this statement one step further by agreeing with Collins (1990) that the relationship between two demographic characteristics (e.g., gender and sexuality) creates social categories that are unique in their perspectives and overall experiences. However, regardless of one's own gender, race, or in this case sexual orientation, I believe that sound sociological research can be conducted independent of the researcher's own characteristics. Even those who insist on research relative to one's own lived experiences will find it difficult to deny the importance of fostering research from multiple perspectives.

Now, let us return to the matter of my own sexuality. Although friends and colleagues may refer to me as "straight" I do not believe in placing myself unnaturally into the heterosexual portion of a sexual binary (Lucal 1999). My personal convictions place sexual orientation on much more of a continuum like the one suggested over a half-century

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ago by Alfred Kinsey (1948). With that being said, I have always participated in sexual, affectual, and romantic relationships with members of the opposite sex and am therefore lumped by others into the neat little box entitled heterosexual. Being associated with the most prevalent sexual identity, I rarely have to publicly or privately justify my sexuality or explain my affinity for members of the opposite sex. Interestingly, perhaps as a result of my interest in studying sexuality and gender, even "progressive" colleagues of mine have been known to question me about my own sexual orientation. It could therefore be argued that I too have to come out from time to time, but in most environments coming out as heterosexual does not put me in a vulnerable position personally, socially, or professionally.

My interest and curiosity over matters related to sexual orientation continued to grow as I established and maintained more close relationships with students and colleagues who identify as LGBQ. As I completed my undergraduate and graduate degrees, I came to recognize trends in what my LGBQ friends and colleagues experienced in terms of grappling with their own sexuality and dealing with the public sharing of their sexual orientation. Anecdotally, I realized how coming out was much more than a purely personal undertaking. It was very much a social process involving family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, social institutions such as church and school, and even media outlets and the broader society as a whole. I also began to recognize coming out as less of a point-in-time event and more of a career (Goffman 1962) in which individuals come out only to meet new friends, change jobs, or relocate to another city and find themselves in a situation to potentially experience elements of the coming out process all over again.

My interest in sexuality and coming out reached its pinnacle, however, during my first year of doctoral study. It was during this time that I learned much of the methodological and theoretical foundations for empirically studying the process of coming out. Also important to note is that, during this timeframe, the citizens of three U.S. states (including my home state) voted on and passed constitutional amendments limiting marriage to a woman and a man. For me, this was a tough pill to swallow. Same-sex couples were being framed as undeserving of basic human rights guaranteed under the constitution, and much of this rhetoric was coupled with stereotypical caricatures of LGBQ persons. This political climate launched me into researching and writing a series of papers related to attitudes toward homosexuality. The research was conducted in an effort to better understand why people felt justified in limiting the rights of others on the basis of sexual orientation. My discontent with the rigid language and monolithic categorization used in many quantitative studies was one of the driving forces behind my decision to engage in the current study using the methods discussed above.

The time I spent absorbing research on sexuality, LGBTQ studies, and more specifically coming out served as my most recent and ultimately definitive motivation for engaging in the current study. As a result, I am very familiar with and accustomed to speaking about the three aforementioned areas of research. Prior to initiating my first interview, I had a general idea of some experiences and factors that may prove to be instrumental in the coming out process. The integrity of this study was not tainted by this knowledge. I was very careful to avoid making any assertions based on prior research, and I therefore focused purely on disseminating the narratives of each individual interviewed.

In the end, it was my familiarity with prior research, coupled with my personal experience involving friends and colleagues that guided me toward an interest in exploring the unique lived experiences of people and their coming out processes.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE MEANING OF COMING OUT

> The way I define coming out is coming out to my parents because everyone I met and talked to, you know, my colleagues, my professors, my friends, they all knew I was queer. But, my parents never knew. – Ari

At the onset of this study, I set out to discover what "coming out" means to individuals in the LGBQ community. In the most general sense, coming out is often compared to *telling* or *storytelling*. For example, in the case of mental health patients, individuals often must often engage in the telling of their condition—such as in the workplace or around new friends (Goffman, 1974). Some participants in the current study even used the word "telling" in discussing their coming out experiences. For example, Ram, a 21 year-old gay male, discussed how he became "addicted to telling." As he explained, "every little person I told I feel like a knot was undone." Or as stated by Gabrielle, a 22 year-old lesbian, "coming out is a way of telling others who you are." Coming out, or even telling, therefore assumes that there is something that needs disclosing, something that requires sharing. Taken one step further, it also implies that there currently exists a certain level of secrecy around a particular topic (hence the analogy of "the closet").

Some scholars such as Seidman et al. (1999) argue that contemporary identity disclosure is less focused on legitimating sexualities via coming out since non-heterosexual identities are becoming increasingly normalized. That is, LGBQ persons are less likely to experience secrecy and social isolation, so "the closet" is not as repressive as it once was. The normalization of LGBQ identities casts doubt on the relevance of coming out as a necessary part of identity formation and maintenance. However, every single participant in

this study acknowledged having to engage in coming out. Evidence from my interviews challenges the notion that coming out is no longer a relevant concept. Coming out is a personal and social process that appears to be omnipresent so long as we operate within a heteronormative society. As seen in the opening quote, the face of coming out may be changing. Many teens and young adults are assumed gay in certain contexts. The *assumption* that someone is gay is oftentimes based on physical identifiers that are associated with gay culture or a gender presentation based in gender non-conformity (e.g., a masculine female). But, even those who are assumed to be gay still engage in some form of coming out.

What is Coming Out?

Across the body of research on coming out, we have already seen that substantial variability exists in the *meaning* of coming out. Many studies define coming out as the broad public acknowledgement of a gay identity, while other studies state that coming out is more specifically a matter of disclosing one's sexuality to family members. Still others acknowledge an aspect of self-affirmation in the coming out process. If there is variability in the meaning attached to coming out within academia, then it is likely that there is variability among its use within the LGBQ community too—and this study serves as evidence of such variability.

It should come as no surprise then that even the word "meaning" has multiple interpretations. For example, when asked: "What does coming out *mean* to you?" my

respondents interpreted the word "meaning" differently, yielding a variety of responses. I set out to learn more about what coming out means to each individual (i.e., what it entails). One participant, Eden, proceeded to tell me somewhat philosophically how coming out means "to live life openly and honestly." Many other individuals started by defining the term broadly (as in a definition) and then explaining how it relates to their lives. Throughout the interviews some resounding themes emerged such as coming out to oneself, coming out to family/friends, and coming out as full disclosure, among others. Other interesting trends related more specifically to various social influences on coming out as well as insight into the duration of coming out.

Coming Out to Oneself

One of the most ignored elements of coming out is whether or not "coming out to oneself" is part of the equation. Some scholars maintain that self acceptance or self affirmation is part of coming out. But, if coming out is the *public* disclosure of one's sexual identity (as many scholars posit), then logic would dictate that self-acceptance—an internal process—must be a prerequisite for coming out rather than a part of coming out. As one respondent, Athena, put it, "you have to come in to yourself before you come out to others." Athena seems to be indicating self acceptance as a prerequisite to coming out. However, she later recognized that, although her vision of coming out does include the public disclosure of her identity to others, coming out "has more to do with accepting yourself than other people accepting you." Based on the data in this study, self-acceptance is quite central to coming out and not merely a prerequisite.

Across many interviews, the discussion of coming out to oneself was an emergent trend. Not only were participants discussing the importance of self acceptance, but in some cases they were referring to self acceptance as being synonymous to coming out. Pao, a 24 year-old female who identifies as gay, mirrors this sentiment that self-affirmation *is* coming out.

> For me, coming out is accepting *me*, accepting who I am – I'm gay, that's it. Telling myself - not really coming out. I just find that so cliché that people think that coming out is just practically making a speech, like "hey everybody..." Not really. Coming out is me accepting me – nobody else, just me.

Incidentally, with the exception of her sister, Pao has not come out to any of her family. But, she does intend to. It's just that disclosure to her family is not a defining element of her coming out story, nor is it a part of what coming out means to her.

Another participant, Kelly, agreed that, at least for her, coming out means purely coming out to oneself.

> Coming out, in terms of myself, would probably be me accepting myself for loving who I want to love and not doing what society tells me – you know, like, loving who I *should* love. That, to me, is coming out. There are other definitions, you know, like telling people about it, but that's never been something I've felt like I've had to do only because I was lucky and I knew I would have support no matter what.

Kelly was very careful in qualifying why self-acceptance was synonymous with coming out for her, but why coming out likely has a broader meaning for other people. In her evaluation, self-acceptance is more central to her coming out since she has such strong external support from others. Kelly's family had been proactive in letting her know that she

would be loved regardless of her sexual orientation, and they conveyed this through concrete action. Kelly describes a phone call she received from her mother during her freshman year of college—while Kelly was still unsure about her sexuality. "She's like 'Kelly, are you a lesbian or what? Do I need to, like, buy you a coming out cake or something?' It really was awesome. I knew that if I ever…." From that point forward, Kelly took solace in her family's support and looked at her coming out as purely a personal journey of self-acceptance.

More common in the current study was the inclusion of "coming out to oneself" as one element in a broader meaning that individuals ascribe to coming out. Self-acceptance was frequently depicted as an initial step in coming out. In fact, of the 30 participants in the sample, exactly half of them (15) indicated coming out to oneself as being a central element in their meaning of coming out. Most participants were very clear that coming out to oneself was not a prerequisite to coming out; rather, it was a major part of coming out—of the process itself. I say "process" because, as discussed below, those who saw self-acceptance as an initial part of coming out most often referred to coming out as a gradual process. Even though most agreed that coming out to oneself was part of the process, there was some disagreement. For example, Carly, a 22 year-old female who identifies as queer, spoke of coming out to oneself as both a part of the process and a prerequisite:

> Coming out to yourself is part of the process. I know people who, on a regular basis, sleep with people of the same gender, yet do not even think to themselves that they can be anything other than straight. I don't get that at all, but I feel like that's an important part of, yeah, coming out to yourself. I think of it as a prerequisite.

Veronica, a 20 year-old female who identifies as a lesbian, embodied the notion that coming out means both 1) coming out to oneself, and 2) coming out to others. As Veronica put it, "coming out, I think, for me…it's two steps – coming out to yourself, which was the hardest step, for me – and coming out to the people in your life…letting them know who you are." Veronica's discussion of these two elements to coming out went well beyond this single statement. As is the case with other participants who saw coming out to oneself as one part of a broader meaning to coming out, she discussed it often. In fact, her reference to a two-prong meaning came up organically earlier in our interview before I delved into any questions on the meaning of coming out.

> I just came out with it to Matty [one of her close guy friends]. I had come out to myself probably the—well, kind of—like, I didn't let it process all the way. I had kind of come out to myself probably the same week because I was trying to be, like, the aspiring psychology major in high school and I sat myself down in front of a mirror and I, whenever I had a breakdown— sometimes I do that—I'll just vent almost to myself and go on an uncensored rant, and it slipped out of my mouth that I'd fallen in love with all of these people, these girls, in my past, and I mean it was out there but it was like my brain was still fighting it a little bit until I hung out with Matty and I just said it, and once it was out there it was just like {whistling sound} – tssouuh – free. And, then from that point I told a couple of other people.

Here Veronica conveys not only that the meaning of coming out has two elements, but that they combine to create a sense of having truly come out. Coming out to herself gave her the confidence to come out to Matty, but self-acceptance alone was not enough to constitute the meaning of coming out. As discussed below, Veronica did not feel as if coming out was a completed process at that point. Still, from that moment forward she had a sense that her coming out was becoming familiar, comfortable, and progressive. Coming out to herself

verbally in the mirror made it real, and telling Matty made coming out a symbol of liberation.

Another clear example of coming out to oneself as part of the larger meaning attributed to coming out came from Brandon, a 19 year-old gay male. As Brandon saw it, coming out is "a three-step process." He spoke first about how coming out means "coming out within and having that self-realization of your sexuality." Following this process, there is "an initial disclosing of your sexual identity to those around you – your peers, people you go to school with." Then, he lastly spoke about "the disclosing of your identity where the topic just happens to specifically come up." So, the meaning Brandon attributes to coming out goes one step further than Veronica in that he alludes to coming out as an ongoing, unending process driven by new circumstances and new situations. But, both Veronica and Brandon shared the sentiment of many participants in this study: coming out to oneself is part of the meaning of coming out, but self-acceptance alone does not account for the entire meaning of coming out.

'Open' and 'Honest'

Those whose meaning of coming out relied heavily on coming out to oneself very commonly used the same vernacular when discussing coming out in general. Frequent references to "living openly and honestly" or "living my life honestly" were peppered throughout the interviews of those whose meaning of coming out was rooted in self acceptance. In many cases, the words "open" and "honest" were simply woven into the

fabric of participants' language. For example, Kyle, a 21 year-old who identifies as a lesbian, spoke about how coming out meant "being *open* with oneself and others about who you truly are." Another participant, Ruby, a 24 year-old female who does not identify ("no labels"), sums up coming out in similar terms: "I guess it's just *honesty*. It's just being *honest* about who you are. You can come out as anything, you know, but it's just being *honest* about how you are in terms of feelings toward other people (emphasis added)."

The common thread among participants who used the words "open" or "honest" in great volume was that these individuals were less concerned with the acceptance of other people. Their journey, and therefore the meaning they attribute to coming out, was more about coming to grips with their own unique sexuality rather than explaining it to other people. Coming out to oneself was also central to the meaning of coming out more often for individuals who identified their sexual orientation as queer, fluid, pansexual, or open.

Research suggests that coming out is more of a necessity for people who are interested only in members of the same sex (i.e., gay or lesbian) than for bisexuals (McLean 2007). In the case of bisexuality or various open identities (e.g., pansexual, fluid), individuals are not as easily identifiable on the basis of with whom they engage in relationships. Considering our society's insistence on binary logic (gay/straight, male/female) those who have attractions for both men and women, multiple genders, or those who do not use gender as a determinate for choosing a mate are often misunderstood. The socially constructed, dualistic framework makes coming out more problematic for individuals who are bisexual, queer, fluid or pansexual. Difficulty in explaining and justifying a sexual identity that is rooted in multiple attractions leads many

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people to make a choice: a) come out publicly with an identity that the general public has a better understanding of, or b) focus on self-acceptance and place less emphasis on coming out to others with a discrete identity.

Such was the case with Eden who advocates living her life "openly and honestly." Rather than coming out to her friends and family as having a concrete sexual orientation, Eden prefers to no longer identify. She feels that she has previously been misunderstood and stereotyped each time she expressed a discrete sexual identity—in her case bisexual, then polysexual, and currently "not identified." Her open view on sexuality places much more of the onus of coming out on self-acceptance and self-affirmation—essentially coming out to oneself. As Eden articulated:

> I know I say this a lot, but this is kind of my life mantra – to live openly and honestly – and that's what coming out means to me . . . If you say "I live my life openly and honestly" then you're not going to shun other people for their belief systems. [Coming out means to] live your life openly and honestly when appropriate in a happy, healthy environment not impeding on other people's standpoints . . . the way I abbreviate it is 'live your life openly and honestly.'

Coming out to Others

Aside from the two participants whose meanings of coming out were rooted only in coming out to oneself, every other participant shared a meaning for coming out that included "coming out to others." I should qualify this statement by mentioning that the term coming out to others was not found in any of my interviews. Rather, it is a useful way for me to encompass the two most common themes outside of coming out to oneself: 1) coming out to family/friends, and 2) coming out as "full disclosure." These two elements of

coming out both include the disclosure of one's sexuality to another person (i.e., coming out to others). The interviews of a select few participants included mention of both coming out to family/friends and coming out as full disclosure. But, for the most part, participants mentioned only one or the other. Those participants who cited coming out as full disclosure mentioned very little about coming out to family/friends in discussing the meaning of coming out. This finding likely has to do with the methodological differentiation between a necessary cause and a sufficient cause. Coming out to family/friends is a necessary cause for full disclosure, while full disclosure is a sufficient cause for coming out to family and friends. So, those who talked about coming out as meaning full disclosure inferentially provided sufficient cause for coming out to family/friends.

One important item to remember here is that I am not concerned so much with to whom individuals do or do not disclose their sexuality or in which social arena. I am concerned with *what coming out means to each individual*. Although the discussion of meaning often includes details related to whom they chose to disclose their sexuality and in what setting, individuals having disclosed their sexuality to family/friends does not automatically imply that their meaning of coming out includes coming out to family/friends. Such was demonstrated by Kelly above in the section on coming out to oneself. Kelly had disclosed her sexuality to some family and friends, but, to her, the meaning of coming out was purely a matter of self-acceptance and self-affirmation. In an effort to avoid misreading anyone's narratives, the forthcoming discussion about coming out to family/friends or coming out as full disclosure was extracted directly from participants' statements about what coming out means to them.

Coming out to Family/Friends

Among all of the various meanings participants attributed to coming out, coming out to family/friends was the most common. However, there is definitely variation in what "family" or "friends" means from person to person. For one participant, Brian, family refers specifically to his parents, while for another participant, Carly, the discussion focused more broadly on those people closest to her. Although coming out to family/friends was a highly prevalent theme across the interviews, relatively few participants cited it as the lone element in their meaning of coming out. But, there were a few exceptions—three to be exact: Ari, Nathan, and Adam. This chapter opened with a quote from Ari, a 28 year-old who identifies as a lesbian. As Ari put it,

> The way I define coming out is coming out to my parents because everyone I met and talked to, you know, my colleagues, my professors, my friends, they all knew I was queer, but my parents never knew.

After reflecting on this statement, Ari revisited the meaning of coming out later in the interview. She went on to specify that coming out means more to her than simply telling her parents. "Coming out means telling the people who are closest to you. . .telling the people who matter, and I suppose I'd have to define 'matter' – it would be parents, close relatives, close friends." This statement represents a common trend in the meaning of coming out seen throughout this study. The words "family" and "friends" were typically used to refer to those people in one's social network with whom one has high levels of interaction, strong ties, and more meaningful relationships. Extended family and distant

friends and acquaintances were rarely spoken about within the context of these conversations, except to point out that coming out to such persons was not central to their meaning of coming out. Those participants who felt that the meaning of coming out includes disclosing their sexuality to extended family and distant peers were also the participants who also believed in coming out as full disclosure.

Adam, a 20 year-old gay male mirrored Ari's meaning of coming out. Adam discussed broadly how, for him, coming out means disclosing his sexuality to his parents and his close friends. As Adam sees it, the reason that he places so much emphasis on coming out to his parents is because of how long they've known him under an assumption of heterosexuality. "No one's going to be harder to come out to than your parents because they had 14 years to get used to the person that they thought they were raising, with the ideals they thought I was going to have, and the future they thought I was going to have." This, he explains, is why family and close friends are central to his meaning of coming out—these relationships are rooted in longer histories, and therefore greater assumptions. Adam talks a great deal about coming out to other people as well—new friends, acquaintances, coworkers—but these interactions are not central to what coming out means to him. Simply put, there is very little at stake with these more distant relationships.

> The initial impetus of coming out to my parents, my friends – that was tough. But with every day, every new person I meet it gets a little bit easier, just because I've done it before and I know who I am and who I can depend on, and if it's not the person I'm talking to, that's fine . . .

Much more common was the inclusion of coming out to family/friends as one element in a much broader meaning of coming out. More often than not, coming out to

family/friends was combined with coming out to oneself, although it was occasionally paired with coming out as full disclosure. Those participants who spoke about multiple elements to their meaning of coming out rarely referenced any series of fixed "stages" or "steps" that they went through or are going through while coming out. In fact, the only examples of such steps were already shown above in the statements of Brandon and Veronica. Other participants simply saw coming out as having various elements to the meaning, but they never explicitly stated a "formula" for coming out.

Of the participants who spoke about coming out as meaning both coming out to oneself and coming out to family/friends, there was sometimes a hint of time-order in their wording. As stated by Rachel, a 20 year-old who identifies as gay:

> [Coming out means] coming to terms with who you are and how you feel about who you want to be with, who you want to date, who you feel comfortable with, and who you're attracted to. And, first of all, coming to terms with it yourself and accepting it, and usually telling people you are about and letting them, you know, decide 'oh, this is ok with me' . . . I feel like you need to accept yourself before you can let, you know, be able to let others accept you.

Although Rachel iterated a this-before-that causality in her statement, more common was the simple mentioning of both coming out to oneself and coming out to family/friends. Even when causality was not explicitly stated, participants almost always spoke about coming out to oneself before talking about coming out to others. For instance, the meaning of coming out according to Hannah, an 18 year-old female who identifies as gay, is "not just knowing that you're gay or bisexual, but being ok with it, and having the people that are close to you that you want to know…letting them know." Lee, a 20 year-old gay male

simplifies the connection even further. Coming out is, "acceptance of yourself . . . acceptance of your friends knowing who you are." One exception to this implicit or explicit one-way causality was demonstrated by Alex, a 24 year-old female who identifies as gay. "I came out to Pam. That was when I came out to myself. And then it was a half hour of panicking madness." Alex is referencing the first vocal declaration of her sexuality to one of her best friends, Pam. It was not until that moment when she heard herself utter the words out loud that she began to totally accept herself (i.e., identify) as gay. So, coming out to oneself need not always precede coming out to others.

Coming Out as Liberation

Whether or not coming out to oneself was achieved prior to coming out to family/friends, one thing is certain: coming out to those within one's social circle is not simply about telling. It is about gaining acceptance, and even more importantly it is about liberation and validation. In fact, the discussion of validation was central to Gabrielle's explanation of why coming out to family/friends was an essential part of her meaning of coming out:

> You come out because you want to be validated, that it's ok. So, it's either coming out to your parents, and them being like "it's ok" or something inside of you and you can't keep it inside yourself because you're too depressed about it but you want to get validated . . . it's a sort of validation, and it's a form of being proud of who you are . . . at the end of the day it's what you feel within yourself, and I think that coming out is a way of getting validated, validating yourself, and encompassing the pride part of it.

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The notion of achieving liberation or receiving validation, both from within and from without, was by far strongest among participants who saw coming out to family/friends as central to the meaning of coming out.

In discussing the liberating power of coming out, participants sometimes implied liberation through the use of analogies. Kyle spoke of how coming out "was a huge weight lifted off my shoulders because I had been struggling with that for awhile." She was speaking more specifically to the elation she felt after coming out to her mom. Ram, a 21 year-old gay male, spoke about how coming out to his family and friends was an "unburdening." The most colorful analogy came from Alex, who is both a poet and an artist:

> Coming out is owning it, identifying as it, just letting people see it, and even if you are a little bit ashamed of it at first, it's sort of like that good burn, you know, like the first time you go and get a really good, deep-tissue Swedish massage, and the next day you just feel like shit, and the day after it you're like "wow, I feel better now, I can actually move more." So coming out, for me, was like getting a Swedish massage – you can quote me on that.

Other participants that emphasized elation as a result of coming out frequently used singular words like "happy," "free," "open," "honest," "proud," and "real" to describe the feeling that followed coming out to family/friends. I often felt such a positive shift in the interviews upon engaging in this portion of the discussion, which reiterates the centrality of coming out to others in the meaning of coming out for so many people. Of course, for many people the meaning of coming out goes well beyond coming out to family/friends. For about one third of the participants in this study the meaning of coming out can be more aptly described as "full disclosure."

Coming Out as Full Disclosure

> To me (coming out) is just finally being able to be completely yourself in all facets of life. If you're coming out, then you're coming out and you just need to be out. And, I know that's not always the case, and it took me a little bit longer than I wanted it to be. But, I think that eventually when you come out it should be out to everyone. - Renee

For many people, coming out was not limited to the select few family members and friends that make up one's inner circle. Coming out may mean disclosing one's sexuality to any and everyone including extended family, casual friends, acquaintances, coworkers, classmates, neighbors, or just people on the street. Much of the conversation surrounding coming out as full disclosure revolves around the idea that to come out means to be yourself in *every* setting, or as Renee put it "to be completely yourself in all facets of life."

Most participants agreed that, given an idyllic setting, they would be out entirely. In fact, some participants flat out stated that they loathe the process, and the social expectations that people with non-heterosexual identities are expected to share their sexuality with others. Brian, a 20 year-old male who identifies as queer emphasized this when discussing the meaning he attributes to coming out. "I think everyone should come out . . . straight people should have to come out as straight, and queer people as queer. I just don't like how it's assumed that everyone is straight—everyone's one way." But, in spite of the current social climate regarding sexuality Brian still maintains that coming out means publicly disclosing one's sexuality broadly to whomever is interested in knowing.

Part of the ideology behind full disclosure is the notion that "if someone doesn't accept me for me, then I don't want to be associated with them anyway." As Veronica explained, "I definitely have always had the tendency to always let people know, almost as soon as possible, that I cannot just waste my time with them if they're gonna reject that part of me." She goes on to state that coming out means full disclosure preceded by coming out to oneself.

> [Coming out means] all the way out, to the fullest extent. Not like "I'm thinking about it" or "I'm curious." It's like "you know, I'm gay, I identify as gay" . . . letting them know. To me, that's "out," but I think there definitely is a two step process, and I think the most difficult for me was definitely coming out to myself.

The one caveat to the idea that coming out means full disclosure is that an individual may choose to come out entirely within a particular social arena (e.g., an LGBTQ organization in town), yet refrain from coming out in other social arenas (e.g., one's family, close friends, or workplace). The most frequent example of this in my interviews involved those who were unable or unwilling to come out in the workplace. In discussing how coming out means full disclosure, Gabrielle stated "I'm very proud, so I don't think I would put a level on [how open she is about her sexuality] unless I'm working and that's a different situation." Because of the lack of sexual orientation-based employment protections in Florida, Gabrielle, who is as "out" as can be, is forced to place an asterisk on her "full disclosure."

Since sexual orientation is not a protected class under Florida employment law many participants cited the need to keep their sexualities private in the workplace,

regardless of what coming out means to them. The most interesting element of these employment restrictions is that, although they curbed individuals' degree of outness in the workplace, they did not seem to alter individuals' meaning of coming out. Participants who saw coming out as full disclosure yet were unable to come out at work still maintained that full disclosure was their social goal and the meaning they attribute to coming out nonetheless. The meaning remained unchanged, regardless of the structural barriers that currently prevents one from being as out as one wishes.

The most extreme example of a barrier to full disclosure was seen in my interview with Michelle, a 25 year-old female who identifies as gay. Michelle has spent the past few years employed in the U.S. Armed Services, and still serves actively in the military. To Michelle coming out means full disclosure, but due to her military career she is structurally unable to engage in full disclosure within all social arenas. At the time of our interview, the military was still enforcing Don't Ask Don't Tell, so her desire to engage in full disclosure was limited by her desire to keep her career intact. To a lesser degree, this same situation arose in various other interviews, and the exception always revolved around employment. It would be interesting to ascertain if this same interaction would arise for LGBQ persons residing in states that did offer legal employment protections on the basis of sexual orientation.

Still, some participants maintained that coming out literally means true, *full* disclosure. Eden expressed perhaps the most open meaning of coming out as full disclosure, which is reinforced by her personal mantra of living life openly and honestly.

> [Coming out] means if your family, friends, pets, neighbors, people walking
> down the street, people on the bus, anybody asks you a question that
> involves a statement about your sexual identity, orientation, gender identity
> and expression, then you would divulge. To me coming out means
> everywhere I go someone's going to hear about it if it comes up in
> conversation.

Arielle, a 24 year-old who identifies as a lesbian, mirrored the sentiment that full disclosure is in fact *full* disclosure. To her coming out means gaining self acceptance of her sexual orientation and "sharing it with everyone regardless of repercussions, whether positive or negative." But many participants, such as Eden and Arielle, recognize that the meaning they personally ascribe to coming out may not necessarily be congruent with the meaning held by other people. Coming out is a unique experience that depends on a number of social factors, and so the meaning of coming out varies substantially as well.

Coming out as a Unique Experience

> I was just talking to my sister that for each person it's different. I'm telling
> her that her friend is going to have one day – maybe it will take her 10 more
> years to accept who she is. It's just her own process – each person has a
> different process. Some people don't ever come out. - Pao

Nearly all of my interactions with the participants in this study revolved around *their personal* experiences with coming out: what coming out means to *them*, how *they* came out, how *they* identify, etc. The dangers associated with asking someone to explain how other people feel about a particular topic are well known. But, there is still something that can be learned from understanding 1) how someone sees herself, 2) how she views other people, and 3) how these two elements compare and contrast. In regard to the

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meaning of coming out, I was interested in learning not only what coming out means to each individual, but also what each individual felt coming out meant more broadly. In other words, is there congruency between the meaning an individual personally attributes to coming out and what she believes coming out means to other people with an LGBQ identity?

Many participants perceived of their coming out as being unique from the coming out experiences of other people. Eden exemplifies the split between her personal ideology on coming out and the meaning that others may attribute to coming out. Recall how she personally views coming out as a process of coming out to oneself and full disclosure:

> To live openly and honestly, that's what coming out means to me. It means if your family, friends, pets, neighbors, people walking down the street, people on the bus, anybody asks you a question that involves a statement about your sexual identity, orientation, gender identity and expression, then you would divulge.

Later in the interview, we got onto the topic of other people she knows and how their meaning of coming out varies substantially from hers. She summarized the views of a few of her friends in a single statement about the broader meaning others attribute to coming out:

> Every individual has different gradations and different steps toward whatever they feel is the almighty high point of coming out as it relates to their individual self. Some people feel like coming out would just be telling their parents. For some people, all they need to do to come out is post it in their diary - because once they self identify, they feel whole finally. So, it just depends on each person.

Eden recognizes that coming out means something different for her than it does her friends, and she appears to be basing this knowledge purely on facts obtained from her close friends. She is very aware of how her friends' experiences differ from her own, and she details how one's varied experiences lead to different meanings of coming out.

Another 22 year-old female, Kelly, had a similar awareness of the difference between the meaning she attributes to coming out and the meaning others attribute to the concept. Kelly, who identifies as pansexual, sees coming out as self-affirmation, and "accepting myself for loving who I want to love and not, kind of, doing what society tells me." On her own volition, she goes on to tell me that:

> There are other definitions [of coming out] . . . like telling people about it, but to me that's never been something I've felt like I've had to do. Telling my mom that "you know, I'm kind of dating this girl" wasn't necessarily me coming out. It was more like "hey mom, I've got a new relationship," and I didn't see it as coming out. So, it's probably a lot different for other people.

In this passage we see that Kelly does not equate coming out to telling—at least not for herself. Coming out is about affirming her sexuality, and for her that is purely a personal quest. But she is sharply aware that other people who have less social support may see coming out as being more rooted in the sharing of their sexual orientation with people from whom they need validation, namely parents.

Eden and Kelly went into great detail about the various meanings people may attribute to coming out. However, more common among participants was the very brief mention of coming out as a unique experience. That is, participants expressed the belief that the meaning of coming out varies depending on an individual's social environment, but

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they offered little insight into where they derived such knowledge. For example, Arielle, a 24-year old who identifies as a lesbian, recognized that the meaning of coming out varies from person to person, but more specifically she noted that this variation is a matter of social support:

> I definitely think it's different for everyone. I mean, I obviously had a pretty good experience because I wasn't rejected from my friends and family or shunned or kicked out of my house like so many young people are.

The meaning that Arielle personally ascribes to coming out is rooted in both self-acceptance (coming out to oneself) and coming out to any and everyone (full disclosure). She felt that, depending on an individual's social environment, many people are simply unable to fully express their sexuality thus affecting their meaning of coming out. And, rightly so—her perception is consistent with the literature on coming out. She felt that those who fear rejection on the part of their family and friends would likely place more emphasis on coming out as a matter of coming out to family and friends. But, she did not offer any details on whether this belief was based on the experiences of her friends, social media, or some other source.

Influence of Storytelling and Media on Coming Out

Lee, a 20 year-old gay male, expressed a similar notion to that of Arielle—that the meaning of coming out varies from person to person. As Lee put it, "I think coming out is very relative." However, rather than noting social support as the source of variation in the

meaning different individuals ascribe to coming out, Lee emphasized the role of common storylines and social stereotypes. For example, he stated that coming out is "not that one moment where you're at a family dinner where your whole extended family is over for Christmas and you're carving into a turkey and you clang your glass…" Such a stereotypical type of point-in-time coming out moment was mentioned throughout various interviews. Lee offered a bit more insight into where such perceptions of coming out are derived.

> It's just like you watch these videos or you watch these shows…of course, you start watching the shows with, like, the gay protagonist – you watch their storyline. Of course, the breaking point is like "oh, when is he going to come out to his family" and it's this big thing and it's glamorized and this and that. But, when it comes down to it, life isn't a TV show.

Lee's recognition of common storylines and media portrayals of coming out brings up an important element in our perception of what coming out means.

Where do people derive their conceptions of coming out and what it means both for themselves and other people? Above, when Eden was summarizing her broader definition of coming out, she referred to the experiences of specific friends (the portions of the text containing their names was left out to ensure confidentiality). Still, most participants did not offer any details on where they derived their broader understanding of what coming meant for *other* people. As Lee referenced, social media and pop culture likely have a lot to do with forming our broader definitions of coming out. From the coming out of Ellen DeGeneres' character on the 1997 sitcom *Ellen* to the recent YouTube phenomena of Dan Savage's *It Gets Better*, people come in contact with various interpretations of what coming out is, and what it means. The challenge then is for individuals to learn what is important to

themselves and their sexual identity formation and maintenance versus what they are being told *should* be important.

Richard, a 24 year-old gay male, highlighted just how much social media and common storylines can influence our conception and expectations of coming out. "I wanted to come out in high school, I guess, in this classic television sense." Richard explicitly remembers watching the episode of *Ellen* where she comes out to her close friends. He recalls how her identity disclosure was such a big deal both on the show and in the media and how her friends were so surprised. Based on the portrayal of coming out on *Ellen*, as well as other shows like *Degrassi*, Richard expected an equally profound moment.

> I was like, ok, I need to come out to someone, and I had a group of, like, my really, really close friends who I've known since I was born, so I felt comfortable with them over anyone. So, I came out to them one evening, and they really just didn't care, they were just like "ok." I remember being shocked. I was like "no, I want you to be like 'whoa, oh my god,'" and they were just like, "ok, whatever." So, I remember being kind of disappointed in that.

Popular media told Richard to expect surprise from his friends, so their mundane reaction disappointed him following his coming out. This, and other media influences gave Richard the perception that coming out means one or perhaps a series of monumentous occasions. He has since altered his vision of what coming out means to emphasize both self-affirmation and being honest about his sexuality to his family and close friends.

So, the meaning of coming out appears to have some similar influences: social media, popular television, and common storylines. But, regardless of the frequency with which such formulaic versions of coming out are ingested, the data from these interviews

holds one essential truth: coming out is a unique experience. It is shaped by myriad social influences which result in substantial variability in the meaning of coming out across participants.

Duration and Form

One of the more prevalent dimensions to my interviews with participants about coming out was that of temporality. Based on an analysis of the interview data I uncovered three general categories for the duration and form that coming out may take: coming out as a point-in-time event, coming out as a gradual process, and coming out as a career. Most participants alluded to multiple temporal dimensions in their discussion of coming out. But, there was substantial variability regarding which temporal elements garnered the most attention and which seemed to be more central to the meaning of coming out.

Coming out as a point-in-time event and/or gradual process

Throughout my interviews, most of the participants engaged in discussions of how they came out to specific people (a parent, a best friend, or perhaps a coworker). These instances highlight the meaning of coming out as a point-in-time event. This is a trend that came up much more in the general interview data than from specific questions about what coming out means to each individual. But, it is an important part of the meaning individuals attach to coming out nonetheless.

As a point-in-time event, coming out is similar to "telling" as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. It is the process of disclosing one's sexual orientation to an individual or a group in a single setting at a single moment. For example, when I questioned Ram about his coming out experience, he replied "I would say I never had *a* perfect coming out story with any one person. (emphasis added)" Later on, he revisited this concept by indicating that he's "never had *a* smooth coming out." His use of the article "a" indicates coming out as a point-in-time event. As is the case with every participant who indicated coming out as a point-in-time event, Ram also recognized coming out as a gradual, ongoing process. So, the linguistic use of the phrase "coming out" is broad simply because its definition varies depending on context. Consider the variation in the definition of coming out as seen in the following three sentences:

- 1) "I came out to my mom last month" (point-in-time),
- 2) "I began coming out after an epiphany I had on my eighteenth birthday" (coming out as a process), or
- 3) "Society encourages gay men and lesbians to come out" (could allude to either a point-in-time event or a process)

It was fairly common among participants to discuss coming out in the context of both a point-in-time event and a gradual process. Veronica, a 20 year-old who identifies as a lesbian, epitomized the use of coming out as both a point-in-time event and a process. On her own volition, she took the liberty of highlighting the different uses of the term "coming out":

> I guess "out" in general would be "openly gay." Coming out to someone – it may not mean you're coming out to the rest of the world, but coming out to that person is telling them you're gay. I guess it depends on the context. *So,*

there's a situational coming out and there's coming out as a whole (emphasis added)*.*

This split between the situational coming out and coming out as a whole was similarly stated by Nathan, a 21 year-old gay male:

> I guess I view [coming out] as two different interpretations. There is the one where it's just kind of like people asking me if I'm gay and I will go "yes, I am." That's one form of coming out. Then there is the more philosophical – that kind of delves into "what is my coming out story?"

For every participant in this study, coming out means more than *just* coming out in a single circumstance. In other words, those who referenced coming out as a point-in-time event also talked about coming out as a gradual process. Gabrielle, who talked about the temporal elements of coming out a great deal, encapsulated how coming out is not a singular event. Rather, coming out is comprised of a series of point-in-time events, like a gradual process with many individual stops along the way.

> I think, as a gay person, there's always multiple coming outs. I mean, every person I meet on the fucking street, you know, if they realize I'm gay [they're like] "You're gay?"—"Yeah, I'm gay,"—once again, that's another coming out.

Another form of "multiple coming outs" that Gabrielle spoke about has to do with coming out multiple times to the same people, even herself. A great deal of literature on coming out assumes that sexual identities are static, fixed entities. But, sexual identities are becoming increasingly fluid, and this fluidity translates to potentially coming out multiple times to other people, even oneself. So far, most of the discussion about the duration of coming out

has centered on the outward elements of coming out—coming out to others. But Gabrielle

brought into sharp contrast that coming out to oneself is a process which includes a series

of point-in-time self-realizations or admissions as well.

> I came out as bi-curious, and then I came out as bisexual…It took a lot…It
> probably took me like two or three years to really feel comfortable with
> myself saying "I am Gabby and I am a lesbian," and now I am, you know, so I
> think it was definitely a process.

Nobody suggested that coming out was purely a point-in-time event. However,

many participants refrained from talking about coming out as a point-in-time event;

choosing instead to discuss coming out only in the context of it being a gradual process.

One such person was Renee, who spoke of coming out only as a process. For her, coming

out is a "process of [disclosing her sexuality to] friends and coworkers, and then family."

Renee also alluded to, but never outright stated, an important theme seen throughout many

interviews: coming out as a career. The two trends of *coming out as a gradual process* and

coming out as a career are similar in that they both recognize coming out as an ongoing

progression. However, there is a sharp distinction between these two conceptions of

coming out: a career is managed, while a process is completed.

Coming out as a Career

The uniqueness of the career perspective of coming out is the notion that coming

out is never a completed process. It is a recognition that, as long as sexual minorities are

othered in society, members of the LGBQ community will continuously have to engage in

coming out. People enter and part from our lives continuously and our social spheres

change, thus the process continues. As Athena put it, "You're always kind of coming out.

Every time you're in a new situation where you need to mention who you are, you're

coming out again." Such a perception means coming out is comprised of limitless ebbs and

flows. For example, an individual may come out to her entire network of friends only to be

relocated to another city by her employer. The individual will likely establish a new

network of friends, after which she will face a similar decision of whether or not to come

out to others.

There is a sense of both progression and regression that can be seen in these

processes. Goffman (1959) originally spoke of careers as they refer to the stigmatized

identities of mental health patients. However, the term has since been used to refer more

broadly to any social strand in one's life course.

> One value of the concept of career is its two-sidedness. One side is linked to
> internal matters held dearly and closely, such as image of self and felt
> identity; the other side concerns official position, jural relations, and style of
> life, and is part of a publicly accessible institutional complex. The concept of
> career, then, allows one to move back and forth between the self and its
> significant society, without having overly to rely for data upon what the
> person says he thinks he imagines himself to be (Goffman 1959:125).

Goffman references there being both an internal and external element to the concept of the

career. This important aspect of the career was seen clearly throughout my interviews with

the participants in this study. Participants spoke frequently about coming out to oneself

(internal) and coming out to others (external), thus bolstering the assertion that coming

out is a career in much the same sense as Goffman asserted nearly a half century ago. Some

participants did focus more on either the internal or the external elements of their career in discussing the meaning they attribute to coming out. Nevertheless, nearly every participant at least made mention of both internal and external aspects to her coming out, thus supporting the claim that coming out is truly a career.

Careers are not completed; rather, there is a sense of continuity in the proceedings. Adam emphasized that coming out "is more of a continual effort just because, like I said before, any time you meet someone new you have to go through that process again." An individual may come out to everyone in her social network only to relocate to another city and find that she has essentially taken a few steps back in terms of her *degree of outness*. I am speaking under the assumption that individuals are interested and willing to share their sexuality with other people. But, this assumption is not unfounded. The participants in this study who spoke of coming out as a career were also the same people who most were willing to engage in broad disclosure of their sexual identity.

Outside of those individuals that someone may purposively come out to, LGBQ persons also encounter numerous situations in which casual friends, peers, or even strangers question their sexuality or make a remark that beckons an admission of sexual difference. Some participants spoke of using humor or quiet complacency to avoid speaking of matters related to sexuality, but the awareness of such techniques reiterates the element of career management. Brandon hits on this very aspect of coming out: "It's a constant process. It's something that people ask you 'oh, do you have a girlfriend?' or something like that. It's a constant process, it's not something that you do and you finish, it's something you do for life."

As is the case with all careers, as one gains experience, the process becomes more easily manageable. Adam seemingly picks up where Brandon left off:

> But, at the same time, it gets easier to the point that it's a non-issue anymore. Where the initial impetus of coming out to my parents, my friends – that was tough. But, with every day, every new person I meet it gets a little bit easier, just because I've done it before and I know who I am and who I can depend on.

But, the perception that "it gets easier" is not shared among all participants of this study. Michelle, a 25 year-old, who identifies as a lesbian, recognizes the career element of her coming out. More importantly, she sees her coming out as a career because "everywhere you go there is a new group of people, new cliques, new, you know, everything." To Michelle, coming out means "being able to function like anybody else would be in your daily activities whether it be work, school, you know, house, anything. You should be able to do whatever you want with whoever you want." Michelle is structurally prohibited from fully engaging in her coming out due to her employment with the U.S. military. She is unable to merge the personal and professional spheres of her life. In essence, she is living a bifurcated existence as it relates to her sexuality. As she puts it, "I'm always looking over my shoulder like 'oh, did I do something that looked gay? Or, do I look gay today? And, always trying to make sure I don't stand out." For Michelle, coming out is a career within a career.

Lee also sees coming out as a career, but there is a caveat to his belief. Whereas everyone else who cited coming out as a career felt that you never fully complete the coming out process, he has the philosophical notion that there is an end to coming out.

> For me, I feel as if once you come out, like, once you're not afraid to let people
> know you're gay, or you're not going to be holding it back, then I feel like you
> already fully came out. I don't feel as if you can come out "again"; granted, I
> know that there's new people . . .

So, although Lee describes coming out as a process and a career that must be managed, he feels that once you are no longer afraid to disclose your sexuality to other people you are effectively "out." This demonstrates the only example of a participant seeing coming out as both a career and something that can be completed.

H.G., a 51 year-old male who identifies as queer, had an entirely different take on the career element of coming out: "If you ask when I came out I would probably tell you 'never.'" Hank has, in fact, come out to many people in his life: family, friends, colleagues. He is simply making light of his view that he cannot ever *fully* come out. That is, he cannot be entirely "out" so long as there is a social expectation that certain groups must disclose their sexuality. For all the reasons discussed in this chapter, he is well aware that he will never feel that he has fully and truly come out. The common thread here is that for Brandon, Adam, Athena, Michelle, H.G., Jason, Gabrielle, and Lee, coming out means engaging in a career—a perpetual process that must be managed.

Summary

The meaning of coming out is anything but formulaic. Meaning is relative, evolutionary, and varied on the basis of different life circumstances, different social environments, and different personal beliefs and values. A formal meaning or textbook

definition of coming out cannot be made without trivializing the broad variation seen across the participants in this study. If there is one point that may be generalized it is that coming out is a transformative, ongoing process—this was indicated by all 30 participants in the study. Whether this transformation consists of a purely internal shift in self-conception, a newfound sharing of one's sexuality with others, or a combination of the two, is for each individual to decide.

Public disclosure related to coming out is rooted in heterocentric ideology that encourages, if not requires telling or confessing *difference*. In terms of sexual orientation, "difference" simply means "not explicitly heterosexual," which incidentally is a contemporary definition for the word "queer." Many study participants engaged in conversation about whether or not they feel a disclosure imperative is placed upon them by society. Most everyone agrees that we, as a society, expect difference to be explained. But, not everyone shared this sentiment. Some participants felt an expectation to remain closeted, to allow society to delude itself into believing that everyone is straight. Our cultural belief that difference in sexual orientation must be explained is rooted in dualistic thinking and a reliance on everyone fitting into artificial binaries.

As long as we assume that sex=gender=sexuality (thus leaving no room for difference) we will continue to expect those who do not fit our simplistic model to disclose and explain said difference. Consequently, participants who are further removed from conventional dualistic thinking (i.e., they think beyond a gender binary) are more inclined to deemphasize coming out to others and focus more on coming out as a personal journey of self-affirmation. In other words, those participants who identify as queer, fluid,

pansexual, or simply do not identify are less prone to include coming out to others as central to their meaning of coming out.

Since current trends in identity formation include more young people aligning with these "open" sexual identities, we may continue to see the meaning of coming out change in the near future. Based on this study, parents appear to be increasingly open to discussing sexual orientation with their children. Perhaps with the increased dialog and awareness of various sexual identities, families will continue to be more proactive in letting their children know that they will be loved regardless of their sexual orientation. With less pressure to disclose their sexuality to family members, the insistence on coming out as a purely personal journey will likely gain momentum in the coming years. Still, among the participants in this study, coming out often means so much more than just coming out to oneself. For some it means disclosing their sexuality to family and close friends, and in all likelihood seeking a sense of liberation or perhaps even validation from those same people. For others, coming out means disclosing one's sexuality to any and every one. For 18 of the 30 participants, coming out means a combination of these elements.

Future research on coming out should take into account all of the variety in meaning when designing studies. An assumption of shared meaning should not be made without considering the disparate impact such a practice will have on the outcome of the study. At the very least, researchers should share their meaning of coming with participants so that research participants can understand the researchers' position on the concept and therefore provide more meaningful, valid responses to questions.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE QUEER APOLOGETIC

Heteronormativity and Coming Out

Those groups that enjoy positions of privilege in society rarely, if ever, have to justify the characteristics of their dominant traits. In the U.S., privilege is held by those who are white, male, and—of import to this study—heterosexual. In the minds of the majority, to be heterosexual is to be normal. Heterosexuals often do not even consider their sexual orientation as a defining element in their self identity (Herek 1990). It is simply not thought about. When a characteristic is normative it is rarely called into question. Heterosexuality is everywhere. As a result, our common social expectation is that everyone is straight until proven gay. It is no coincidence that my choice of wording is eerily similar to "innocent until proven guilty." After all, fear of judgment is one of the strongest barriers to coming out. This fear is derived from the constant barrage of heteronormative expectations that young children and teens receive from their family, their friends, their teachers, and other authority figures. These expectations are in addition to the heteronormative wording and imagery seen throughout society from schools and churches to legal guidelines to the mass media.

From an early age, people are bombarded by a multitude of messages concerning the heteronormative expectations of our society (Yep 2002; Martin and Kazyak 2009). Most people who are born into two-parent households are brought up by a woman and a man, a mother and a father. Even among the participants in this study, 73 percent (22 out of 30) grew up in two-parent heterosexual households. Of these 22 respondents, 18 reported

having intact families consisting of a biological mother and father who are still together, and another four grew up with mom and dad who are now separated (one of which is remarried). This percentage is higher than national averages concerning intact families, and that is likely a result of the heavily middle-class sample in this study. Still the expectations of man and woman, husband and wife, mom and dad, boyfriend and girlfriend, are a daily reminder of what is expected of these individuals in their future relationships.

Gabrielle recalls some of the media and cultural forces that continued to push her toward heterosexuality as a young girl, even as she began to recognize having feelings toward members of the same sex:

> When I was little all I could think about was me under a fucking hopa, getting married and the guy stepping on the fucking glass, and having an awesome crazy-big wedding because I'm very big like that, and that's all I could think about…you think about your wedding day as a little girl. And, playing Barbie…Barbie and Ken, you make them fuck, you don't make the two…well, maybe you do make the two girls fuck, but you know what I mean. That's always how it's been and the all of the sudden you either meet people who are like this, or you are just realizing or you find that you have this attraction toward this person or that person, and you just don't understand why and it's something that's deep inside of you.

Throughout the interviews in this study, participants frequently spoke of experiences similar to those in Gabrielle's recollection. Participants spoke most often of expectations placed upon them by their parents, themselves, and society in general. This is what makes coming out such an arduous journey—members of the LGBQ community are well aware that their sexuality is not the norm, and that their status as a sexual minority adds additional challenges to many facets of life. Such heavy social expectations often force individuals to grapple with their sexuality much more than should be expected given that

sexuality is ultimately treated to be a very personal matter. The desire to satisfy social

expectations, please other people, and be comfortable with oneself can sometimes lead an

individual to disclose a sexual identity that does not truly match one's inward sexuality.

The Queer Apologetic

There is extensive literature on why an individual may choose *not* to come out.

Studies often cite the influence of family and friends, social norms, or even refusal on the

part of the individual to affirm an LGBQ identity (Jordan and Deluty 1998; Waldner and

Magruder 1999; Flowers and Buston 2001; Johnston and Jenkins 2003; McLean 2007;

Gorman-Murray 2008). Rarely does research focus on the details of how these same three

influences alter the way in which an individual *does* come out. Rather than preventing a

coming out process from taking shape, these powerful forces can influence someone to

come out in a compromised fashion. That is, an individual may come out with an identity

that differs from her internalized sexuality in an effort to be more palatable to all parties

involved in her coming out process (family, friends, even oneself). I call this interaction the

queer apologetic. Queer, in this sense, simply meaning "not explicitly heterosexual."

The queer apologetic is an individual's attempt at minimizing disapproval of and

disappointment over her sexuality by disclosing a public identity that she feels will be more

easily accepted by family/friends or even herself. The queer apologetic is essentially a form

of identity compromise whereby individuals locate and disclose an intermediary identity

situated somewhere between a) their personal attractions for only members of the same

sex and b) society's expectation that they be attracted only to members of the opposite sex. Such circumstances were discussed by 10 of the 30 participants in the current study, highlighting that this process is far more than an anomaly. Despite their interest in and attraction to only members of the same sex, many participants spoke about coming out publicly as bisexual.

The "apologetic" is a strategy for bridging the gap between cultural expectations and the perception that one's situation (e.g., coming out) challenges those expectations. Rohrbaugh (1979) spoke of such apologetics being employed by female athletes who were aware of the contested (male dominated) terrain they were operating within. Most research on the apologetic surrounds certain social institutions—namely politics, sports, and religion (Benoit 1995)—but the concept of the apologetic applies to other domains in which individuals encounter a problematic situation (such as a violation of social expectations regarding sexuality).

As Goffman (1971) points out, one of the primary motivations for individuals to engage in apologetic interactions is to maintain healthy relationships with valued people (family, friends, etc.). And although the queer apologetic is intended to ease the process of coming out, the apologetic nature of the exchange actually works to reinforce existing arrangements regarding sexuality. Apologetic interchanges may be short, but they are often campaigns that are developed over time (Benoit 1995). This last characteristic of apologetic interchanges was echoed throughout my interview data, as many participants navigated their queer apologetic for months, even years.

A final point is that the concept of the queer apologetic is not necessarily about offering an apology for one's non-heterosexual orientation. It has much to do with expressing regret for the occurrence of an undesirable event (Schlenker and Darby 1981). An example of this distinction can be seen in the gay theology movement of the 1950s— which was also largely apologetic (Krondorfer 2007). Individuals who were involved in the movement were not so much apologizing for their sexuality; rather, they were apologetic about the situation caused by their movement (based on their acknowledgement of a mainstream belief that gay Christians represented a paradox of sorts).

The ten participants in this study who engaged in a queer apologetic were (and still are) attracted only to members of the same sex, so their initial disclosure of a bisexual identity was an apologetic endeavor. It was apologetic in that the compromised identity was put forth purely for people whom the individuals perceived would be less able or willing to accept a gay identity (which may have included themselves). The interesting element of these individuals' experiences is that they came out as bisexual either for the sake of their family/friends or because they were personally not ready to let go of social conventions. So, in the eyes of individuals who are coming out, the disclosure of a bisexual identity allows them to express their interest in members of the same sex while still allowing others (and sometimes themselves) to hold out hope that an eventual opposite sex partner could be secured. At least that was the intent and their belief at the onset of first coming out.

To their surprise, their identity compromise backfired in nearly every circumstance. Although individuals may feel like they are coming out with a sexual identity that satisfies

both themselves and others, they later come to realize that our society's reliance on heavily dualistic thinking derides their progress. In the eyes of many Americans, and consequently the friends and family of many of my participants, bisexuality involves "liking members of the same sex" and this is seen as synonymous with being gay. Consistent with current research on sexual identities, intermediary identities (a concept itself rooted in faulty dualistic thinking) that fall somewhere in between heterosexuality and homosexuality are less understood and therefore not as easily explained or accepted. As such, rather than accepting or affirming the newly disclosed bisexual identity, family members and friends resoundingly pushed for the individual to "choose a side" or "admit that you're gay." In this way, the decision to come out initially with a bisexual identity made for a much more difficult route to disclosing an internalized sexuality which eventually aligned with a gay or lesbian identity.

The concept of the queer apologetic focuses on individuals' usage of bisexuality as a transitional identity, but I am not inferring that bisexuality is always a transitional identity. In fact, bisexuality is a concrete sexual identity for many people, and there is a sizable contingency of bisexual persons in the U.S. Of the 30 individuals in this study, bisexuality served as the *initial* public sexual identity for 15 participants. Although nobody in the current study presently identifies as bisexual, one participant, Hannah, does recall having initially come out as bisexual based on her sincere attractions to both men and women.

> [I told] my parents that I was bisexual, and they had thought it was a phase,
> which really for some reason, really upset me, and because I was so sure of it
> and I was like "no, I definitely like both." I was positive I was bisexual for a
> long time. I was 100% . . . I was like "I like both and I will always like both."

Hannah has since affirmed a gay identity. As she put it "I started dating women and I hit 9th grade of high school, and I realized 'I'm gay, I'm gay.'" Still, Hannah represents the only participant in this study who initially came out as bisexual and did *not* engage in a queer apologetic. She had mutual attractions for men and women at the time, so her disclosure of a bisexual identity was not apologetic.

The individuals in this study who previously disclosed a bisexual identity all presently identify as gay, lesbian, queer, pansexual, or they simply choose not to identify. The present analysis of the queer apologetic applies solely to those 10 individuals who were interested only in members of the opposite sex (all of whom eventually affirmed a gay or lesbian identity). The other 5 individuals who initially came out as bisexual are sincerely interested in dating multiple genders or they simply do not use gender as criteria for choosing intimate partners. Therefore, they did not engage in a queer apologetic—there was no compromise. But, for the 10 participants who presently identify as gay or lesbian, their journey through bisexuality was truly apologetic.

Pleasing Family/Friends

In contemporary society, we still typically expect anyone who is not explicitly heterosexual to publicly disclose their sexual orientation. Most of us assume that when someone does disclose a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer identity, it means that she does, in fact, privately identify as such. When someone says "I'm gay" or "I'm bisexual," we often

come away with the understanding that what we're being told is accurate. But, considering what we know about the effects of heteronormativity on coming out, it should come as no surprise to learn that public identities and private sexualities do not always align. Just as someone who privately identifies as gay may remain closeted, another individual who privately identifies as gay may come out publicly as bisexual.

Social science research, particularly survey research, is often filled with people's attempts at providing socially desirable responses to survey questionnaires. In the same way, people sometimes present a public identity that they believe to be palatable to their audience. Sexual orientation is no exception. And, in the case of sexual identity disclosure, that audience typically consists of family and close friends. Most of us care deeply about being accepted or even validated by our family and friends. Fear of rejection is a powerful force, especially when it involves those people we rely on most. Even children and teens who come from perfectly healthy families worry about how their coming out will be received. Research suggests that those with healthy families have a greater fear of rejection than those who have weak family ties (Waldner and Magruder 1999). LGBQ persons who come from unsupportive homes have more dire reasons to worry (e.g., direct threats from family members or outwardly homophobic dialog in the home), but in many ways there is more to lose in the case of healthy, happy families. Considering the high percentage of close-knit, intact families in this study, it makes sense that fear of rejection would prove instrumental in guiding the coming out process for most of the participants.

Aside from pure fear, participants also indicated a strong desire to please their families. Just as we each try to make our parents proud by performing well in school or

landing a good job, many participants chose to disclose a sexual identity that they believed

would meet their parents' expectations of sexuality—at least partially. Most parents raise

their children under the assumption that they are heterosexual. In extreme cases, such

parental expectations may keep an individual from coming out at all, opting instead for the

maintenance of a publicly heterosexual identity, at least around the family. Hamed, a 30

year-old gay male, was not comfortable answering many of my questions, but he shared

some poignant insight on living under an assumption of heterosexuality at home:

> My friends, everyone at school, they knew I was gay . . . I never really made a
> point of keeping that part of myself private. I even came out to my parents at
> one point, but they just sent me to a therapist who was supposed to cure me,
> and even now, as far as my parents know, I am "cured" . . . when I'm at home
> with family I am heterosexual.

However, for most participants, hiding or denying all same-sex attractions was

simply not an option. Some participants spoke specifically about how much of an

imperative it was to come out. As Gabrielle put it, "regardless if I was being paid a million

dollars, I would not want to be in the closet." The decision to keep one's sexuality entirely

private would require the compartmentalization of one's entire life into separate social

spheres. Such was the case for Michelle, who is reluctantly closeted in certain social circles

due to her military service: "Well, I can only come out sometimes. Obviously, with the

military you're not supposed to [come out]." At the time of our interview, Don't Ask Don't

Tell was still being enforced. A much more feasible choice undertaken by many participants

was to opt instead for the disclosure of a public sexual identity that would both 1) allow

them to maintain their own interest in same-sex relations, and 2) uphold the opposite-sex expectations of their family/friends. Enter: bisexuality.

The queer apologetic is an individual's attempt at minimizing disapproval of and disappointment over her true sexual identity by disclosing a public identity she *believes to be* more palatable to her family/friends or herself. I emphasize the words "believes to be" because an individual's perception of how her family and friends will react often fails to match up with reality. But, the *perception* that family and friends would be more likely to accept a bisexual identity than a gay or lesbian identity is prevalent across many participants. One of the clearest examples of such thinking was demonstrated by Rachel, a 20 year-old who presently identifies as gay.

> I couldn't stop getting thoughts out of my head about just women, and like, just being gay. And so that's when I kind of cracked, and I told someone because he had told me . . . he had come out to me as gay and he told me I was the only person that he told, and so I felt comfortable with him and I just kind of told him and from there it was a snowball effect . . . Um, telling my mom. . . at first though I told them that I was bisexual because I thought that they'd be more accepting, but in reality I was just trying to ease them into it.

Rachel was slowly getting comfortable with the reality that she only "liked women," but she still felt inclined to come out to her mom as bisexual. She envisioned bisexuality as a sort of go-between or a compromise between her interest in only members of the same sex and her perception that her mom wished to see her date members of the opposite sex. So, despite her honest lack of interest in "guys," she came out as bi-.

> I told her [mother] that I like girls, and I said that maybe I'm bi-, just to make it easier…and so she kept questioning me, "well, what do you think you are?" [Reflecting back] I just tried to convince myself "ok, I'm bi-. I'm just going to

be bi-." Like, I told myself, "I can be bi- if I want to. I like girls but I can try to like guys," – which wasn't the case.

She inferred from this conversation that her mom was pressuring her to say that she might still be interested in guys. But, it was actually quite the opposite. Her mom was not concerned about the sex or gender of her daughter's romantic interests—she was merely set on her daughter being either explicitly gay or straight. The decision to engage in an identity compromise seemed, at least initially, to backfire and make the entire coming out process more difficult. Her mom questioned and pressured her to affirm a gay identity.

> My mom said, "Rachel, I think you're gay, and you need to be able to accept that," and so she was kind of like, not arguing with me, but really stern about it like "you really need to be ok with it, and it's great that you came out, but if you're gay you're gay," so. . .

Rachel's expectation that other people would be more affirming of a bisexual identity was not limited to her parents. Even among her group of close friends, she anticipated that they would be more likely to accept her coming out with an identity that left the door open for dating guys. But, her decision to come out as bisexual was more about pleasing other people than making her own coming out less difficult. Her actions really seemed to communicate an apologetic response to the realization that she was only attracted to members of the same sex.

> In high school I [came out as bisexual], just because I thought they'd accept me more if they're like "ok, well, maybe she'll like a guy again," I mean I felt like it was just a way to ease people into it [the fact that she privately identified as gay]. At first I just said "I like girls," and they just assumed that I was bi- because I had dated all these guys that they knew…I just wanted to please everyone, and try to make it easier for them.

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Now that Rachel has moved beyond trying to anticipate what her family and friends would prefer to see her identify as, she is comfortable outwardly admitting that, "I have no interest in being with men. . . I definitely consider myself gay, I'm a lesbian, I just don't like the term, so I'll call myself gay." So, in Rachel's case, the only force that encouraged her to engage in a queer apologetic was her perception that family and friends would be more likely to affirm an identity that still had a partial foothold in heterosexuality. Although she only indicated feeling pressured by the perceived expectations of family and friends, the fact that there was such a big disconnect between perception and reality also uncovers the power of cultural ideology. She had built up the notion that being accepted was contingent on appearing to have at least some level of interest in men.

Another example of the level of influence that family can have on the public disclosure of a sexual identity can be seen in the experiences of Kyle, a 21 year-old who presently identifies as a lesbian. Throughout her interview, Kyle expressed that she has never liked boys/men. She laughingly recalls "dating" a male friend in high school (whom she knew to be gay) purely to see what her friends' reactions would be and during the process she realized "man, I am sooo gay, and he's sooo gay, but I was still not telling people." Although she was beginning to come to terms with being attracted only to women, she was nowhere near ready to come out to her family. But, as she recalls, fate had a different plan. One day her mom came across a note that she had written to a girl she was "crushing on" in her class. Her mom "flipped out, describing lesbians [with words like]

carpet muncher. . . " and scaring Kyle into believing that she could never come out as a

lesbian.

Based on her conversation with her mom after the note was found, she was more

afraid than ever to ever say that she was attracted to women—much less attracted to *only*

women. But, as time progressed, it became increasingly difficult for her to be interested in

women and yet hide all signs of these interests at home. After a couple of years she became

sure that disclosing a bisexual identity was what she wanted to do. It would accomplish 1)

conveying to her mom that she "liked girls" while 2) simultaneously allowing her mom to

maintain that her child might still end up with a boy.

> And, then, two years later I was like "I think I'm bisexual," and she's like "you
> better choose a sex," and I'm just like "ok??" [her mannerism communicated a
> sense of "whatever"] and when I finally came out as a lesbian she was like
> "that's great hunny." And, I was like "for years you made me feel like crap"
> and she was like "I just wanted you to choose." I'm like "you're insane."

The strain that was created by Kyle having come out as bisexual was severe. At the

time that she came out, it seemed to make perfect sense to her that the disclosure of a

bisexual identity was the safest bet overall. As was the case with Rachel, it would serve to

achieve the goal of expressing that she liked girls while still leaving the door open for

future relationships that might involve boys. But, this apologetic identity compromise

forced her to take two steps back. For a great deal of time after she came out as bi-, she and

her mom plainly avoided any discussion of attractions or dating whatsoever. When she

finally did come out as a lesbian her relationship with both of her parents improved

remarkably. She just never would have predicted that her mom would have been more affirming of a lesbian identity than she was a bisexual identity.

> I don't know what she thinks about bisexuals, but she doesn't like them {laughter}. I'm just like "ok, she's comfortable that I'm gay, like, she's fine with that now," but just in the moment she's like "I hate all bisexuals, and my daughter will not be bisexual," and I'm just like [sarcastically] "right on."

Kyle's perception that her parents would be more accepting of an intermediary identity was very influential across the course of her coming out. Most telling is the clear step-wise pattern to her coming out. She first came out to her friends and her sister as "liking girls," then she came out to everyone as bisexual, and finally she came out across the board as a lesbian. "Liking girls" is more about affinity than identity, so it was seen by many participants as the safest way to come out, especially when an individual has yet to form a discrete sexual identity. In the eyes of many participants, such as Rachel and Kyle, bisexuality offers the next best alternative in that it does not close the door on heterosexual relationships. Of course, their decision to come out as bisexual is based in the assumption that family and friends are open to someone being attracted to both men and women.

However strong the influence of family and friends may be, it is not the only social force one faces upon deciding to come out. Perhaps the most influential force comes from within. After all, we all have to live with ourselves much more than anyone else has to put up with us. For many participants, letting go of the normative sexual identity (i.e., heterosexuality) felt like an insurmountable challenge. Participants spoke of trying as hard as they could to hold on to social conventions and not let go of "normalcy," despite knowing that they were only interested in relationships with members of the same sex.

Holding on to Social Conventions

Heteronormative expectations—even subsequent fear of rejection—do not always come from outside sources. One of the most powerful forms of rejection comes from within—via one's own refusal to affirm a non-heterosexual identity. Heteronormative expectations become such a routinized practice for many Americans that the first hint of non-heterosexual thoughts or behavior can lead to extreme self-doubt, denial, frustration, confusion, and even all-out self-rejection. The influence of internalized heteronormativity was extreme among many participants who engaged in a queer apologetic. As Pao demonstrated:

> It was a process of denial . . . of . . . I think you just go through so many processes to completely, completely, completely come out and accept yourself for who you are. It's just so long, and it's dreadful and it's – you torture yourself a lot and you go through so much before accepting it. You're taught that it's wrong, so you're fighting against yourself.

Internalized heteronormativity was not limited to those who engaged in a queer apologetic—this trend was seen throughout the interviews of most participants. Reactions of denial and disbelief are still rooted in fear, but in addition to a fear of rejection, people cite a fear of not conforming to their own heterocentric social expectations. Kelly demonstrated this:

> This girl I was interested in in high school, I kind of got really close to her, and then psyched myself out. I was like "no, no, no, this isn't me," and made up all of these excuses because I was initially scared of what other people might think about me, and, which, usually isn't me at all, so I was really scared by all the new things surrounding it…so, I was kind of in denial myself,

and then it was kind of a process of me questioning, you know, like "I don't know, do I need to define myself? What is all of this?"

The influence of social conventions and normative heterosexuality was strong among many participants who engaged in a queer apologetic. In fact, three participants, Veronica, Lee, and Pao, placed little to no emphasis on the perceived reactions of family or friends when deciding to come out as bisexual. Their decision to come out initially as bisexual, despite their attractions to only members of the same sex, was rooted entirely in their personal refusal to let go of "normalcy." Admitting that one was gay rather than bisexual or simply someone who "liked girls/boys" would figuratively shut the door on any hope that one would blend into the mass of heterosexual identities seen across contemporary society. This personal, internal struggle is the real differentiation here. Participants who engaged in a queer apologetic rooted in pleasing family were only engaging in the *public* disclosure of a bisexual identity. But, participants whose queer apologetic was based in their personal refusal to let go of social conventions were also deluding *themselves* that they were still interested in members of the opposite sex. Put more succinctly, the first group engaged in an outward apologetic, while the second group engaged in both an inward and outward apologetic.

The realization that one is "different" (i.e., queer) by social standards can be difficult to digest. Initial reactions ranged from disbelief to amusement, but the influence of years of messages rooted in heteronormativity leads many people to struggle with the realization that they are attracted to members of the same sex and may, in fact, be gay. This is also oftentimes the point when individuals begin to differentiate between same-sex *affinities*

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and a more fixed non-heterosexual *identity*. Veronica recalls this very distinction as a point

of comfort in her struggle to accept herself. "[Coming out as bisexual] was more for me . . .

definitely for me. Um, because my first thought wasn't 'oh, I'm totally gay,' it was just

admitting that I liked girls" (emphasis added).

Veronica recalls coming out to her good guy-friend Matty as her first real

recognition that there existed some internal barriers to affirming a lesbian identity.

> I just came out with it to Matty. I was like, "oh, you know, I'm bisexual,"
> because most people, when they come out…I mean most of the people that
> I've met, or many, not most, many, coming out as bisexual first I found is very
> common. For me, it was that *holding on to normality* a little bit, and then
> realizing that, you know, I just don't [like guys] I don't at all…and I shouldn't
> have to try this hard, and fail every time, you know, to muster any kind of
> romantic or sexual feelings for the opposite sex. But, I was telling…I was just
> like "yeah," and it just came out of my mouth…I hadn't planned it (emphasis
> added).

In Veronica's summation she was already well-aware of her interest in only women, but

when it came to the public disclosure of a sexual identity she could not overcome the

influence of heteronormative ideology. In the moment she forged an identity compromise

which consisted of coming out to her best friend, and consequently herself, as bisexual.

Veronica stated that her decision to come out first as bisexual had nothing to do

with the perception that her family or friends would reject a lesbian identity (her present

identity), it was a matter of her not wanting to let go of "normality." Her queer apologetic

was aimed at satisfying the social expectations of one person—herself. "My family is open-

minded, very open-minded. . . [My mom] told me from the very beginning that

homosexuality is totally natural. . . None of it was for anybody else, but it was definitely the first step for me." Her disclosure of a bisexual identity was a compromise, but, for Veronica, it was a necessary step in her personal coming out process. She soon realized that she was surrounded by a great number of people who were all accepting of gay and lesbian identities, so she began to be self-affirming of a lesbian identity very shortly after coming out as bi-. "When I was coming out, I realized that I was a lesbian within two weeks of coming out as bisexual . . . I mean it was very quick, the realization." Although she began to self-identify as a lesbian two weeks after coming out as bisexual, it still took awhile before she would publicly identify as such. "[It was] like a month and a half before I started coming out [as a lesbian]. Everyone around me was like 'cool, cool, awesome, whatever.' Some of them were like 'duh.'" So, although Veronica faced numerous challenges in disclosing and affirming a lesbian identity, her greatest challenge came from within.

The internalized social conventions of "man+woman=couple" was particularly strong for another participant, Pao, who also engaged in a queer apologetic rooted in holding onto social conventions. Pao provided rich detail as to why she harbored such internalized heteronormativity. For starters, she grew up in Ecuador. Ecuador is, as Pao put it, "a third world country . . . gays and lesbians are, like, thirty years behind here." She was always attracted to women, as long as she can remember. But she grew up around such intolerance for homosexuality that she recalls, as a child, wishing she was a boy. Girls cannot be with girls, she thought, but if she was a boy then everything would be alright.

> It's only when I think I reached my adolescent stage, like around 18 or 19 . . .
> way later that I was like "no, I'm a girl and I'm really happy to be a feminine
> girl." But, it took me awhile to snap out of that [earlier] stage.

It was around this same time that Pao started to be more accepting of the fact that that she "likes girls" and that her attraction to women was not a phase. Still, her inability to let go of social convention—that is, her beliefs and values—kept her from affirming a gay identity (her present identity).

> It wasn't until I was 18. I remember I graduated from high school and I told my best friend. I started because I think, I, I, thought I was bisexual . . . I think that happens to a lot of gay people, they first think they're bisexual and they go through thinking they're bisexual until . . . and it's just an excuse to accept...it's like a pact you take until you truly accept who you are. You say "I like girls but I still like guys," so I started saying I was bisexual.

For Pao bisexuality was a phase until she was able to let go of what she perceived to be semi-heterosexuality and affirm that she is purely interested in members of the same sex. Pao's insistence on disclosing and maintaining a bisexual identity was embedded in her own insistence that she *should* be attracted to men as well as women. "It was a long process because I went through two years of thinking I was bisexual." The internalization of her bisexual identity came to an end just after her first experience with a girl.

> I thought I did [identify as bisexual], I really did think I did, but it wasn't until I had my first experience with a girl...when I understood what it was really like to feel attracted to . . . to really like being kissed, and then that, like, shook my world apart.

As was the case with many participants in this study, a family member played a central role in helping Pao affirm that she is only attracted to women and thereby affirm a gay identity. Again, we find that, for participants in this study, family and friends are often

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quick to encourage the individual to dualistically take a side, and (more times than not),

come out as gay. But, in Pao's purview, her sister was not forcing her to take a side; rather,

she was helping her admit the truth.

> One day my sister called me and I was telling her about this girl, and my
> sister was like, "you know what?," she told me "Pao, I don't think you like
> guys. I think you should just be true to yourself – be honest with yourself and
> if you don't like guys, it's ok," and I was like, "you know what Nati," that's her
> name, "I actually think you're right, I don't like guys, I like just girls," and that
> was the first time I had admitted it to anybody, which was my sister, which
> was pretty cool. After that it was like another coming out process – telling
> everybody I'm not really bisexual.

Pao's internalized apologetic seems easily explainable considering the social

environment in which she grew up. However, even those participants who grew up in open,

affirming environments were not immune to developing heterocentric ideologies. Lee, a 20

year-old male who now identifies as gay, grappled with his interest in men for years.

Despite his resounding lack of interest in women, Lee came out as bisexual. "I tried to say I

was bisexual – that's what I said at the time, but I knew at the time that this was me kind of

denying it. I guess you don't really notice that until after the fact." Throughout the

interview, Lee reiterates that he was only interested in men, and that his decision to come

out as bisexual was not a function of trying to please his family or friends. "My family, like

my nuclear family, they're pretty affirming." The pressure came from his personal refusal

to let go of social conventions.

Lee was convinced of his bisexual identity at the time that he first came out. But,

now he is starkly aware of the broad social forces that inundated him with images of

heteronormativity and therefore encouraged him to hold onto the social convention of

being attracted to members of the opposite sex. He also presently identifies as gay, and this realization came only after he finally affirmed that he truly is not attracted to women. The most telling statement from Lee's entire interview is actually a surprisingly simple summation of why he now identifies as gay. "I think the only reason that, for me, I stick with gay, is because, as I said before, I haven't been able to become attracted to a girl to the sense where I could have a relationship with her." The power in Lee's admission lies in his wording: "I haven't been able to become. . . " The mere phrasing of this sentence shows just how much social pressure there is in to conform to a heteronormative ideal of intimate relationships. The language subtly communicates that, even today, Lee senses that he *should* be attracted to women. It also explains why Lee came out first as bisexual, and then eventually as gay. His admission that he now identifies as gay runs parallel to his newfound realization that he is not "able to become attracted to a girl."

Tug and Pull: Social Conventions versus Family Influences

Many participants who engaged in an identity compromise via the queer apologetic were influenced purely by their internal desire to conform to social conventions. A few of these individuals also faced a second, antithetical force in the encouragement of family and friends to identify as either gay or straight. In the cases of two participants, Gabrielle and Adam, their families' encouragement to identify explicitly as gay or straight actually helped them overcome their own internal bias toward holding onto sexual normalcy.

It has already been demonstrated that family and friends often encourage

individuals who come out as bisexual to "take a side"—at least that is the perception of

many participants. Those individuals who engaged in a queer apologetic based in pleasing

family or friends were sincerely surprised to find that the people close to them preferred

that they identify as gay. These individuals erroneously assumed that other people would

be more accepting of an identity that still had at least a partial foothold in heterosexuality.

The decision, then, to disclose a bisexual identity turned out to be based on *false*

perceptions of what an individual's family or friends would be willing to accept. In the end,

family and friends often push the individual to one end of the spectrum or the other. For

Gabrielle and Adam, this "push" was exactly what was needed in order to help them realize

that their disinterest in members of the opposite sex did not mesh with the idea of

maintaining a bisexual identity.

As was the case with Veronica, Pao, and Lee, Gabrielle was committed to the idea of

"holding onto both worlds."

> I came out as bi-curious, and then I came out as bisexual, and um, my parents
> are cool with it – I mean, they weren't cool with it – they're cool with it now,
> but basically, as the years went by I didn't feel comfortable really calling
> myself a lesbian because I wanted to hold onto both worlds, I guess to feel
> normal, you know.

Gabrielle is the prototypical example of someone who, despite engaging in a coming out

process, hung onto social conventions throughout much of the process. She moved, almost

methodically, through a series of transitional identities and labels; each one with slightly

less of a foothold on opposite-sex attractions. Gabrielle came out as 1) liking girls, 2) bi-

curious, 3) bisexual, and then finally 4) a lesbian. During none of these phases did she ever earnestly feel attracted to men. Still, in her reflections, she emphasizes just how committed she was to hanging onto both worlds. She frames her movement through the first three identities as transitional periods, slowly easing her into a lesbian identity.

Gabrielle's desire to "live in both worlds" was not the only strain on her sexuality. Her family and friends placed a great deal of pressure on her as well. They continued to push her to choose a side. Although her family was encouraging her to take *a* side, Gabrielle initially interpreted this encouragement as pushing her to take *the* side of heterosexuality.

> My mom – she's trying to hold onto the fact that there is still a possibility with boys. [I came out to her as] bi-curious, then bisexual, and then eventually my mom was just like "you know, what are you?" I feel like I'm always . . . [her mom pushes her to] "choose Gabrielle, choose what you fucking are." I feel that it's that way in the gay community too.

These sorts of conversations between Gabrielle and her mom continued sporadically over the course of the next few years, all while Gabrielle continued to identify as bisexual. Over time, she began to understand that her mom was not insisting that she affirm a heterosexual identity; rather, she just wished her daughter would submit to and affirm a gay identity—an identity that she saw as being in line with her daughter's behavior.

> My mom was finally "well, you're not dating any boys," and I was like "well, I don't know," and she's like "well, are you still bisexual?" and I was like "well, I'm, uh, I'm 60/40," and then it would go to 75/25, and then 80/20, and then, you know, basically I thought I was a lesbian, but I wasn't really sure because I just really wasn't dating guys.

Her insistence on maintaining a bisexual identity was supported by the fact that she had not *proven*, through concrete action, that dating guys was entirely out of the question. That is, she had not tried dating a boy. By this same logic, most people would presently identify as bisexual since they have not attempted to date a member of the same sex. Regardless, her insistence to hold on to both worlds was strong. Although she had not been interested in men at all, it took her years to affirm a lesbian identity. Gabrielle spoke of a conversation that she had with a friend over her MySpace profile saying "lesbian" despite her insistence that she was bisexual. She recognizes this as the "aha" moment in which she confirmed that she is not attracted to men *at all*—she is a lesbian.

> [Her friend said] "Well, why did [your MySpace profile] say lesbian, like, you told me you were bisexual," and I was like "well, you know, all these guys hit on me...I just thought it was fucking annoying that guys were hitting on me, so you know, I put it as lesbian." And she was like "hello, like, ding, ding, ding, doesn't that prove the fact that you are a lesbian, like, hello, Gabby, accept yourself," . . . I was like "wow, I really am a lesbian, ok," and it took a lot – it probably took me like two or three years to really feel comfortable with myself saying "I am Gabby and I am a lesbian."

Adam, a 20 year-old male who presently identifies as gay, faced a similar struggle. He knew that he was interested in men, and completely disinterested in women, but he still insisted on maintaining a bisexual identity, both publicly and privately. Like Gabrielle, his bisexual identity satisfied his personal reliance on holding onto both worlds. It took him quite a while to realize that the bisexual identity did not align with his wholly single-sex interests. His first familial influence came from his mom who maintained a sharply dualistic view on sexuality—either her son was gay or he was straight.

I initially came out as being bisexual, and I never really came out as being gay . . . I was always . . . [long pause] I came out as bisexual, and I remember sitting down with my mom, and she was like "Adam, you can't be both. It just doesn't work – they're too different. You can't enjoy both. So, at some point you're going to have to pick one." And, I was like {sigh}. . .

The confrontation by Adam's mom really got him thinking about how he identifies.

That's what really led me to think about "do I really? . . . " I mean, I was 14 at the time, so my world revolved around pornography {laughter} so I was like "do I even watch anything with girls anymore?" I don't hang out with girls...I mean, I don't HANG out with girls, but I do hang out with girls. I've never really had a sexual thought about a girl in my life that I can think about.

Even though Adam never had a sexual thought about or even an attraction for a girl, he still identified as bisexual. Only after his mom continued to interrogate him over his sexuality did he finally start to say to himself "you know what, maybe I'm just not [into both boys and girls]." He goes on to say, "I truly *thought* I was bisexual, and it was kind of my mom's pushing that kind of caused me to think deeper on the issue." What Adam did know is that he "liked boys." As he put it "I didn't really know if I liked girls...in fact, I didn't think I liked girls, so as far as I was concerned, in the darkness of my own bedroom, I was gay." Eventually, Adam would come to affirm a publicly gay identity as well.

Affinity and the Apologetic

Rather than disclosing a public sexual identity[2] that aligns with their private

sexuality, people sometimes opt for coming out first with affinity for the same sex (rather

than an identity). The technique of coming out with affinity allows the individual to keep

the door open on the possibility of future opposite-sex relationships. When I speak of

"coming out with affinity" rather than an identity, I am referring to participants saying to

themselves and others that they "like girls/women" or they "like boys/men." This sort of

language was peppered throughout the interviews, most notably among the participants

who engaged in a queer apologetic. Here are a few examples for context (emphasis added):

> Rachel: "I would tell people, you know, that *I like girls*, but I never said 'hey
> I'm gay,' or 'I'm a lesbian,' so I kind of '*I like girls*,' that's how I kind of brought
> it up to people."

> Veronica: "[Coming out as bisexual] was more for me…definitely for me. Um,
> because my first thought wasn't 'oh, I'm totally gay,' it was just *admitting that
> I liked girls.*"

> Kyle: [In first coming out to her sister] "I was like '*I kind of like girls.*'"

> Lee: "The first time I really came out to someone that I feel that I could talk
> about my sexuality was with my best friend. I was just like 'I need to tell you
> something,' and she's like 'oh, what is it.' And I was just like '*I like guys.*'"

> Gabrielle: [On her first time coming out to someone] "I was in 8th grade going
> into sleep away camp again, and I sat down at Sweet Tomatoes with my
> sister and I was like 'you know, *I think I might like girls.*"

> Pao: [Upon being questioned by her friend about was she appeared so
> unhappy] "She sat me down and she was like 'Pao, I want you to tell me

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[2] "Sexual identity" and "sexual orientation" are terms that are often used interchangeably. However, they both assume a more fixed pattern of attraction toward certain categories or groups of people. "Affinity," on the other hand, is a more fluid concept that is centered on expressing to whom an individual may be attracted without ascribing or altering one's sexual identity. For the participants in this study, affinity was expressed prior to the development of a more concrete sexual identity.

what's wrong because you're just, like, bad, you look really bad.'" "I ended up telling her, I said 'I'm in love with [another friend] and *I like girls.*'"

Ariana (Ari): "It's not so much me saying 'I'm bisexual,' as much as it is '*do you like girls?*' and I respond 'yes.'"

Again, all of the examples here are from participants who previously engaged in a queer apologetic in an attempt to minimize disappointment over or disapproval of their sexuality identity. The trend of coming out first as "liking girls/boys" is sometimes rooted in this same interaction—limiting the potential backlash of eventually disclosing an LGBQ identity. Coming out with affinity (e.g., liking girls) is less concrete and therefore less threatening to much of society than coming out with an LGBQ identity. By coming out with affinity and not an identity, the individual allows family, friends, even oneself to maintain the possibility that she may still date members of the opposite sex. In speaking of affinity, the individual is merely saying that she is attracted to members of the same sex, not that members of the opposite sex are out of the question. So, all of those expectations that have been building up since childhood (both personal and familial) may still be kept intact.

Other forms of coming out with affinity were seen across multiple interviews. Gabrielle recalls:

I told [my mom] I was bi-curious and she was like "ok, that's cool," and I was like "oh, ok," and then two weeks later I was like "I'm bisexual," and then she flipped out because it was more legitimate.

Parental reactions are remarkably different between coming out as bi-curious (exploration) versus bisexual (identity). As was the case with Gabrielle's mom, bi-curious is

often shrugged off as just what the label implies: curiosity. Her mom's reaction to bisexuality is also a great example of why so many participants spoke about coming out first as liking girls/boys rather than coming out with a discrete identity. The same can be said of those who came out as being bi-curious. As soon as participants moved beyond affinity and offered up an identity, it sent a clear message to others that this is more than just a phase.

A final variation on coming out with affinity was employed by Ari when she came out to her mom.

> I just exploded into tears and I was like "you know, before I tell you this, I just want you to remember that I'm your daughter and I love you," and she's like "yes, I know, and I love you too…what's wrong?" And I told her "ok, well *I don't really like guys* (emphasis added)."

Ari's situation is somewhat counter to what other participants conveyed. Rather than coming out to her mom as "liking girls" she came out to her mom as "not liking guys." Such language belongs with the liking boys/girls thread, but it conveys a greater amount of information. Whereas "liking girls" would have still left the door open for opposite sex attractions, Ari's admission that she doesn't like guys actually affirms a gay identity. But, it's still less concrete than saying "I'm gay," which is a big part of why she chose to speak in such a way.

Summary

Most people grow up under the impression that to be straight is to be "normal." Influences from outside (family, friends, media, etc.) as well as inside (oneself) encourage those who have same-sex attractions to feel that they must somehow hold on to heterosexuality—at least to a degree. Ten participants in the current study engaged in a queer apologetic—coming out as bisexual despite being interested *only* in members of the same sex. The queer apologetic is essentially a form of identity compromise whereby individuals disclose a bisexual identity that they feel will be palatable to their family, friends, or even themselves. This compromise is based on the rationale that bisexuality simultaneously satisfies 1) their personal attractions for only members of the same sex, and 2) society's expectation that they be attracted to members of the opposite sex.

The ten individuals who engaged in a queer apologetic came out as bisexual either for the sake of their family/friends or because they were personally not ready to let go of social conventions. Participants whose queer apologetics were based in pleasing family/friends were surprised to find that their family and friends were not supportive of the bisexual identity. Participants were immediately encouraged to affirm a gay identity. The decision to come out initially as bisexual made for a much more difficult route to disclosing their internalized sexuality which eventually aligned with a gay or lesbian identity. Other participants engaged in a queer apologetic based in their own refusal to let go of social conventions. Internalized heteronormativity led these participants to struggle with the realization that they are attracted to members of the same sex and may, in fact, be gay. Rather than coming out as gay, they chose to come out as bisexual, thus allowing them

to hold onto "normality." While participants who engaged in a queer apologetic rooted in pleasing family were only engaged in an outward apologetic, participants whose queer apologetic was based in their personal refusal to let go of social conventions were engaged in both an inward and outward apologetic.

The implications of the queer apologetic go well beyond individuals who engage in such an identity compromise. The people who likely suffer the most are those who earnestly identify as bisexual. We already live in a society that makes it extremely difficult to live outside of Western dualistic expectations. Bisexuality, as well as intersexuality and transgender, challenges the artificial binaries that society imposes on us all (Lucal 2008). Although there appears to be no mal-intent on the part of those who engage in a queer apologetic, this interaction further trivializes bisexuality. The use of bisexuality as a transitional identity reinforces the essentialist belief in two discrete sexualities, and it perpetuates the common (mis)perception that bisexuality is a phase and not a true sexual identity. While homosexuality is marginalized in society at large, bisexuality is marginalized even within the LGBTQ community (Bradford 2004). Eden, who no longer attaches a label to her identity, recalls the hardship of maintaining a bisexual identity, especially around LGBTQ peers.

> I first came out as bisexual, and then I found out, in [the local LGBTQ organization], I was one of two bisexuals in a room of over 50, and then I was starting to hear flying all of these different really negative assumptions about the way I behave as a bisexual – that I don't know what I want or why can't I make a choice.

Those who maintain bisexual identities continue to face pressures to "choose a side," and these demands are particularly strong within the LGBTQ community. This reality was discussed by numerous participants. According to Lee, "a lot of homosexuals do not believe in bisexuality, like they take it as an offensive thing . . . like you should just come out already." Lee's statement highlights the primary issue cast upon the bisexual population by the existence of a queer apologetic. The utilization of bisexuality as a transitional identity causes many people in the LGBQ community, particularly those who engaged in an apologetic themselves, to fail to recognize bisexuality as a concrete identity. This sort of fracturing among the LGBTQ community may, in turn, limit the level of empathy and support received by those with a bisexual identity.

People will likely consider engaging in a queer apologetic so long as society maintains a "this or that" mentality. Perhaps with the proliferation of more fluid identities, people will come out as pansexual, polysexual, or fluid rather than bisexual. Then again, such open identities are even less understood than bisexuality, so their disclosure would likely hinder the goal of the queer apologetic: being accepted. Even with the abolition of the heterosexuality/homosexuality dichotomy, individuals who are attracted to members of the same sex may still choose to come out as bisexual (or some other identity that includes both same-sex and opposite-sex attractions). Pressures to be a part of the privileged majority can still make people feel inclined to hold onto heterosexuality—at least to some degree.

CHAPTER SIX: GENDER (NON)CONFORMITY AND COMING OUT

> I have to come out more often than most because, uh, I don't, I'm not the stereotypical lesbian. When I, myself, think "oh, that girl's gay," she usually has short hair, maybe spiked, wears guys clothes—you can usually tell that she's either gay, gay accepting, transgendered, something, or very, very tomboyish, but usually the case is "oh yeah, she's probably gay." – Rachel

A great many of the assumptions we make about other people are predicated on their gender presentation. All too often people assume that that someone with a feminine gender presentation is attracted to men, while someone with a masculine gender presentation is attracted to women. In fact, this assumption is at the root of dualistic thinking surrounding matters of sex, gender, and sexuality. But, how might people's gender presentation affect their coming out processes? How might the coming out process differ, for example, for a feminine lesbian as opposed to a lesbian with a more masculine gender presentation? Based on data from this study, it is apparent that the experiences of individuals who engage in a coming out process vary substantially depending on their gender presentation. A central concern here is whether gender conformity (e.g., a feminine female) or non-conformity (e.g., a masculine female) makes for a more difficult, arduous coming out process.

Gender conformity refers to meeting the common social expectation that sex = gender (that is, female = feminine and male = masculine). By default, gender non-conformity is any relationship between sex and gender that does not align with this social expectation. For most Americans gender non-conformity refers more specifically to a masculine female or a feminine male. In order to understand this common social

expectation, it is essential to understand the dualistic model with which most people perceive of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Traditionally, Western dualistic thought has dictated that we categorize people into one of two boxes in terms of sex category (female/male), gender (feminine/masculine), and sexual orientation (desires men/desires women) (Garfinkel 1967). The Gender Box Structure (Crawley et al., 2008) provides perhaps the clearest visual of our dualistic thinking on these three traits.

Gender Box Structure

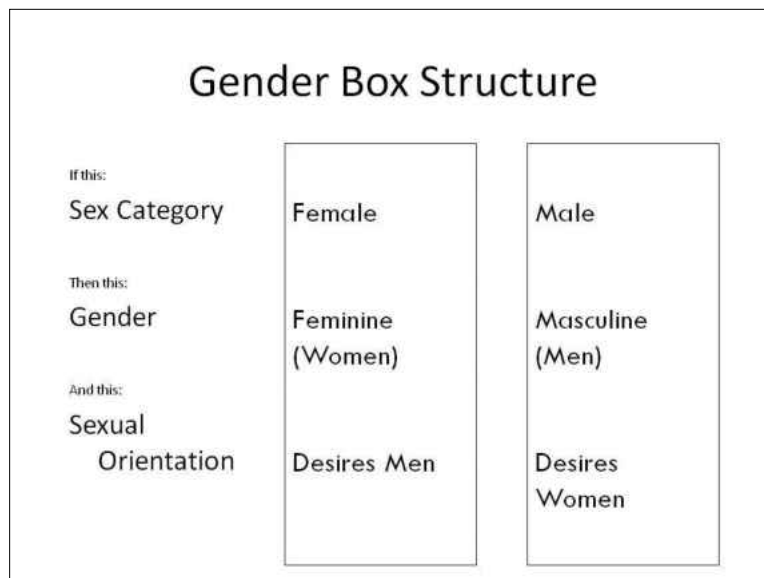| If this: Sex Category	Female	Male
Then this: Gender	Feminine (Women)	Masculine (Men)
And this: Sexual Orientation	Desires Men	Desires Women

Figure 1 - The Gender Box Structure (Crawley et al., 2008)

Crawley et al. (2008) built upon the work of scholars such as Lorber (1994) and Lucal (1999) in order to create their Gender Box Structure. As shown in Figure 1, this model shows how sex category, gender, and sexual orientation are fused. By "fused" I mean that

we believe that to know someone's sex category is to know her gender and sexual orientation as well. At least this is our expectation. It is essential then to consider the interrelatedness of sex category, gender, and sexuality when analyzing experiences related to coming out.
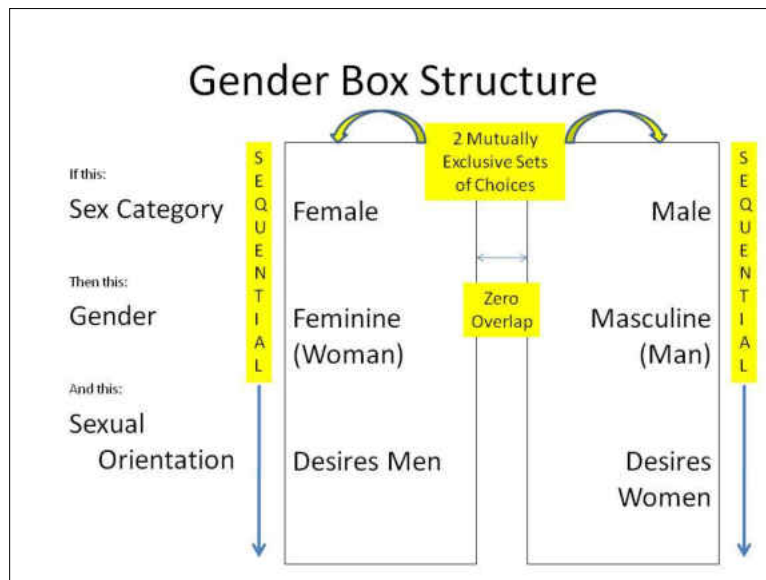
Figure 2 - Heteronormative Assumptions of Sex, Gender, and Sexuality

The equation of sex=gender=sexuality embodies heteronormative assumptions regarding sexuality. As Figure 2 details, everyone presumably falls into two, mutually exclusive categories—hence the gap between the two categories in this model. We are held accountable concurrently on all three levels, and if any one level is called into question, so are the other two. So a male who desires men or a female who desires women both challenge our dualistic ideology—hence the expectation to come out to others. In reality

many people challenge traditional expectations (i.e., sex category ≠ gender ≠ sexuality) (Lucal 2008). So, how might gender conformity or non-conformity alter the coming out process?

Data from the interviews in this study indicate that experiences with coming out vary depending on one's gender presentation. This was particularly evident in my interactions with female participants. Figure 3 provides a visual example (for females) of gender conformity versus gender non-conformity among LGBQ persons.
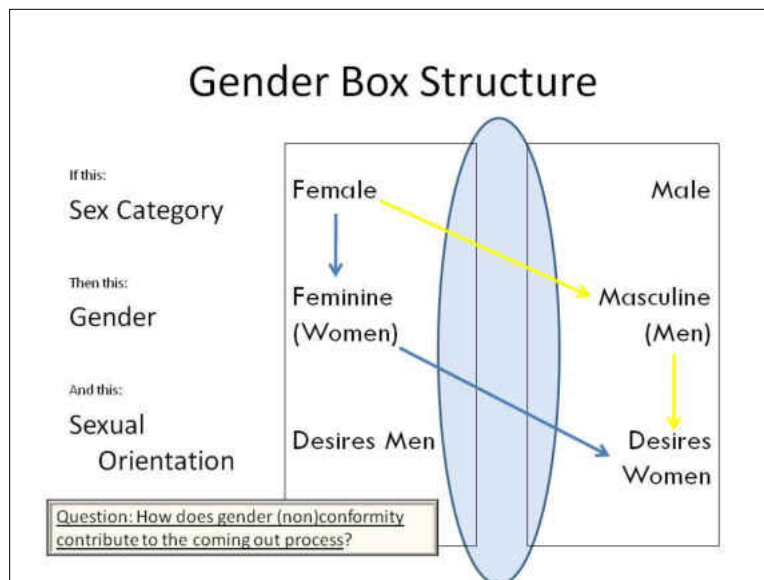

Figure 3 - Gender (Non)Conformity and Same-Sex Attractions

The blue arrows represent a female who is feminine, which matches the heteronormative assumption that sex = gender. The yellow arrows represent a female who is masculine, and therefore runs counter to the sex = gender assumption. Both of these females are attracted

to women, but their gender presentation is vastly different and so is their coming out. A few individuals in this study present a more neutral and sometimes androgynous gender presentation. Neutrality or androgyny (each of which fall within the shaded bubble of the diagram) is another form of gender non-conformity in that it still defies the common cultural expectation that females are explicitly feminine and males are explicitly masculine.

Gender Presentation & Coming Out

Among LGBQ persons who engage in coming out, gender presentation (whether conforming or non-conforming) presents unique challenges to the process. The most frequently cited challenge associated with gender conformity is that, as Athena put it, a gender conformist does not "look gay." Social commentary and political correctness are quick to emphasize the danger in saying that gayness is sometimes physically identifiable. But the participants in this study very frequently spoke of such a thing. Looking or appearing gay was almost entirely related to *not* meeting the social expectation that sex = gender (i.e., gender non-conformity). Ram, a gay male who is decidedly masculine in his presentation, is quick to point out that "it's a matter of how 'in your face' kind of gay you are…I don't really wear it on my sleeve." To Ram wearing it [his "gayness"] on his sleeve would be tantamount to appearing gay via gender non-conformity—that is, appearing feminine in some way. Participants who do not feel that they "look gay" often provide an example of a friend or a peer who does "look gay" in order to support their claims. As Ram continues,

So, one of my friends, who is also my fraternity brother, he is just . . . you can't
help him, he's twinklishous and he's tiny and he just wears these like deep
V's that come down to here, so he can't help it.

Ram contends that his friend "can't help" but be assumed gay based on his appearance. To

Ram "looking gay" has to do with attire, size, and as he later points out, speech and

mannerisms. All of these characteristics challenge gender conventions, and, in the case of

Ram's friend, make him appear to be challenging the whole "male = masculine" assumption,

thereby leading others to visibly question his sexuality. But, the concern here is to ascertain

how the coming out experiences of gender conformists like Ram, or gender non-

conformists like his friend, might vary based on their gender presentation.

For the most part participants communicated that gender conformity makes for a

less difficult coming out process. The lessened degree of difficulty deals primarily with the

opinion that, on a daily basis, acquaintances and passers-by do not recognize them as gay.

In the case of participants like Ram, there is actually a sense of accomplishment in passing.

"I think I take pride in the fact that when I do come out people are like 'oh, I had no idea.'"

So, his sex category aligns with his assumed gender, and therefore prevents outsiders from

visibly questioning his sexuality. The idea that people expect gender presentation to tell us

something about another person's sexuality is essentially rooted in broad stereotypes.

In order to maintain a dualistic model of categorization, people often typify what it

means to be this or that (e.g., masculine or feminine, gay or straight, black or white).

Throughout the interviews in this study, the reality of LGBQ stereotypes was constantly

looming in the background of conversation. Occasionally, the discussion of stereotypes

entered the forefront of conversation. Lee, Renee, Ruby, Ram, Athena, Rachel, Kyle, and

Arielle all made direct references to the stereotypical gay person or the stereotypical

lesbian and whether or not they personally fit the stereotype. As was the case across this

study, participants offered up little information about what comprised the "stereotypical

gay person," except to say that gender presentation has a lot to do with such stereotypes.

Stereotypes were more often discussed only to convey that they (the individuals I

interviewed) *did not see themselves as the stereotypical LGBQ person*. Lee demonstrated this

very point in explaining how his coming out has been "fairly uneventful."

> There's my experience, where I fit this, I didn't, not that I fit the straight
> stereotype, but I didn't, I'm not, I don't fit the gay stereotype. . . people are
> just like "oh, I didn't think you were gay," and I'm just like "well, I am,
> whatever."

Part of the explanation for his mundane experiences is that he is not often perceived to be

gay based on his gender presentation. This was a common trend among other participants

as well. For example, Renee does not see herself as the "stereotypical lesbian." And, she

feels that she does not have to come out as often as a result.

> I don't think that people expect me to share it [her sexuality] . . . I don't
> know, if you just saw me walking down the street and you want to go by
> what a stereotypical lesbian looks like, I don't ever get placed into that
> category. And a lot of times when I do tell people, they look and me and they
> go "oh, my gosh, I would never be able to tell." And then I'm like, "of course,
> because we all are supposed to look a certain way, right?"

I could sense the tone in Renee's voice about how ridiculous it is that people assume to

know what a lesbian looks like. But, in reality, she does perceive that people approach her

differently based on the assumption that she is straight. So Renee's feminine gender presentation (i.e., her gender conformity) makes coming out easier in the sense that she has to engage in coming out less often. She went on to explain how she felt more control over when her sexuality would be discussed (such as when she was with her girlfriend) and when it would not be mentioned. This general sentiment was shared among other participants, such as Ruby.

Ruby maintains a broad, open perception of both gender and sexuality. But, she is keenly aware of how much appearance plays into other people's assumptions regarding her sexuality. She engaged in a lengthy discussion about how her feminine appearance has prevented her from receiving much of a backlash over her queer sexuality. She also shares some revealing insight into why she identifies with a feminine gender presentation.

> I choose to dress in the feminine gender because that's what's comfortable for me. Maybe it's because every single Sunday since I was born I've worn a dress to church, maybe it's because my ears were pierced at age 1 and I was thrown into, like swaddled in pink, and that's just always the way it was in my family. I was assimilated into this gender, but *I just don't face anything because of my appearance*, and that's not the way for a lot of people who just identify more with the male sex or the male gender by dressing more as a male that, as females, face a LOT of resistance (emphasis added).

In Ruby's calculation, female-bodied persons who align themselves with a masculine presentation face a lot more resistance than she does and therefore engage in coming out more often and in more difficult circumstances. By appearing to challenge their assumed gender, masculine-presenting females have their sexual orientation more frequently called into question. Another participant, Hannah, expanded on Ruby's discussion on the effects of gender conformity on coming out.

Hannah talks a great deal about her perception that coming out is less difficult for

women who are more traditionally feminine in their gender presentation. She attributes

her relative ease in coming out to her heightened femininity.

> There is a difference between a girl who looks like a very straight girl – and I
> look like a very straight girl – coming out and saying I'm a homosexual, and
> somebody who maybe is a little more awkward on the outside, you know
> what I mean?

She expands on this train of thought further. But, rather than focusing on herself and her

own experiences, her discussion of gender presentation and coming out centers more on

the experiences of her female friends who present more masculine.

> One of my close friends is more of a butch-looking lesbian, and when she
> came out it was harder for her because she was awkward. You could tell she
> was butch but her hair was long and kind of awkward looking, and it was
> harder for her.

Hannah's repeated use of the word "awkward" is interesting. Essentially, she is stating that

her friend's sex category does not align with heteronormative expectations of gender

presentation (i.e., female ≠ feminine). But, hidden within Hannah's wording there is also a

sense that gender non-conformity may be seen as challenging homonormativity as well. In

recent years there has been increasing dialog about how large segments of the LGBQ

community are adopting the same gendered expectations commonly associated with

heteronormativity (Duggan 2002). In her summation, "awkward" appears to be

synonymous with challenging others' expectations of sex and gender. Since the expectation

of sex = gender is not met, her friend's sexuality is more frequently called into question as

well. As a result, Hannah sees coming out as a more manageable process for females who present feminine—someone like her.

Hannah's logic is partially rooted in her opinions of her friends and their experiences, but another participant, Kyle, confirms the same trend from the opposite end of the spectrum. Kyle is oftentimes assumed to be gay, and this assumption is based on her gender presentation. "If it's people I'm comfortable with, I'm like 'yeah, I'm gay.' A lot of people just can *tell* I'm gay." She typically keeps her hair short and dresses in baggy clothes, some of which are hand-me-downs from her older brother. She goes on to give an example of her interactions with her peers that led her to the conclusion that she is assumed gay.

> If I get comfortable with someone, and they start talking about "oh, my boyfriend did this," or "oh, my girlfriend. . . " then eventually it might come to "oh, are you dating anyone Kyle," and I'll just be like "yes, I'm dating a girl." And, a lot of them will be like "we could kind of tell," and I'm like "ok, thanks." They're like "no, it's not that you're a stereotypical lesbian, it's just that you kind of have that vibe thing going on."

Again, we see the mention of a "stereotypical lesbian." In Kyle's case, her seemingly masculine characteristics (coupled with a name that is typically masculine in the U.S.) have sometimes even led people to assume that she is a female-to-male transgender person. "A lot of girls in my classes thought I was a boy because my name was Kyle, I never spoke in class, I always wore baggy clothes. . . " Soon after, she emphasizes that she is "really girly," she just doesn't look that way. The end result is that Kyle's androgynous, and sometimes masculine, gender presentation has made for a tumultuous coming out process. In fact, the backlash she faced from appearing to defy gender expectations was greater than any reaction to her sexuality. This sort of phenomena will garner greater interest below.

So, all things being equal, it seems that gender conformity makes for a less

tumultuous coming out process. But, there is another side to the topic of gender conformity

and coming out. Although gender conformity may contribute to an individual having her

sexuality questioned less often publicly, it may also make it more difficult to come out to

those people closest to her. For example, Rachel recalls her high school years where she

was first grappling with the disclosure of her sexuality to her friends and family. Initially

she did not want to come out to other people as being gay because everyone who was out

at her school was "obviously gay." There was nobody like her who was out—nobody who

was more in line with traditional gender expectations.

> I didn't want to come out because there weren't any girls like me out there
> that people assumed, "oh, she's straight, she's got long hair, she wears girls
> clothes usually." Like, I would wear skate shoes, but people would usually
> assume I was a punk, so it was just, I felt like I was the only one like myself
> that's somewhere between, like, tomboy and femme, and so that's kind of
> what my high school's like. It's like everyone was either in the closet, or, like,
> obviously gay.

So, when Rachel does come out, she feels that she has to make a more concerted effort to do

so due to her femininity. In her summation, those who view their own appearance as "not

stereotypical lesbians" have to come out more often as a result. She is not assumed gay, so

she must be more direct about coming out in order to get the point across.

> I actually feel like I have to come out more often than most because, uh, I
> don't, I'm not the stereotypical lesbian. Um I mean I'm not exactly very, very
> feminine but when I, myself, think "oh, that girl's gay," she usually has short
> hair, maybe spiked, wears guys clothes…you can usually tell that she's either
> gay, gay accepting, transgendered, something, or very, very tomboyish, but
> usually the case is "oh yeah, she's probably gay." And, with me, I just look like

sort of a tomboyish, maybe a punk or musician, indie girl with long hair and pretty feminine, so I feel like I have to come out more than most people.

In contemporary society, we already operate under the assumption that everyone is straight until proven otherwise. This is why Rachel feels that her femininity forces her to come out more often than other women who present more masculine.

<p style="text-align:center;">Self Presentation as Coming Out</p>

Our family members and close friends have known us the longest, so they have spent the most time operating under an assumption that we are all straight. Consequently, a young woman whose gender presentation is decidedly feminine—and therefore conforms to familial gender expectations—may find it more challenging to come out to her family. Rachel spoke briefly of this, but another participant, Renee, provides a perfect example of this interaction. Although she acknowledged above that her femininity has made for a smoother coming out process in general, it still provided an additional challenge to her coming out to her family. She perceives that her femininity kept her mom from acknowledging that her daughter might be gay. In her summation, she didn't look gay, so any news of her being attracted to women would come out of nowhere. Eventually, Renee figured that dating and bringing home women with a more masculine presentation would ultimately communicate her sexuality to her mom.

And I guess my mom was pretty, like, just had no idea. She's like [oblivious] "I just told everyone you and [your girlfriend] were good friends." I'm like

"couldn't you kind of tell with her?" Me, not so much, cuz I am pretty feminine, and I dress feminine and stuff like that, but she is tall, real short hair. She had wore, like, men's clothing and stuff like that. I don't want to stereotype, but it is what it is, and that is the world of lesbians.

Although Renee feels that her femininity made it harder for her mom to "realize" her daughter was a lesbian, she still sees her feminine presentation as easing the rest of the process—at least on the public side of things. In the end, Renee tried to utilize gender non-conformity (via her girlfriend) to appear more visibly gay and resultantly come out to her mom. So, she was operating under the same assumption held by many of the other participants: gender non-conformity = assumed gayness. This technique of purposively utilizing gender non-conformity in order to visibly come out was employed to a greater degree by other participants as well. As Arielle describes:

Sometimes you have to like announce it or come out with it because you can [otherwise] pass as straight because, like, sometimes I can look really, really gay {laughter} you know, like, well [today] I just kind of rolled out of bed and put the first thing on I saw but, um, sometimes I look really, really gay . . . I just look like a big 'ole dike.

Gabrielle echoed Arielle's stance on presenting a more masculine appearance in order to appear more visibly gay. Upon first coming out she used her appearance as a way to generally and broadly come out. That is, she felt a sort of self-imposed disclosure imperative and therefore used her gender presentation to allow others to infer her sexuality as gay.

I definitely felt the need to tell everyone that I was gay, and I also felt the need to . . . when I first came out I was also a little bit dikier . . . I wore the big t-shirts and I was insecure about my body, but I was also a little bit dikier

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because I felt the need to show the world that I was a lesbian or that I liked women.

So, all three of these women at one point operated under the same assumption held by many of the other participants: gender non-conformity = assumed gayness. But, these women perceived gender non-conformity as a way to simplify the coming out process. Other participants, whom we discussed prior, felt that gender non-conformity makes coming out more difficult. It is apparent then that coming out is not strictly more difficult for either gender conformers or non-conformers. Gender is a very personal matter, as is coming out, and this is most evident among those participants who do not present explicitly feminine or masculine.

In the Middle

As is the case with most people, many LGBQ persons do not exclusively present feminine or masculine. Oftentimes, individuals demonstrate some traits that are deemed more traditionally in line with one gender while concurrently showcasing traits considered reminiscent of the other gender. Regardless, people are still arbitrarily placed by others into one of two gender categories: masculine or feminine. However, an individual's gender presentation may shift day-to-day, or situation-to-situation. In other words, few people are 100% masculine or 100% feminine all the time, so an individual's relative alignment with gender conformity or gender non-conformity is fluid. Consider Eden, who dresses in the

feminine gender, and is oftentimes assumed to be heterosexual purely based on her gender

presentation.

> I feel a lot of times, I'm going to the grocery store or something like that, and I
> say because I dress in the female gender, people will never know I'm gay. So,
> to them, they could care less…they could totally care less. They will never
> know I'm gay. They live their life, there are no gays in this world, and they're
> happy as clams.

Yet, Eden is often seen in public with her girlfriend who dresses in the masculine gender. In

such circumstances her femininity is overridden by her accompaniment with another

female who appears to be a masculine intimate partner. And she finds herself engaging in

coming out in new and unusual circumstances.

> But, maybe if they see me dressed as the female gender, and with my
> girlfriend dressed in the male gender, being a female, seeing her breasts
> underneath her clothing and us holding hands, then they feel like they might
> have to confront that situation either outwardly or inwardly, and reflect.
> People sometimes get really frustrated when they see me dressed in my
> femininity and they want to know why I'm not a heterosexual. I would gladly
> set some time aside and say "that's ok that you don't understand, but now
> you're thinking about these things." I choose to dress in the feminine gender
> because that's what's comfortable for me.

Eden's experiences demonstrate how people are held accountable concurrently on

all three levels (sex, gender, and sexuality), and if any one level is called into question, so

are the other two. She is both a female and feminine, and therefore assumed to be attracted

to men. But once people are provided with evidence to the contrary, her gender is called

into question. Although sexual orientation is less about gender identity and more about

whom an individual has sexual or affectual attractions for, it's relation to doing gender is

very clear (Jackson 2006). Gender presentation informs many of the assumptions people make about others' sexual identities (Miller and Lucal 2009). People extract contextual cues from others' apparent sex category and gender presentation in order to determine their sexuality. So, what happens when people do not clearly align themselves with one gender or the other?

Like Eden, Carly often gets varied responses from other people on different occasions, and she finds herself disclosing her sexuality based on other people's reactions to her gender presentation. But, unlike Eden, the variety in Carly's experiences is based on variation in her own gender presentation, which is sometimes feminine and other times masculine.

> I confuse people that I first meet because sometimes I dress very masculine and sometimes I dress very feminine so people sometimes get confused. I've had people where I'd been in a class for like a whole semester and then I'll say something, maybe about feminism or something, and then they'll ask me "wait, ok, so you're a feminist?" I'm like "yeah." "So, are you a lesbian?" "Well, yeah, kind of." And then it's like, "really because sometimes you wear dresses, and sometimes you wear bows, and sometimes you wear makeup, and I just, like, you know, I don't get it." People are just very confused, so sometimes there is that moment of me being like "yes, I guess I'm coming out to you right now to try to help you understand because you want to put me in a box, and you don't like that I confuse you."

The fact that Carly's gender, and therefore her sexuality, is challenged by other people leads her to engage in more frequent, and sometimes impromptu situational coming out moments. Again, the lack of consistent alignment with the feminine gender makes for a more tumultuous coming out process. The final conclusion drawn by Carly is in harmony with what Rachel was speaking of above. Those who do not appear "obviously queer" may

find additional difficulty coming out since people are taken aback by the apparent incongruity of their gender and sexual orientation.

> People feel like they need to know that about you [your sexuality] for whatever reason because you're not "normal" or whatever. And, so, yeah, I feel that people expect you, and that's especially true for people who are not, like, very obviously queer, you know, because there's a lot of people who you look at them and you wouldn't say "oh, they're definitely not straight," and, but it's the people that are more confusing like if I wear a dress but I don't tell you that I'm queer, like, I'm sorry that I tricked you, I'm not trying to trick anyone, but people expect that I guess.

Carly perceives that other people may feel "tricked" by being confronted with an apparent incongruity between her gender and sexuality. People see femininity, and then expect that the she—or any other individual who exhibits femininity—is attracted to men.

This leads into the discussion of Veronica and Nathan who, like Carly, see their gender presentation as somewhere in the middle, or rather part of a continuum between extreme femininity and extreme masculinity. As Veronica puts it, "I'm kind of on the fence, like the way I look and dress. You know, I wear makeup, I consider myself feminine – I'm not totally femme . . . I've always been a tomboy, and I'm kind of on the fence, I've always been neutral." Veronica's experiences resemble those of Carly in that people sometimes recognize her as not exclusively aligning with the gender expectations that they impose on her (femininity). Nathan's intermediary gender expression is related more to "how gay" he believes he comes off. "I'm not a flamboyant flamer, but I also feel that I don't try to cover it up, I just . . . it is ME." Nathan is ardently aware that his lack of hegemonic masculinity leads to his sexuality being questioned. This results in him more often coming out publicly

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I think for a lot of people it is very easy to tell if I am [gay]. So, even then, I feel like that is almost a form of coming out because, even if they are making assumptions, which usually leads to them asking questions, them asking a friend "hey, is Nathan gay," type thing . . .

Some participants, as well as some scholars, contend that "assumed gayness" creates an environment in which an individual does not have to truly "come out." But, in Nathan's purview, assumed gayness (the result of his gender non-conformity) still leads to new forms of coming out. Although he is not setting out to disclose his sexuality to another person, he ends up engaged in coming out nonetheless. The social environment dictates that the topic is still relevant.

To be clear, most participants in this study do not personally align themselves with only femininity or only masculinity. Nonetheless, each participant was aware that other people, and society in general, will force them into one box or the other. This was demonstrated at the commencement of each interview when I asked the participants to identify their gender. With the exception of Ruby, every single participant chose one of our two expected choices (i.e., woman or man). Remember, anything in the middle is still seen as running counter to our general, heteronormative expectations of gender, and therefore sexuality. As the interviews progressed, participants frequently clarified that their gender is much more complex than simply feminine or masculine—woman or man.

Parental Resistance to Gender Non-Conformity

Individuals often experience a great deal of anxiety during the formation and maintenance of an LGBQ identity. As a central element in this process, coming out naturally involves feelings of anxiety as well. For many people, such anxiety reaches its climax during the disclosure of one's sexual identity to close friends and family. After all, there is more at stake in the relationships we have with our inner circle than with anyone else. Although fear is rooted in expectations of rejection, many LGBQ persons are surprised to find that family members and close friends are more accepting and affirming than was originally predicted. Ironically, even parents often report being much more accepting than their LGBQ children anticipated (Savin-Williams & Dube 1998). To the surprise of many of the participants in this study, it was not so much their sexuality, but rather their gender presentation that family and close friends were concerned about.

Sexuality is one of those unseen characteristics of our lives. More times than not, we can physically identify one another on the basis of race or age, but sexual orientation is a whole different arena. Gender, on the other hand, is much more visually apparent than sexuality. Gender is something that is done, something that is achieved, and it is about identity as well as expression. But, gender is also something gets treated by much of the general population as innate, natural, and essentially different depending on one's sex category. From birth, or perhaps even earlier, we are inundated with gendered expectations. Prompted by society at large, our families socialize us from day one to be a tough little boy, or a polite little girl, and so on. But, gender is not only about behavior, it is

also about physical expression. Gender materializes in our clothing, hair styles, grooming habits, and myriad other attributes and characteristics.

Given the essentialized treatment of gender, it should come as no real shock that family and friends can be very resistant to any inkling of gender non-conformity. Many participants recall being completely blindsided by their family's reaction to their gender presentation, not their sexual orientation, upon coming out. Ariana jokingly quipped, "My parents find more of a problem with me not shaving my legs than with me being gay {chuckle}. So, they have very strict gender roles . . . they're Latino, so, but you know, so it came out alright." In many cases, gender non-conformity is the issue more so than sexual orientation. This is particularly true among families with traditional, conservative views of gender—like Ariana's family. Ariana began to notice hints of gender resistance emanating from her family well before she came out to them as a lesbian. Like so many young women, Ariana developed body image issues related to unrealistic media imagery and lofty social expectations to conform to emphasized femininity. Wearing a large shirt or baggie pants gave her a sense of comfort, but this style of dress was not well received by her family.

As Ariana's sexuality developed and she realized that she "liked girls," she found herself increasingly comfortable in clothing that was not traditionally associated with young women. Her gender presentation became intimately tied to her sexuality and her sense of expression. She recalls a specific interaction between her and her mom in which it became apparent to her that gender presentation was going to continue to be an issue.

> So we went to Express and I was looking at the men's section, and I saw this really nice tie that I wanted, and I showed it to my mom, and she just kind of

did a double-take and she's like "why do you want to wear that? That's a man's tie," and I'm like "Because. I think it's really cute and I think I'd totally rock this." And, we just got into this argument about the tie in the middle of the store, you know, which the tie to me meant so much more than that but clearly she couldn't understand why and it's because, you know, she didn't know [that I am a lesbian]."

This conversation ultimately became the catalyst for her telling her mom and dad that she "likes girls." Even as her interest in the same sex developed into a more concrete lesbian identity, she continued to face resistance on account of her gender presentation. And this is all after her family affirmed her sexuality. Issues over gender presentation continued well after coming out in much the same way for another participant, Gabrielle. Gabrielle recollects how it took quite awhile for her mom to accept her being gay, and how her mom's reluctance was rooted in the fear that her daughter would begin to present more masculine.

[On coming out] . . . it took two years for her to be cool with it. I think her biggest fear was the fact that she was afraid I was going to get really dikey, and cut my hair, you know, but what if I did? I think she would love me regardless. I think that's just something that she is thankful that I'm not.

Gabrielle's gender presentation is decidedly feminine, and she credits much of her family's acceptance of her sexuality to the fact that she does not defy traditional gender expectations. In my later discussions with Gabrielle she reiterated part of the point I made above about the visibility of gender. Parents who are still not entirely accepting of their child's sexuality may take more issue with gender presentation because, consistent with stereotypical images of gay men and lesbians, gender non-conformity comes to be seen as

the physical manifestation of gayness. So, in her reaction, Gabrielle's mom essentially

communicates a sense of "I'm ok with you being gay, but I don't want you to show it off to

everyone else in the way you look."

Objections to gender non-conformity came not only from parents, but also from

extended family and close friends. For example, Kyle recalls the reactions of her extended

family to her coming out.

> The rest of the family is like "yeah, that's cool [her being gay]" . . . my grandpa
> is fine with it too – his wife was a little iffy, but my grandpa loves my
> girlfriend too, so it's all good. He had met my *ex*-girlfriend and he was like
> "I'm glad you got rid of her, she looked weird," and I was like [sarcastically]
> "thanks Grandpa, that's awesome," and he was like "well, she looked like a
> little boy."

Again, family members have more of a problem with gender non-conformity than sexual

orientation. The objections to Kyle's gender presentation went well outside the home. She

recalls her gender, not her sexuality, being the focus of a great deal of harassment and

ridicule at school.

> . . . harassment came later [after coming out], or well, harassment came
> before also because I was pretty androgynous, like younger. I would cut my
> hair really short and I would wear boy's clothing, and it's really just because
> that's what I was comfortable in, and so in my 9th grade year a lot of girls in
> my classes thought I was a boy because my name was Kyle, I never spoke in
> class, I always wore baggy clothes.

She later goes on to say that she is actually quite "girly," she just doesn't look that way.

Harassment over her gender identity forced her hand at coming out on numerous

occasions. It's almost as if her peers were satisfied to hear that Kyle was gay because it clarified her androgynous and sometimes masculine gender presentation. In a sense, her friends could then attribute her gender non-conformity to her lesbianness, and keep the traditional notions of sex=gender intact. But, the fact remains that Kyle's gender presentation has made for some exceedingly difficult experiences associated with coming out.

'Attractiveness' and Coming Out

> You know what I also think though? I also think that there is a difference, and this is not to be talky, this is not . . . but there is a difference between a girl who looks like a very straight girl – and I look like a very straight girl – coming out and saying I'm a homosexual, and somebody who maybe is a little more awkward on the outside, you know what I mean? - Hannah

People who are considered "classically attractive" face some unique circumstances in terms of coming out. As Hannah put it, "people seem to, in this society, accept, let's say pretty people, more than they would somebody who wasn't as physically attractive." There is plenty of literature to support the notion there is a sense of privilege that comes along with being classically attractive. We already saw how parents sometimes seem to be more concerned about their child's gender conformity than their sexuality. In the U.S., classical attractiveness is generally rooted in gender conformity, and in many cases gender conformity to the nth degree. Hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity are pervasive social forces that define much of our social interaction. Based on my interactions with the participants in this study, attractiveness can definitely affect coming out—

particularly for young women. But, attractiveness seems to serve as a burden much more than a privilege.

Throughout the interviews attractiveness was mentioned only by the women in this study. In most cases, women discussed how their attractiveness led to many uncomfortable encounters with male friends and acquaintances. Five of the participants spoke specifically of how coming out was made more difficult by straight men finding them attractive and making advances toward them. Rachel had a variety of such experiences, particularly when she tried to befriend straight men.

> It's happened a lot of times where I'll meet a guy and I'm like "oh, he's a cool guy, I wanna be friends with him," and then he'll start hitting on me, and then he'll start wanting to hang out more and then he'll start acting more, like, flirty, and then I'm like "hey, I'm sorry, I'm gay, so . . . "

Rachel, like the other women who spoke of such encounters, discloses her sexuality in an effort to avoid further advances. "Guys stand and start talking to me and hitting on me, and I feel like I have to come out so they'll stop." One would think that coming out would discourage further advances from men, but it is rarely that simple.

Gabrielle said that she always comes out as a lesbian when men flirt with her, but it does not always help her cause. "I feel comfortable just saying that I'm a lesbian because I know that guys aren't . . . well, that's not necessarily true . . . actually, guys might hit on me even more because of it." Gabrielle acknowledged the common heterosexual male fantasy of being with two women simultaneously as the source of the perseverance exhibited by men who come-on to her. Athena articulated this very issue and how it makes little sense to

her. "Straight men find that attractive, two women together, but why would they want to watch two women that don't want them?" Nonetheless, Gabrielle does often come out to men that flirt with her in an attempt to cast them off.

> I don't tell everyone that I'm gay, but at least, a lot of guys end up hitting on me, so in that respect, you know, I end up going "you know, I'm gay," but I could've just been like "I'm not interested," but I guess maybe to get them off my chest, I just say that I'm gay and then they they're like "ok," or then they try harder. There's a reason I don't go to straight bars.

Veronica has had numerous encounters which mirror what Rachel and Gabrielle are talking about. Her experiences emphasize how, among a group of straight men, lesbians may even be treated as a spectacle. After all, the male gaze is an oppressive force that is not bound by the target's sexual orientation.

> . . . your average Joe at a party that your straight roommate throws, you know, they don't know a lot about it, and you become a spectacle, especially as a lesbian, and a lesbian who knows she's not ugly, and gets a lot of responses and has to explain herself, you become a spectacle and you become a sexual spectacle when you just want to be treated normally.

So, there are some circumstances where coming out may simply foster more unwanted advances. But, for the most part, the women in this study preferred to be "open and honest." Coming out at least allowed them to take comfort in knowing that they did not lead anyone on, nor did they allow their sexuality to be ignored.

The relationship between attractiveness and coming out still goes one step further. Just as Carly spoke about people feeling tricked when she came out to her peers, men may react as if they were tricked if attractive women "hide" their true sexuality, or rather, their

disinterest in men. Michelle has had many run-ins with men that ended in this sort of

outcome.

> A lot of people, you know, if you don't come out, then they get mad, like, say if
> you thought I was attractive and I don't come out to you, then they get mad.
> Like, I had that happen a lot in the military. Like, they expect, "ok, this is who
> I am," you know, so that they don't waste their time type thing.

Michelle's experiences are rooted not only in her gender presentation and attractiveness,

but also the social environment in which the events she is discussing take place. She is

interacting with men in a military setting in which the assumption of straightness is even

greater than in typical social settings. Masculinity is pervasive in the military, and

Michelle's experiences were during the enforcement of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. So, although

men would apparently prefer to know that she is gay, the social structure prevented her

from disclosing her sexuality except with a few confidants.

Classical attractiveness definitely poses some unique challenges to coming out

among LGBQ women. Rachel summarizes the main issues with men finding her attractive

in a single statement. "I feel like in some ways I do have to come out a lot and just have to

disclose that to people because otherwise they're just not going to get it from looking at me

and talking to me." Based on common stereotypes, Rachel's femininity does not physically

communicate her sexuality. Men find Rachel's feminine gender expression attractive. She is

compelled to overcompensate and ward off male sexual advances by coming out as gay. In

accordance with our common social expectation that sex=gender=sexuality, her gender

conformity makes coming out a more arduous process.

Summary

The influence of gender presentation on coming out varies from person to person. For some people gender conformity lightens the load for coming out broadly because many acquaintances and peers assume that they are straight. For other people, gender conformity makes coming out more difficult because they have to make a more concerted effort to come out to others—again, because other people assume them to be straight based on their gender presentation. Gender conformity does, however, seem to be more well-received by family members who are still reluctant to affirm their child's sexuality. After reflecting on the way in which family members and friends react to gender non-conformity, it is apparent that males who present more feminine and females who present more masculine often face additional difficulties in coming out. But, as Gabrielle and Renee pointed out, gender non-conformity may also serve the purpose of communicating to others more broadly that one is not heterosexual (at least based on the assumption that gender non-conformity = assumed gayness).

Individual variation in the perceived effects of gender conformity on coming out may have to do with what coming out means to each individual. For those who see coming out as a matter of full disclosure—that is, telling any and everyone—gender non-conformity may aid the cause. However, those individuals who see coming out as being more about disclosing their sexuality to close family and friends may find gender conformity to ease the difficulty. Of course, these last few statements are based in the

assumption that one's gender presentation is used purposively to physically communicate one's sexuality. And, as demonstrated by Eden and Ruby, in most cases our gender expression is rooted in so much more. Gender is a matter of what makes us comfortable as individuals, and it is also a form of *play* which we use to attract potential partners. Nevertheless, gender presentation can and often does have an effect on coming out.

One element of gender conformity that was not previously discussed is its effect on coming out to other people within the LGBQ community. Without much data on this, I was in no position to develop much of a discussion about it. But, one participant, Alex, spoke of her anxiety about coming out to her LGBQ peers—wondering how they would receive her. In her purview, feminine females are favored in the gay community the same way as in society at large. When she was first coming out, Alex modeled herself on her friend Natty "because she was pretty, she was feminine, which in the gay community is sometimes just as important as being pretty." Alex hits on the influence of both gender conformity and attractiveness. Most of the discussion throughout this chapter centered on the discussion of gender presentation as it relates to heteronormativity, but Alex's statement beckons further research into gender and homonormativity.

As scholars Lucal (1999) and Crawley et al. (2008) emphasize, in our heteronormative society, to have one's gender questioned is to have one's sexuality questioned, and vice versa. A woman whose femininity is called into question will quickly find that her sexuality is suspect as a result, and the same trend holds true for men. At the same time, those individuals whose gender is not called into question still face myriad

challenges in the formation and maintenance of their sexual identity. Coming out therefore

often differs based on whether our gender falls in line with traditional expectations or not.

CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current explores the meaning of coming out as well as an organic investigation of the experiences of those who engage in a coming out process related to their sexual orientation. Open interviews were conducted with 30 lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ) persons all of which have been engaged in a coming out process. All data were coded and analyzed using constructivist grounded theory with the exception of my data related to the meaning of coming out. As my singular predetermined research question, the analysis of *meaning* was informed primarily by symbolic interactionism. The remaining two major themes were both induced via a grounded analysis of the data: 1) the queer apologetic and 2) gender (non)conformity and coming out. The following section includes a discussion of key findings, limitations of the study, and directions for future research in this area.

Key Findings

Coming out is an important element in the lives of LGBQ persons, and it is widely considered to be a crucial element in the development of a healthy sexual identity among members of the LGBQ community. It serves a multitude of functions, not the least of which is self-affirmation and the public disclosure of a non-heterosexual identity. As this study demonstrates, coming out is not the same for everyone. Individuals have varied experiences with coming out, and this is evident in the different meanings participants attributed to coming out.

The meaning of coming out varies on the basis of one's life circumstances, social environments, and personal beliefs and values. Everyone has unique lived experiences, and therefore different experiences that comprise coming out. A singular meaning of coming out cannot be derived without ignoring the broad variation seen across the participants in this study. All 30 participants in this study did agree on one thing: coming out is a transformative, ongoing process—a career. For some participants this transformation was more of a personal journey of self-affirmation, while for others it was about the sharing of their sexuality with others (and oftentimes a combination of these two characteristics). The two-sidedness of coming out (internal and external) reiterates the *career* element of coming out. For most participants, coming is not a process that is completed—it is a career that is managed. One caveat to this apparent universality is that my sampling was aimed at recruiting people who are or have been engaged in a coming out process. For LGBQ persons who have not engaged in such a process, the meaning of coming out might very well differ. Longitudinal research that follows a cohort of young people, many of which have yet to form a sexual identity, may provide the best insight into the roots of coming out.

Young people appear to be identifying with more *open* sexual identities such as pansexual, queer, and fluid. As these sexualities continue to emerge, we will likely see the meaning of coming out change across time. We know very little about coming out among people who identify as pansexual or fluid, but research on bisexuality may provide a clue. People who identify as bisexual, when compared to those who identify as gay or lesbian, are less likely to come out to others (Weinberg 1994; McLean 2007). Part of the difficulty associated with disclosing a bisexual identity is that few people in the general population

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understand anything about bisexuality. As newly emerging sexual identities, pansexuality

and fluidity are generally even less understood than bisexuality. Even among the

participants in this study, many people were unfamiliar with pansexuality. The lack of

public understanding over newly emerging identities may explain why the meaning of

coming out among people who identify as pansexual, queer, or fluid, is more about self-

affirmation than anything else. Perhaps in the coming years we will see an increase in the

volume of people who perceive of coming out as a purely personal journey.

The issue of *meaning* presents a methodological concern for studying coming out,

and any other social phenomena for that matter. As evidenced in this study, individuals

attach a variety of meanings to coming out, and these meanings vary based on their

individual lived experiences. Future research on coming out should take into account all of

the variety in meaning when designing studies. An assumption of shared meaning should

not be made without considering the disparate impact such a practice will have on the

outcome of the study. At the very least, researchers should share their meaning of coming

out with participants so that research participants can understand the researcher's

position on the concept and therefore provide more meaningful, valid responses to

questions. Otherwise the disconnect between researchers' intent with and participants'

understanding of a concept may lead to invalid findings. After all, research findings are

typically analyzed and written up based on the researcher's conceptualization or

operationalization of the phenomena under scrutiny—not the participants.

Most people live under the impression that to be straight is to be "normal."

Heteronormativity is everywhere—in our households, our schools, even on TV. The

pervasiveness of heterosexuality therefore encourages many people who experience same-sex attractions to feel that they must somehow maintain at least a partial foothold on heterosexuality. Despite being attracted *only* to members of the same sex, ten participants in the current study came out initially as bisexual. I call this interaction a *queer apologetic*. The queer apologetic is essentially a form of identity compromise whereby individuals disclose a bisexual identity that they feel will be palatable to their family, friends, or even themselves. This compromise is based on the rationale that bisexuality simultaneously satisfies 1) their personal attractions for only members of the same sex, and 2) society's expectation that they be attracted to members of the opposite sex.

The interesting element of these individuals' experiences is that they came out as bisexual either for the sake of their family/friends or because they were personally not ready to let go of social conventions. Those participants who believed that coming out with a bisexual identity would be more acceptable to their family and friends were surprised to find out that this could not be further from the truth. Family members and friends immediately pushed these individuals to affirm a gay identity. So, rather than easing the process, the decision to come out initially as bisexual made for a much more difficult route to disclosing their internalized sexuality which eventually aligned with a gay or lesbian identity.

Other participants engaged in a queer apologetic that was based in their own refusal to let go of social conventions. The influences of heteronormativity led these participants to struggle with the realization that they are attracted to members of the same sex and may, in fact, be gay. Rather than coming out as gay, they chose to come out as bisexual; thus

allowing them to hold onto "normality." Participants who engaged in a queer apologetic rooted in pleasing family were only engaging in the *public* disclosure of a bisexual identity. But, participants whose queer apologetic was based in their personal refusal to let go of social conventions were also deluding *themselves* that they were still interested in members of the opposite sex. Put more succinctly, the first group engaged in an outward apologetic, while the second group engaged in both an inward and outward apologetic.

Society is already resistant to accepting bisexuality as a concrete identity, particularly for men. After all, bisexuality challenges the artificial binaries that society imposes on us all (Lucal 2008). The queer apologetic includes the use of bisexuality as a transitional identity, and this has an immediate impact on those individuals who earnestly identify as bisexual. The use of bisexuality *only* as a transitional identity reinforces the essentialist belief in two discrete sexualities—gay and straight. It perpetuates the common (mis)perception that bisexuality is only a phase and not a concrete sexual identity. The queer apologetic contributes to the marginalization of bisexuality not only throughout broader society, but also within the LGBTQ community.

People are becoming increasingly open to the existence of non-heterosexual identities, and this may lessen the perceived need for an individual to engage in a queer apologetic. However, individuals who are attracted only to members of the same sex may still choose to come out as bisexual (or some other identity that allows both same-sex and opposite-sex attractions). As long as power and privilege are held by the sexual majority, people may feel inclined to hold onto heterosexuality—at least to some degree.

The queer apologetic explains why people who are interested *only* in members of the same sex choose to come out initially as bisexual. However, these are not the only individuals engaging in apologetic behavior. A similar phenomenon was observed among participants who currently identify as queer, pansexual, polysexual, or fluid. The general public understands very little about these newly emerging, open identities. So, in an effort to simplify their "crazy, progressive" ideals, participants with open identities oftentimes opt for coming out publicly as bisexual, or perhaps even gay (at least situationally). Their decision to do so is based in the belief that their family and friends will not understand their true sexual identity. So, they simplify things in order to communicate their difference to others. The motivation for coming out with a modified identity is the same as those who engage in a queer apologetic in order to please their family/friends. In both cases it is not so much about locating and confirming a sexual identity. It is about one's public, social identity, and finding a place to fit in and be accepted. In other words, the basic concept of any "apologetic" is an individual's attempt at minimizing disapproval and disappointment of her true sexual identity by disclosing a public identity she feels is more palatable to her family/friends or herself. Of all the interesting threads found in my data, perhaps the most interesting (and the one with the greatest implications for future research) is the trend of people coming out first with affinity, not identity.

Rather than disclosing a discrete sexual identity, people frequently come out first as simply having an affinity for members of the same sex. This technique of coming out with affinity, not identity, allows the individual to keep the door open on the possibility of future opposite-sex relationships. It is also typically perceived, among participants in this study,

to be more palatable to other people. When I speak of "coming out with affinity" rather than an identity, I am referring to people coming out to themselves and others as "liking girls/women" or "liking boys/men." For example, Lee came out first to his best friend as liking guys. "I was just like 'I need to tell you something,' and she's like 'oh, what is it.' And I was just like 'I like guys.'" Nine participants in this study spoke of coming out first with affinity, and this was most common among participants who engaged in a queer apologetic. Coming out with affinity rather than identity was seen by many participants as the safest way to come out, especially when they have yet to form a concrete sexual identity. I never initiated any discussion with participants about this form of coming out—this is an example of a truly organic theme. Although it only came up in nine of my interviews, based on the similarity of participants' experiences, I expect that many more participants came out first with affinity as well.

While analyzing the data related to coming out with affinity, I found myself pondering the methodological impact of these findings. So much social research, particularly survey research, relies on the assumption that people maintain concrete sexual identities—hence the use of "boxed" categorical identity choices. From demographic questions related to sexual orientation to any number of other survey items, we often assume that participants or respondents can be categorized (and "boxed") according to their sexual orientation. Consider, for example, research on intimate partner violence (IPV). Only recently have studies on IPV included a focus on IPV within the LGBTQ community. Even still, survey items are undoubtedly written with the intent of differentiating patterns of violence among different populations (bisexuals versus heterosexuals, etc.). Based on the

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prevalence of fluid identities and the number of people who come out with affinity and not an explicit sexual identity, a large segment of the population is missed in these analyses. In order to gain a fuller picture of how populations that are not explicitly heterosexual are impacted by IPV, or any other social issue, survey instruments and qualitative interviews must contain questions that allow people to describe themselves according to their sexual affinities (e.g., liking members of the same sex), or sexual behaviors (e.g., having engaged in same-sex intimate relationships).

The differentiation between sexual identity and sexual affinity also brings to light another issue: our current language is inadequate for describing people's lived experiences related to sexuality. "Sexual identity" and "sexual orientation" are often used to refer to a static, fixed identity (i.e., "I am _____."). These two terms are also frequently used interchangeably, and scholars have differing opinions as to which concept is more fixed. But neither term is adequate for simply discussing individuals' attractions toward other people without presupposing that their identities align with such attractions. Affinity for members of the same sex predates the formation of an LGBQ identity, so the concept of "sexual affinity" is a more adequate way to refer to attractions without speaking of identity. This quandary over language may remain unresolved until society advocates an understanding that sexuality is not really a fixed "thing"—no matter how hard we try to treat it as such. Evidence from the current study suggests that sexuality is surprisingly fluid (both in-the-moment and across time), and sexuality would be perhaps even more fluid should social conventions lighten up on the insistence that all people maintain a singular, concrete sexuality identity.

Much of the social research on issues faced by the LGBTQ community is aimed at advocating for education or the outright prevention of negative outcomes facing LGBTQ persons. Education and prevention programs are often directed toward youth populations, and younger people are less likely to have concrete sexual identities. Among the participants in this study who came out first as "liking boys/girls," all nine indicated doing so at a young age, most notably in their teens. At the time that they came out as "liking girls/boys" these individuals would have been unlikely to identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. Still, this group is of import to any research directed at limiting negative outcomes or advancing social justice for the LGBTQ community. In addition to those who come out with affinity, more and more youth are choosing to attach their sexuality to open identities such as pansexual or queer, both of which are often left out of rigid research designs. By focusing on affinity and/or behavior in our research, we can work to learn more about populations of people who may otherwise be missed.

Gender presentation has an impact on the coming out process, but the influence of gender presentation on coming out varies from person to person. Gender presentation can be broken down into two basic groupings: gender conformity (sex=gender), and gender non-conformity (sex≠gender). Most people operate under the assumption that sex=gender=sexuality. In our heteronormative society, to have one's gender questioned is to have one's sexuality questioned (Lucal 1999; Crawley et al. 2008). So, a woman whose femininity is called into question will quickly find that her sexuality is suspect as a result, and the same trend holds true for men. At the same time, those individuals whose gender is not called into question still face myriad challenges in the formation and maintenance of

their sexual identity. Coming out therefore often differs based on whether our gender falls in line with traditional expectations or not.

Considering the social expectation that sex=gender=sexuality, gender conformity can lighten the load for someone coming out broadly because acquaintances and peers may simply assume that the individual is straight. For the next person, gender conformity makes coming out more difficult because the individual has to make a more concerted effort to come out to others. Again, because other people assume that the person is straight based on her gender presentation. During coming out, gender conformity does seem to be more well-received by family members and friends. Family and friends sometimes have a harder time accepting gender non-conformity than they do an LGBQ identity. On this basis, males who present more feminine and females who present more masculine often face additional difficulties in coming out. However, gender non-conformity is sometimes intentionally utilized in order to communicate broadly to others that one is not heterosexual. This tactic is based on the assumption that gender non-conformity = assumed gayness.

The effects of gender conformity on coming out may have to do with the meaning an individual attributes to coming out. For those who see coming out as a matter of full disclosure—that is, telling any and everyone—gender non-conformity may aid the cause. However, those individuals who see coming out as being more about disclosing their sexuality to close family and friends may find gender conformity to ease the difficulty. Nevertheless, gender presentation can and often does have an effect on coming out.

The effects of gender (non)conformity on coming out highlights the link between gender and sexuality. Thus, *doing gender* is intimately tied to *doing sexuality*. *Doing sexuality* is heavily reliant on the suppositions we make on the basis of a person's gender, which also draws upon a person's sex category. Those who appear to be female-bodied are expected to be feminine, and to be attracted to men, so future studies on "doing difference" (West and Fenstermaker 1995) should take into consideration the interconnectedness of how we do *both* gender and sexuality simultaneously. One form of doing difference casts a shadow over other forms of doing difference. Due to the cultural stereotypes of gay men as ultra effeminate and lesbians as manly (both characterized as challenging conventional notions of doing gender), public perceptions of gay men and lesbians are often sensationalized and rooted in expectations based on sex category. This is an important point in terms of doing sexuality since we are held accountable to our bodies, and our sex category (Messerschmidt 2009). Between the stereotypical public perceptions of LGBQ persons and the actual lived experiences of LGBQ persons, doing difference in terms of sexuality—that is *doing LGBQ*—is still a concept in its infancy.

Sexual identities are not fixed entities. Although some people forcibly assert that they are 100 percent gay, or 100 percent straight, some identity work has to take place in order for anyone to stake such a claim. The participants in this study demonstrated that sexual identity formation involves a great deal of change and evolution. Put more simply, sexual identity formation and maintenance, and therefore coming out, is a gradual process, and a messy one at that. Individuals shift affinities and identities internally before settling on a more permanent identity, and these identity shifts may also lead to multiple coming

outs. Even when someone establishes and maintains a "fixed" identity, new life experiences can lead an individual to take a step back and reconsider the "rules" of one's identity. A great Hollywood example of this interaction can be seen in the Kevin Smith film *Chasing Amy* (Kevin Smith, 1997). The lead character in the film, Alyssa, identifies as a lesbian, but her eventual affinity for a man makes her question her interest in only women. Although the film engages in little discussion of her present sexual identity, one telling scene demonstrates the jaw-dropping reaction to this revelation among her network of lesbian friends. Alyssa's newfound interest leads other people, and consequently herself, to rethink her sexuality. Participants in the current study spoke of similarly telling experiences after which they found themselves altering their sexual identity.

Coming out is not a singular event. It is a process, or rather a career, comprised of many point-in-time events. These singular events may include internal shifts in self-perception as well as the outward disclosure of one's sexual identity. Most of the time, participants discussed how their internal shifts in self-perception led to "multiple coming outs" or multiple disclosures to the same people. Most of the literature on coming out is written from the perspective that we are studying a singular identity. After all, much research in the social sciences is concerned with cross-sectional data—focusing only on "the now." But, sexual identities are becoming increasingly fluid, and this fluidity translates to the possibility of coming out multiple times to some of the same people.

Even coming out to oneself often includes a series of point-in-time realizations or admissions. Multiple participants spoke of hanging onto social conventions (heteronormativity) and how this translated into graduated identities—that is, slowly

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letting go of heteronormativity. Gabrielle moved, almost methodically, through a series of transitional affinities and identities. During her early development she lived under the assumption that she was heterosexual. As time progresses, she came out as 1) liking girls, 2) bi-curious, 3) bisexual, and then finally 4) a lesbian. At each of these points, Gabrielle not only self-affirmed the affinity or identity—she also came out to others as such. This trend of engaging in multiple coming outs was typical of many participants, particularly young women. Participants indicated that they came out at each stage of their identity development primarily because, at the time, they wholeheartedly believed their identity was fixed and final.

Future research on coming out should continue to focus on the entire career of coming out rather than how coming out relates to a person's present identity. Most of the interesting themes and trends that emerged from my data would have been missed had I relied on speaking only about participants' present identities. As the popular adage goes "the journey is more important than the destination." It is not the identity itself, but rather the process of identifying, that informs us about social trends and symbolic meaning.

Limitations

Although this study adds substantively to the literature on coming out, it is not without limitations. One shortcoming is the overall lack of generalizability. As I stated early on, generalizability was never a concern or a goal, but it can be perceived as a limitation nonetheless. The experiences of the 30 participants in this study demonstrate some

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common themes and trends, but I have to be careful in making broad assertions based on my findings. The themes that comprise the analysis chapters in this volume are resounding themes that were experienced by numerous participants. So, you might say that the scope of the sample was sufficient enough to enable me to draw some solid conclusions on matters related to coming out. The remaining limitations of this study are rooted primarily in the limited sample size, sample characteristics, and the fact that participants are asked to recall past experiences related to coming out.

My ultimate goal in obtaining a diverse sample of 30 participants was to allow for a more well-rounded depiction of the vast array of meanings people attach to coming out. Under ideal conditions, I would have preferred to have twice as many participants in this study. Such a substantial sample size would allow me to break my sample down by a variety of characteristics and therefore make some meaningful across group comparisons. For example, there is a dearth of literature on coming out among black and Latino populations. A larger sample size would have improved my ability to ascertain any racial or ethnic differences in coming out. Due to the nature of this study, and the focus on meaning, the ability to make many across group comparisons was not central to the study. But, it would have made for some interesting analyses nonetheless.

One of the biggest challenges with any qualitative study is obtaining a diverse sample. This difficulty is magnified when the study involves a "hidden" population such as sexual minorities. The most challenging characteristic upon which to draw diversity is what I call "degree of outness." LGBQ persons who *have* engaged in coming out are well represented in literature on coming out. However, few studies include samples of people

who have *not* engaged in any coming out. Although my sample includes participants who have come out to differing degrees, very few of my participants have come out to only one or two people. The meaning and related experiences of coming out are likely very different amongst those who have are newly engaged in coming out. So, I have to recognize this as a limitation of the study.

Most studies on coming contain heavily homogenous samples that are white, highly educated, and of a high socioeconomic status (Griffith and Hebl 2002). I was aware of the lack of diversity in prior studies, so I set out to develop a better-rounded sample. In many respects I was successful in doing so. Among the 30 participants in my study there was a fair amount of diversity in terms of race, sexual orientation, age, religion, and class. However, the sample lacks any participants who identify as black and/or bisexual. The lack of anyone who identifies as black is a major limitation. Cultural influences and distinctive conceptualizations of femininity and masculinity would likely lead to some unique experiences of coming out among black populations. Bisexuality is central to my chapter on the queer apologetic, so it would have been great to have a few participants who currently identify as bisexual. Such participants would have provided the opportunity to observe how bisexuals are affected by the engagement of others in a queer apologetic. Also, my sample is heavily middle class, with only a couple of individuals located at either end of the class continuum. Then again, many Americans self-identify as middle class regardless of their relative income or education levels (Kelley and Evans 1995), so the predominance of middle class in my sample should not be surprising. Still, lower and working class individuals operate in environments that are generally less supportive of coming out

(Appleby 2001), so the meaning of coming out might vary based on social class, but the current sample prohibits me from analyzing such differences.

A final limitation to the current study is the fact that, during my interviews, participants are asked to reflect on their past and recollect experiences related to coming out. The lens with which we view past experiences is affected by our current perspective on our social worlds. I have to acknowledge that participants' recollections are based in the process of recalling and then interpreting old information. For this very reason, some social scientists recommend not asking anyone to recall information that is more than six months old. Then again, I am asking people to recall experiences that have helped shape them in profound ways, and this is much different than asking people to recall more mundane experiences like the last time they visited a doctor's office (Wright and Marsden 2010). Although there are a few limitations to the current study, the findings and subsequent implications far outweigh the limitations.

Future Research Directions

Aside from the themes covered in this manuscript, a number of other equally interesting themes and trends emerged as well. These will comprise my future research directions on the topic of coming out. One of the more interesting trends was the tendency of participants to apologize for not having what they considered to be an "interesting coming out story." Some of the participants indicated at the onset of the interview that their coming out was uneventful and uninteresting, and that they were sorry for not

providing me with more meaningful insight on coming out. Participants even went so far as

to apologize for me having taken time out of my day for their uneventful coming out story.

Such interactions spoke to the power of cultural influence on shaping our perceptions of

coming out. As a few participants highlighted, much belief about what coming out should

look like is based on broad storylines as well as Hollywood portrayals of coming out. We

often hear glorified stories of significant coming out moments and horrific stories of

parental rejection and alienation. These sorts of stories may lead LGBQ persons to perceive

of their own coming out processes as mundane and boring. Participants also seemed to act

as if their mundane experiences were the exception rather than the rule. Such perceptions

likely have a major impact on help-seeking behaviors, coming out, and overall self-

perception.

Some scholars contend that there is a disclosure imperative placed upon LGBQ

persons (McLean 2007). That is, society imposes an expectation that LGBQ persons must

come out and publicly acknowledge their difference. Public disclosure related to coming

out is based in heterocentric ideology that expects people to confess difference. It seems

plausible that LGBQ persons will be faced with a disclosure imperative so long as most

people assume that sex=gender=sexuality (thus leaving no room for difference). Many of

the participants in this study engaged in conversation about feeling expected to come out.

Most participants felt a societal-level disclosure imperative, while others spoke of a self-

imposed imperative. However, not everyone felt an obligation to come out. Some

participants felt that society simply prefers that LGBQ persons remain closeted, thus

allowing society to ignore the needs of the LGBQ community. The perception of a disclosure

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imperative can substantially alter an individual's trajectory in terms of coming out. Further analysis of participants' views on the existence of a disclosure imperative would elucidate some of the external forces that complicate the maintenance of a non-heterosexual identity.

One of the more surprising findings in the current study was the lack of participants in my sample who identify as bisexual. As discussed in multiple chapters, various participants had identified as bisexual at some point in their coming out processes, but nobody identified as such at the time of their interview. Participants spoke openly about how bisexuality is marginalized in the LGBTQ community, and how many people who would have previously identified as bisexual now attach their sexuality to any number of more fluid identities. In fact, two of the participants, who presently identify as pansexual or "not identified," indicated having previously identified as bisexual before choosing a more fluid identity. Their decision to maintain a more fluid identity now is based in 1) their desire to avoid being chastised by their LGBTQ peers, and 2) their recent recognition that bisexuality is rooted in a dualistic gender ideology with which they no longer ascribe. The proliferation of fluid identities may hold many keys to understanding contemporary beliefs and values on gender, sexuality, and identify formation and maintenance.

Much of the research on coming out is centered on investigating various factors that influence (encourage, discourage, or simply alter) coming out. These include family formation, religion, education, and peer networks, as well as many others. Upon initiating this project I set out to avoid intentionally asking questions about any of these topics— figuring that such questions might insight artificial importance on these topics. By utilizing a more open set of questions about coming out, I aimed to see what factors would be

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discussed more naturally by each participant. My rationale is that if something truly impacts an individual's coming out process then the individual will discuss it on her own volition. I would like to investigate the prevalence and scope of influence for each of the following factors in my dataset: social support, family formation, fear of rejection, and characteristics of the individual coming out (age, race, class, sexual orientation, education, religion, and religiosity). Such as analysis would serve as a solid test of prior research on the factors that purportedly influence coming out.

Still a Relevant Concept

Some sexuality scholars contend that we are moving beyond the closet, and that coming out may no longer serve as a concept relevant to sexual identity formation and maintenance (Seidman et al. 1999). Although many young people today are not growing up "in the closet," figuratively speaking, the maintenance of a non-heterosexual identity still requires individuals to engage in some form of coming out. Even those individuals who are "assumed gay" based on their gender presentation sometimes find themselves engaged in coming out—if nothing else, simply to affirm someone else's suspicions. As one of the participants in this study, Nathan, pointed out, coming out is oftentimes not even done verbally. People utilize their physical presentation and dress in order to communicate difference, and therefore come out. It does seem to be true that the dynamics of coming out are changing. Less often are youth engaging in storytold interactions where they come out collectively to their entire families. Coming out occurs much more casually, and it is often

handled situationally with singular friends, family members, or peers. Although it may be

less about monumental moments, coming out is still an influential part of the life trajectory

for many, if not most LGBQ persons.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**
FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: **Nicholas Guittar**

Date: **July 08, 2010**

Dear Researcher:

On 7/8/2010, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Exempt Determination
Project Title:	A Sociological Analysis of Coming Out
Investigator:	Nicholas Guittar
IRB Number:	SBE-10-07014
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Joseph Bielitzki, DVM, UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 07/08/2010 08:40:34 AM EDT

IRB Coordinator

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APPENDIX B: EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH

Explanation of Research

Title of Project: *A Sociological Analysis of Coming Out*

Principal Investigator: *Nicholas Guittar*

Faculty Supervisor: *Dr. Liz Grauerholz*

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Whether you take part is up to you.

- *The purpose of this research is to investigate the unique experiences of those who undertake a disclosure process related to sexual orientation.*

- *Each participant will be asked to engage in an open-ended interview about the unique meaning of, experiences associated with, and factors related to coming out.*

- *The time commitment for this project is one interview lasting approximately 60 minutes.*

- *Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may choose to discontinue your involvement in this project at any time.*

- *All interviews will be audio recorded for the purposes of transcription and analysis. Should you decide that you do not wish to have the interview audio recorded, please notify the principal investigator and you will be released from participation.*

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study.

Study contact for questions about the study or to report a problem: If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, please contact - *Nicholas Guittar, Graduate Student, Sociology Program, College of Arts and Sciences, (407) 823-3744 or Dr. Liz Grauerholz, Faculty Supervisor, Department of Sociology at (407) 823-4241 or by email at grauer@mail.ucf.edu.*

IRB contact about your rights in the study or to report a complaint: **Research at the University of Central Florida involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (UCF IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. For information about the rights of people who take part in research, please contact: Institutional Review Board, University of Central Florida, Office of Research & Commercialization, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901.**

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Question Guide for Open Interviews

What is your self-identified sexual orientation?

When did you first disclose your sexual identity to someone else?

    Who did you first come out to? Why them?

    Has anyone proven instrumental in your coming out?

    What has coming out been like for you? How would you describe your experiences?

    Are there any particularly significant moments associated with your coming out?

Who do you share your sexuality with, and under what circumstances?

    Is there anything that makes it easier or more difficult to come out to certain people?

    Are there any people you have avoided coming out to? Why?

What kinds of social support did you have? How about now?

What does "coming out" mean to you? What does it entail?

    If asked to formulate a definition of coming out, what would you reply?

    Do you feel that there is a disclosure imperative placed upon you?

Have you ever faced any threats, violence, or homelessness as a result of coming out?

To what degree does your sexuality play into who you are as a person? [noun, verb, adjective?]

Do you believe you are simply [lesbian, gay, or bisexual] or do you privately identify yourself as being somewhere else on the sexuality continuum? [Alter question relative to the participants' stated orientation]

Prior to coming out as _____, did you previously identify otherwise?

    Did you ever come out to others with a sexual identity other than your current one?

Is there anything else you wish to share?

Personal and Demographic Information to be Collected

Name/Pseudonym:

Month and year of birth:

Gender:

Race/Ethnicity:

Sexual Orientation (according to both parts of my interview):

Education:

Occupation:

Self-identified "class":

Religion:

Religiosity:

Birthplace:

Place you identify as "home":

Family make-up:

APPENDIX D: ANNOUNCEMENT OF DEFENSE

Announcing the Final Examination of Mr. Nicholas A. Guittar for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Date: June 30, 2011
Time: 10:00 a.m.
Room: HPH 403Q
Dissertation title: Out - A Sociological Analysis of Coming Out

This study uses a constructivist grounded theory approach to investigate the meaning of "coming out" for LGBQ individuals. Analysis of open-ended interviews with 30 LGBQ persons revealed three main themes. First, coming out does not have a universal meaning among LGBQ persons; rather, it varies on the basis of an individual's experiences, social environment, and personal beliefs and values. Coming out is a transformative process, and an important element in identity formation and maintenance. Second, despite being attracted *only* to members of the same sex, ten interviewees engaged in a *queer apologetic*, a kind of identity compromise whereby individuals disclose a bisexual identity that they believe satisfies their personal attractions for only members of the same sex and society's expectation that they be attracted to members of the opposite sex. Third, both gender conformity (e.g., female=feminine) and gender non-conformity (e.g., female=masculine) present unique challenges to coming out. Because they are assumed to be straight, gender conformists must make a more concerted effort to come out. Gender non-conformists may experience greater ease coming out broadly because they are "assumed gay," but they also experience greater opposition from family and friends who resist gender non-conformity. This study provides important insight into the meaning of coming out as well the influences of heteronormativity and gender presentation on coming out. Implication and recommendations for future research are included.

Outline of Studies:
Major: Sociology
Area: Social Inequalities

Educational Career:
B.A., 2001, University of Central Florida
M.S.M., 2005, University of Central Florida

Committee in Charge:
Dr. Liz Grauerholz
Dr. Shannon K. Carter
Dr. John Lynxwiler
Dr. Betsy Lucal

Approved for distribution by Liz Grauerholz, Committee Chair, on May 27, 2011.
The public is welcome to attend.

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