Coming Out

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What does "Coming out" mean?

'Coming out' has been described as the process through which individuals come to recognise their non-heterosexual or alternate gender identities and subsequently share those identities with others through, "an unambiguous and public declaration" (Jagose, 1996). It represents an internal – almost existential – acceptance of self that requires the individual to redefine the 'self' and, for others, their relationship to that 'self' (Hill, 2009; Troiden, 1989). It has also been described as a process of identity-centred development, emphasising self-recognition and an internal sense of identity rather one based specifically on sexual acts (Dubé, 2000). 'Coming out' is not, as we will see, "a static action, but a range of various motivations, goals, and strategies that people wrap up in a single term, a catch-all for this complex identity management system" (Orne, 2011, p. 699). In this chapter we explore the intricacies of 'coming out' and its role in relation to mental health and well-being. We propose a model to better reflect the varied relevance of 'coming out' for some today. In line with other chapters in the book, we focus primarily upon LGB populations but acknowledge that there are commonalities in experience for those who are trans, queer, intersex or, indeed asexual.

Understanding the 'coming out' process

'Coming out' is complex. Historically, research on 'coming out' has tended to focus on the reactions of immediate others (family and friends) to disclosure and, of course, the social, cultural, political, and religious contexts that surrounds individuals at the time (D'Augelli, 1994). Coming out has often been characterised as a singular occurrence. For example, Savin-Williams (2001) presented it as a "critical milestone" where emotional, practical, and economic factors come into play. However, in a society underpinned by assumptions of heterosexuality and cisgender status, LGB, trans, queer, intersex and asexual people regularly find themselves in the position of having to 'come out' to others to correct those underpinning assumptions (Manning, 2014) and many have come to accept this as a 'fundamental feature' of their lives (Knoble & Linville, 2012, p. 330). Furthermore, lived experience shows that not only is 'coming out' actually an ongoing process where there is a constant need to define oneself and correct assumptions, it is also a risky one (Ragins, 2008; see also Pachankis, 2007), which we discuss further later in this chapter. Being 'out' is also not a process that is entirely within an individual's control; information is shared across networking groups, and that information (i.e., disclosure of another's actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity or status) can be passed on. This sometimes occurs without malice (e.g., Cho, 2018), and may even be preferred by some individuals as an "easier" means of 'coming out'. As one participant in Orne's (2011) study shared, "Some of my family has found out through means such as MySpace or Facebook, which I almost prefer" (p. 690).

Numerous stage theories and models of identity formation have sought to explain 'coming out' (e.g. Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989; D'Augelli, 1994). As we have noted above, such theories and models tend to characterise 'coming out' as moving from a personal position of identity confusion to a position of commitment to an LGB

identity, acknowledging wider contexts and prohibitions. However, these models have been criticised for their overgeneralizations in terms of sexual identity (usually lesbian and gay) and, latterly, gender identity development and their emphasis on linear progression (Diamond, 2006). For example, the assumption that bisexual people go through a similar disclosure process has been contested by Manning (2015b), who also critiqued earlier models for their failure to engage with cultural differences. Others have however argued that the concept of 'coming out' has undergone significant change. For example, Kaufman and Johnson (2004) argued that, over the decades, both 'the closet' and 'coming out' have altered in meaning, with the process of disclosure being described as one of a "situated negotiation of stigma management" (p. 821). Here 'coming out' is characterised in terms of "a revolving door" that depends much more upon individual circumstances than self-acceptance (p. 822). This management has been demonstrated in one study of British South Asian gay men who, upon returning to their family homes during the COVID-19 lockdowns imposed in the UK, found themselves having to choose between, or at least compartmentalise, their sexual and family identities (Jaspal, 2021). Similarly, Sansfaçon et al. (2020) described 'coming out' and identity formation for trans (including non-binary) youth as a process of "pauses, advances and retreats" (p. 317). One participant reported going through "many coming outs" as they explored different labels, while another participant described how, at one point, she "revoked" her 'coming out' but then subsequently decided to continue her transition:

> It just came back as a feeling, and then I was like, "No. I don't want to stay how I was born." And then it just came back stronger than ever

and then it [my transition] finally started. (Sansfaçon et al., 2020, p. 313)

According to Rivers (1997) the continuous process of disclosing to others means that LGB people have to navigate a complex decision-making process at different stages in their lives, judging the personal, social, political, cultural and economic implications in which they find themselves. Indeed 'coming out' when one is young has different connotations, expectations, challenges and rewards than those who are older, require care from others, or are unable to maintain their independence (Ward, Rivers, & Sutherland, 2012). This process also may have different challenges for those people who are also trans or non-binary, and may thus find themselves making repeated disclosures of both sexuality and gender (Matsuno, 2019).

Of course many of the models of 'coming out' have focused on face-to-face interactions, and the potential emotional consequences of acceptance or rejection by significant others (family, friends, opposite-sex partners and work colleagues). We know that, in the past, many LGB youth have tended to disclose their sexual orientation to a friend before disclosing to a parent (Wells & Kline, 1987; Savin-Williams, 2001), and this is particularly the case where those parents have strong 'traditional' values encompassing religious beliefs, marriage, and the family (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993). However, such disclosures have not always involved face-to-face conversations, they have been made in writing or by the sharing of clues. On such example comes from Orne's (2011) study of gay men's processes of disclosure where one participants described his strategy for coming out at work as follows:

At work, I make no secret of my sexuality, but rarely talk about it ... I did put all my gay-complishments on my resume, so they knew I was gay since I started' (p. 690). In other words, he came out in writing, via his resume. Online spaces also offer a means for coming out and exploring identities virtually without necessarily having to verbalise one's experiences.

However, the digital world presents new opportunities (and challenges) for those wishing to 'come out' and find communities of similar others. Today, many young people report that they choose to come out online in what they perceive to be a safe space (Alexander & Losh, 2010; Bond, Hefner, & Drogos, 2009; Pascoe, 2011). While the anonymous nature of online spaces means that reactions are not always positive and can, of course, be very destructive (Bauman & Rivers, 2015), it nonetheless offers those who access such spaces opportunities for exploring identities before 'coming out' offline, and empowers them to make changes in the 'real' world (Alonzo & Buttitta, 2019; Cabiria, 2008). 'Coming out' virtually, then, can have many benefits (see Craig & McIntory, 2014) by enabling audience separation, wherein identity formation and expression can be managed through partial disclosure (Duguay, 2016). For example, audience separation provides the opportunity to curate and negotiate content and interactions in some spaces and to some people, but not others. Through an exploration of their own identities, those wishing to 'come out' not only connect with others who share similar experiences but they also access relevant advice, resources, and information that may not be available at the beginning of their journey (Buss et al., 2021).

So, what do we know about the lived experience of those who have or are thinking about 'coming out'? Firstly, many of the older studies of coming out have involved young people who were members of community groups, gender-sexuality alliances (GSAs), or those who accessed services because they experienced negative reactions from others (Savin-Williams, 2005). In the absence of any other means of collecting data, we assumed that their experiences were representative of the everyday rather than exceptional. Politically, these young people have also been seen as vulnerable rather than being 'self-actualised' and able to make decisions for themselves. This construction of youth was particularly evident, for example, in the case of Section 28, a law that prohibited local authorities from, "promoting homosexuality as a pretended family relationship." Parliamentary debates surrounding Section 28 not only characterised children and young people as innocent and vulnerable, they also characterised them as requiring protection both from themselves - often being described in terms that inferred innate or latent homosexuality - and any materials (book and other resources) that might awaken that latent identity (Simpson, 2021).

Section 28 was the culmination of political attempts to select and organise the 'right' kind of knowledge to which children and young people should have access, and the rejection that children and young people possess capacities for agency and self-determination. These protectionist politics are more recently evidenced in the case of *Bell v. Tavistock*, where a court was asked to decide whether young people under the age of 18 could give informed consent to puberty blockers. In determining that it is "highly unlikely" or "doubtful", the court's decision echoed Section 28 in ruling that trans young people are not the experts in their own lives, they cannot know their own best interests, and must, therefore, be protected from themselves.

Positive effects on the self of "coming out"

Research has shown that 'coming out' can have positive effects on mental health and wellbeing, and it is these benefits (as well as potential costs) that have to be considered when deciding whether or not to disclose to others (Waldner and Magruder, 1999). We know that 'coming out' can reduce psychological distress and suicidality (Solomon et al., 2015), as well as aid resiliency, counteract stress, and present opportunities for growth (Meyer, 2003). It has also been correlated with increased satisfaction in same-sex relationships (Knoble & Linville, 2012). Where families are accepting, LGB people are likely to experience greater mental and physical health (Ryan et al., 2010). Evidence also indicates that 'coming out' can also be of benefit to those with mental illness, promoting acceptance, comfort, and happiness (Corrigan et al., 2009).

'Coming out' can also be a source of strength, particularly where it is, "associated with opportunities for affiliation, social support, and coping that can ameliorate the impact of stress" (Meyer, 2003, p. 679). Additionally, 'coming out' has been beneficial in terms of furthering political activism. It has, for example, been used as a strategy to protest laws that force individuals to conceal their sexuality or gender identities (Cisneros & Bracho, 2019). Politically, then, 'coming out' can aid the achievement of legal reforms, raising awareness of sexual and gender minorities in broader society (Orne, 2011), and fostering greater acceptance by and within that society. Indeed, some same-sex couples have linked their level of 'outness' to their desire to be visible and serve as role models for others (Knoble & Linville, 2012) and encourage more positive attitudes towards non-heterosexual people more generally

(Klein et al. 2015, p. 299). Thus, 'coming out' can be beneficial both to the individual and the wider community, in a reciprocal or mutually constitutive process.

However, it should be noted too that 'coming out' in order to achieve greater visibility may ultimately act to marginalise those who do not 'fit the mould' of what is deemed to be acceptable by the majority – whatever that majority is (cisgender, heterosexual or LGB). For example, one couple in Knoble and Linville's (2012) study said:

> We tell our son it's his responsibility to be well-behaved and to be a
> good representation of a lesbian-headed family (p. 334).

Linking 'outness' to notions of being "well-behaved" and being a "good representation" to achieve acceptance is problematic. In addition to subjecting non-heterosexuality to the heterosexual gaze, it risks reifying or bolstering the notion of the so-called 'good homosexual', in which the majority deem only certain sexual minorities to be worthy of respect because those individuals replicate heteronormative ideals. From within LGB communities we can see similar expression of what can be described as 'homonormativity'. For example, we regularly hear debates surrounding the acceptability or appropriateness of demonstrations of 'kink' at Pride events (Pohtinen, 2019). However, it can be argued that, if no other ways of being are modelled for LGB people, they cannot embrace the range of queer possibilities and expressions of gender and sexuality that exist and, thus, may therefore find it more difficult to 'come out' if they do not see themselves reflected in LGB communities.

Potential negative effects of 'coming out'

While coming out is seen as a healthy sign of maturation and identity integration, it also carries risks, including victimisation, stigmatisation, prejudice, and sexual violence (Bogaert & Hafer, 2009). Other negative outcomes can include becoming the target of prejudice, disruption of relationships with friends and family, and developing depression, suicidality, substance abuse, or low self-esteem (Solomon et al., 2015). These impacts are often compounded for those with intersectional identities or multiple minority status, resulting in multiple forms of oppression. They may experience, for example, both heterosexism and racism within and outside LGB communities (Balsam et al., 2011), or have to navigate an undocumented immigration status while facing both anti-LGB and anti-immigrant attitudes (Cisneros & Bracho, 2019). 'Coming out' in these contexts has been linked to negative outcomes in terms of mental health and wellbeing (Rivers et al., 2019).

'Coming out' can also impact personal relationships, most obviously in the case of families, but friendships too. While several studies have documented the invaluable sources of support friendship networks bring, they have shown that 'coming out' often-times results in the loss of those networks (see Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1994; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995; Rivers, 2001; Rivers & Carragher, 2003). Physical, verbal, emotional and even sexual abuse have been reported and this can result in friends taking fright and disowning LGB peers means of self-preservation (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004; Rivers, 2002; Saewyc et al., 2006).

These reasons demonstrate why many may remain in the closet, concealing their identities in order to avoid the anticipated risks and consequences associated with coming out, although this in turn may give rise to other risks. As Sanders (2018)

observed, "the personal challenge to come to terms with one's sexual and gender identity is daunting and painful when there is a pernicious atmosphere" (p. 219).

While we must acknowledge that there is a general consensus that remaining in 'the closet' can itself have negative outcomes (for those who desire to 'come out' but are prevented from doing so). For example, early research by Weinberg and Williams (1974) indicated that staying 'in the closet' could lead to psychological stress in the anticipation of being exposed or involuntarily 'outed' and, thus, subjected to discrimination (which, in turn, leads to strain in managing one's behaviours and expressions). Additionally, the negative impacts of not 'coming out' may be compounded by well-meaning individuals who encourage disclosure or well-meaning workplace policies or practices. For example, requiring individuals to share pronouns on email signatures can have the unintended consequence of forcing trans people to 'out' themselves or push them further back into 'the closet'.

Is 'being out' meaningful still?

In the opening of this chapter, we discussed research on, and theorisations of, 'coming out', in which disclosure is emphasised as a necessary pathway or process for LGB people's self-acceptance and identity formation. However, we want to interrogate the perceived link between health development and the disclosure of one's identities, and in particular the assumption that 'coming out' is universally relevant to LGB people or indeed trans, queer, intersex or asexual people. This particular conception of 'coming out' – of the idea that (repeated) declarations signal positive wellbeing – suggests that the process represents a form of liberation that allows individuals to be 'authentic' (and, conversely, those who remain in the closet, sometimes by choice, as 'inauthentic'). This assumption infers that identities are not

yet fully legitimate or valid unless and until disclosed publicly. Indeed, as Snider (1996) noted, there is a presumption in 'coming out' discourses that being out is beneficial, which itself is underpinned by a perception that a dichotomy exists between the true self and the repressed self. Yet this line of thinking recalls and calcifies essentialist conceptions of sexuality, sexual orientation and gender whereby the discovery *and expression* of a person's identity reveals some inherent truth about that person. If that is the case, then post-structural views of sexuality, sexual-orientation and gender, in which identity is an ongoing social or relational process, are called into question.

Furthermore, we have to question where 'coming out' is important or relevant for some people, and this suggests that there is a need for a new way of thinking about the disclosure process in a way that does not elide or erase the experiences of those individuals, who may be marginalised even within their communities. While the experiences of those who desire but are unable to 'come out' are, of course, valid and worthy of investigation and understanding (see Clarke, 2002) there are also those who resist 'coming out' in ways that assign labels relating to sexuality, sexual orientation and gender altogether. We know, for example, that many labels, and the differences which define them, have less resonance among young people today who question the centrality of labelling desires to their core identities or sense of self (Allen et al., 2021; Coleman-Fountain, 2014; Savin-Williams, 2005). As Dilley (2010) argued, while there is the desire amongst some young people to, "recognize and acknowledge their non-heterosexual feelings, experiences, and social connections as not heterosexual', there is also the wish to 'consciously refute […] the primacy of those aspects of their identity in their overall sense of self" (p. 191).

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Indeed, research conducted with young people who identify as being solely or primarily attracted to members of the same sex, but have not come out, indicates that while they have concerns about hostility from others, fear experiencing loneliness, and have a propensity for risk-taking behaviour, their psychological profile is not noticeably different from peers solely or primarily attracted to members of the opposite sex (see Rivers & Noret, 2008). Thus, if divisions based on desire are not significant to defining oneself and one's community, or to understanding psychological well-being, the question arises as to the continued importance of communities defined by sexual desire to the social identities adopted by young people today (which may not be based on sexual desire at all).

The continued emphasis we place on 'coming out' has the potential to exclude or erase those with 'other' experiences within 'other' populations as well as those who identify as asexual and do not experience sexual attraction or the desire to seek out romantic partners. For some, there may be little value placed in 'coming out' (Robbins et al., 2016). Indeed, some desire to live without having to disclose or explain their trans identity, for example (Klein et al., 2015). In these contexts, choosing not to 'come out' is not the result of shame or secrecy, as the notion of the closet implies, but a reflection of their sense of self which is not tied to public disclosure in the first place. Thus, while concealment can have detrimental effects (Pachankis, 2007) for some, for others, there may simply be a lack of desire to either conceal *or* disclose.

If we can disentangle the historical narratives surrounding disclosure and recognise that 'coming out' is not the goal for everyone from LGB, trans, queer, intersex or asexual communities, 'the closet' can be reconceptualised a space of

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safekeeping for different people at the different stages in their lives. For some it is a place of safety early in their identity development, for others it is a refuge (either temporary or long-term), for others still the act of keeping a 'secret' may be an erotic experience that enhances pleasure.

These arguments do not suggest that 'coming out' is a meaningless or arbitrary process, or that disclosure is a non-issue. Indeed, the research we have cited shows that this clearly is not the case; 'coming out' can both be a transformative experience. But what is key here is the recognition that, for some individuals, disclosure – and the categorisations required to make disclosure possible – may constrain rather than liberate, and thus becomes a compulsory rather than emancipatory act – one that essentially creates a hierarchy of sexual identities in which one is either out and proud or closeted and shamed. The perpetuation of an in/out binary reinforces the experience of sexuality, sexual orientation and even gender-identity as fixed rather than fluid. Indeed, if we accept that they can be fluid, then can it be said that there is ever an end to the 'coming out' process?

A reflexive model of 'coming out'

Given this discussion, how can the process of 'coming out' be represented by a model that accounts for varied and individual experiences rather than a universal or singular process of identity development? We propose the model shown in Figure 1. This model is not intended to reflect a 'spectrum of visibility' (Cisneros & Bracho, 2019, p. 717) – in which each domain or dimension is another level of increased or cumulative public awareness – that would imply that those who are not increasingly 'out' are somehow less legible than those who are. Nor do the domains (represented by circles) infer that there is a natural progression to 'coming out'. As we have

argued, private subjectivity and non-disclosure are as valid as public disclosure. Rather, the domains are intended to represent patterns of disclosure, should individuals so choose, while also recognising that sometimes there is not a choice (i.e., where one is involuntarily outed). By not tying 'coming out' to developmental stages, the model further reflects that, while the understanding that 'coming out' may or may not have value or relevance to wellbeing, the process is inherently a social one. It does not deny that 'coming out' can result in experiences of growth and healthy development, nor does it assume a link between the two or that the process is a universal one.

Figure 1: A reflexive model of 'coming out'
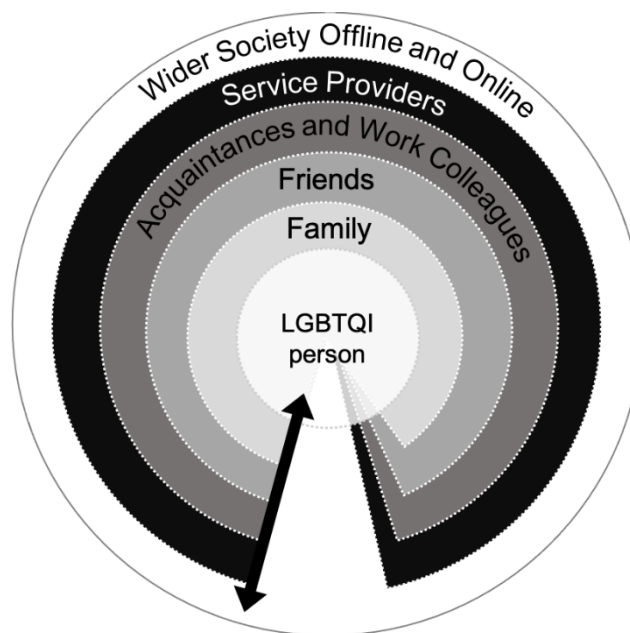
In the model each domain visibly flows from the central 'LGBTQI person' or 'self' domain, indicating that a person can 'come out' in any of these contexts at any time. However, there is no particular order or pathway, though there may be socially imposed expectations of an order or pathway (referencing a form of social ecology), however, some or all of these may be 'skipped' or 'jumped'. The pathways can also

be read as flowing *into* the self, reflecting the socially constructed nature of sexual and gender identities. It also reflects the experience of being involuntary 'outed' by others (see Jaspal, 2021). Finally, the arrow indicates the fluid and non-linear nature of 'coming out', including it's often context-specific nature, wherein the individual may navigate and re-navigate different domains at different times and in different locations (such as in the workplace or when negotiating family relationships).

Conclusion

In addition to summarising much of the research that has gone before on the topic of 'coming out', we have chosen to challenge some of the assumptions that have been made about the being 'out' recognising that past research does not always reflect the diversity that now exists in terms of sexualities, sexual orientations and gender identities. For many LGB people, as it is for those who are trans, queer and intersex, initial disclosure of sexual orientation or gender-identity is a pivotal milestone in the development of self. It has both its personal benefits and its contextual risks. However, for some 'coming out' may be seen as unnecessary or even limiting – casting off one inflexible identity for another. 'Coming out' is a personal choice but so, too, is the decision not to 'come out'. It is important that we move away from linear models of 'coming out' and reflect upon the inevitability that lives cannot be understood in terms of a simple binary – in or out – but involve degrees of 'outness' that reflect both context and personal choice.

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