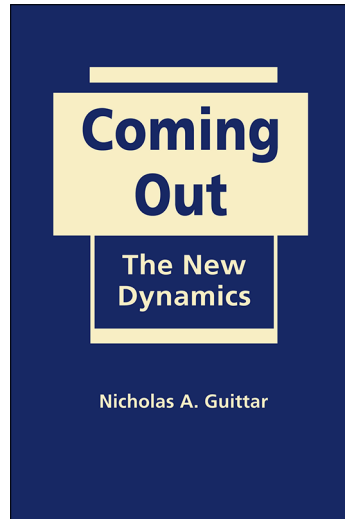


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# Coming Out: The New Dynamics

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# 1

## The Shifting Contexts of Coming Out

When I was little all I could think about was me under a fucking hopa [a Jewish altar], 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.

~Gabrielle

Gabrielle has plenty of reasons to demonstrate a heightened sense of frustration—perhaps even anger—and it all comes through in this single quote. Within this dialog we see very clearly the normative expectation of “man + woman” (i.e., heteronormativity), and we see that it operates on so many levels. Heteronormativity lives in our institutions, it permeates our culture, and it governs much of our social interaction. Like so many of the participants in this study, Gabrielle spoke about the powerful influences of heteronormativity on her sexuality and her life as a whole. Social forces rooted in normative sexual arrangements shackled her to heterosexuality throughout childhood and adolescence, even as she began to recognize having feelings toward members of the same sex. As time progressed Gabrielle became increasingly aware of the fact that her sexuality would add additional challenges to many facets of life. Participants in the current study spoke frequently of various heteronormative expectations placed upon them by their parents,

themselves, and society at large (e.g., to date members of the other sex, get married, etc.).

Heterosexuality is still the norm in contemporary life throughout the United States (Katz 2007). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) individuals, all of whom have a sexual orientation that falls outside of this dominant heterosexual framework, face myriad difficulties associated with identifying and maintaining healthy sexual identities (Rust 1993). Central to these challenges is “coming out,” which has been identified as one of the most crucial elements in the development of a healthy sexual identity (McLean 2007).

Some contemporary scholars suggest that coming out is no longer a relevant concept related to the formation and maintenance of sexual identities. Although the concept of “coming out” is undergoing massive transformation, it continues to impact people’s lives in meaningful ways. At the heart of this study are the experiences of 30 people who collectively demonstrate how heteronormativity continues to assert its influence over all “other” sexualities. For starters, “coming out” does not have a singular, shared meaning—as so many scholars purport. Coming out is not even necessarily about the outward disclosure of one’s sexual identity. For some people, coming out is entirely a matter of accepting and affirming their own sexuality (i.e., coming out to oneself). Quite simply, the meanings of coming out are as varied as the individuals who engage in such a career.

An extensive body of literature exists with regard to why an individual may choose *not* to come out. However, this research project illuminates an equally important interaction—how social forces influence the way in which an individual *does* come out. For example, many participants in the current study engaged in an interaction I call the *queer apologetic*—coming out initially as bisexual despite being interested *only* in members of the same sex. The queer apologetic is essentially an identity compromise based in the rationale that bisexuality simultaneously satisfies 1) their personal attractions to only members of the same sex, and 2) society’s expectation that they be attracted to members of the other sex. The queer apologetic is just one example of how coming out is still quite relevant—even at a time when increasingly fewer people remain “closeted.” In addition to the queer apologetic there are many other new dynamics of coming out.

In decades past, people typically waited until they affirmed a concrete sexual identity before they considered disclosing their sexuality to others. Younger cohorts, particularly individuals under 22 years of age, are disclosing their sexualities prior to affirming a new sexual identity. That is, they are coming out with an *affinity* (i.e., “liking

girls”), not a sexual identity (being gay, bisexual, etc.). Limited research has investigated these early roots of coming out. Another primary finding is that coming out is heavily influenced by an individual’s gender presentation. Both gender conformity (e.g., a feminine female) and gender non-conformity (e.g., a masculine female) present unique challenges to coming out. Gender non-conformists are often “assumed gay,” while gender conformists are assumed to be heterosexual. As a result, gender presentation can make coming out either more or less difficult—and the outcome has a great deal to do with what coming out means to each individual. These and other themes culminate in the summative finding that coming out remains a relevant, and highly influential, concept related to the formation and maintenance of sexual identities.

Coming out is a social construct that today garners a fair amount of empirical inquiry, yet rarely do researchers stop to question the usage and subsequent meanings of the concept itself. If you ask someone who is part of the sexual majority (i.e., heterosexual), “so, what is coming out all about?,” they would likely tell you that it is the process by which people with “other” sexualities disclose their sexual identities to various people—parents, friends, coworkers, etc. If you were to query someone who has engaged in coming out, you would likely receive a response that includes the outward disclosure of a sexual identity, but you would just as likely hear stories of self-exploration, learning about one’s own sexuality, and the development of acceptance or self-affirmation. The disconnect between popular, mainstream views of coming out and people’s actual lived experiences with coming out can be attributed to a variety of factors including the proliferation of common storylines and media sensationalism which characterizes coming out as being an awkward, outward sharing of one’s sexuality.

In order to understand the continued relevance of coming out and its role in contemporary society, we must consider the following fact: *coming out is a function of oppression*. Those groups which enjoy positions of privilege in society rarely, if ever, have to analyze, question, disclose, or justify the characteristics of their dominant traits. In the U.S., privilege is held by those who are white, male, cisgender<sup>1</sup> and—of import to this study—heterosexual (Kimmel and Ferber 2009). In the minds of the majority, to be heterosexual is to be *normal*. Conversely, to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, fluid, pansexual, or polysexual is to be framed as the *other*. Heterosexuals often do not even consider their sexuality as a defining element in their self-identity (Herek 1990; Diamond 2008). It is simply not thought about. When a characteristic is normative it is rarely called into question. Heterosexuals do not feel the

need to ask themselves “Why am I only interested in members of the other sex?” Quite simply, heterosexuality is everywhere. When something is normative it does not encourage introspection or explanation. It just *is*. But the maintenance of an LGBTQ identity stands in juxtaposition to nearly everything we hear and see in society. Thus, the smallest inkling that one may be interested in members of the same sex lends itself to extensive self-exploration, and, if affirmed and desired by the individual, the outward disclosure of one’s sexuality.

As a result of our heteronormative social arrangements, the common expectation is that everyone is “straight until proven gay.” Even when someone does not provide proof of their sexuality via outward disclosure, many Americans believe they can detect sexual minorities by identifying those who violate traditional gender norms. It is no coincidence then that my choice of wording in the phrase above is eerily similarity to the legal phrase “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 people receive from their family, their friends, their teachers, and various authority figures (Sears and Williams 1997). These expectations are in addition to the heteronormative wording and imagery seen across society from schools and churches to legal guidelines to the mass media.

Heteronormativity, in its most basic sense, is the presumption of heterosexuality as a universal fact among social arrangements. Heteronormativity frames “normal” romantic intimacy as shared only between people of different sexes (i.e., one male and one female). 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) noted the frequency with which children’s G-rated films contain hetero-romantic love. Heteronormativity in children’s media is not even reliant upon the presence of human characters. The animals in DreamWorks’ *Madagascar* animated movies have hetero-romantic relationships, as do the cars in Disney Pixar’s popular *Cars* franchise. Multiple participants in the current study noted the influence of children’s media in forming negative self-images—in terms of both gender and sexuality. For example, Ari, an 18 year-old participant who identifies as a lesbian, spoke at length on the pervasive impact of Disney films. As she emphatically stated, “the things I internalized from watching *Beauty and the Beast* are what fucked me over the most in my life.” Heteronormativity and traditional gender norms are conveyed through countless other media-based sources as well—books, magazines, advertisements, even nursery rhymes. Not

surprisingly, the most frequently cited source of heteronormativity among most people is our central primary socialization unit: the family.

Family is often cited as one of the first—and consequently most influential—sources of heteronormative expectations (Savin-Williams 1998; Jenkins 2008). Most people who are born into two-parent households are brought up by a woman and a man, a mother and a father. Even those who are not raised in two-parent homes are typically raised in heterosexual households. To be fair, heterosexual households do not necessarily foster heteronormativity or homophobia—at least not intentionally. In fact, some family homes foster supportive environments that challenge the heterosexist underpinnings of social institutions and the broader society (Gorman-Murray 2008). Still, exposure to purely heterosexual social arrangements—among parents, extended family, neighbors—communicates a powerful message to a young, moldable mind—that one man plus one woman equals “normal.”

Of the 30 participants in this study, 73 percent (22 out of 30) grew up in two-parent heterosexual households. Of those 22 people, 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). The percentage of people who grew up with intact families is higher than the U.S. average, 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, were a daily reminder of what was expected of these individuals in their future relationships. And when social expectations fail to match up with personal lived experiences, an inner dialog begins—a dialog that oftentimes develops into various manifestations of coming out.

In her study of sexual fluidity among lesbians, Lisa Diamond (2008:58) aptly suggests, “the presumption of universal heterosexuality is so strong that [many women] never have to question it.” The presumption of what Adrienne Rich (1980) calls “compulsory heterosexuality” is what makes coming out such an arduous journey for many LGBTQ persons. To affirm an LGBTQ identity is to go against everything an individual may have been socialized to believe or see as “normal”—that is, acceptable. It is essential, then, to recognize coming out as a social phenomenon rooted in the process of *doing difference* via sexuality.

Sexual identity formation and maintenance is a process of “describing one’s social location within a changing social context” (Rust 1993:50). Scholars such as Paula Rust have therefore begun to recognize sexuality as something that is accomplished rather than purely innate.

Just as West and Zimmerman (1987) introduced the notion that gender is a routine accomplishment, so too is sexuality. Despite the revelation that gender and sexuality are quite social, the nature versus nurture argument continues to this day. Scholars such as Michael Kimmel (2008) have thwarted the “either/or” argument over the origins of gender and sexuality 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 sexuality now emphasizes how sexual identities emerge 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. Sexual identities are less about expressing an essential truth and more about mapping out difference and diversity (Weeks 2003). West and Fenstermaker’s (1995) concept of *doing difference* 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, around family, or perhaps even as a part of one’s own inner dialog. 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) which may consist of remaining closeted or perhaps passing as heterosexual in routine interaction.

In cases where LGBQ persons decide to forego sexual conformity, they may opt to engage in the self-affirmation of an LGBQ identity or the public expression of their sexuality—both of which constitute coming out. 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 is the heterosexual majority. Stemming from the pre-1973 status of LGBQ persons as disordered, much about doing difference via sexuality (that is, *doing LGBQ*) is about shedding the past and working toward liberation. For some people this means inclusion, others separatism, and still others transcendence. Since heteronormativity purports that sexuality is synonymous with heterosexuality, for LGBQ persons there is no singular way to do sexuality except to do difference or undo heteronormativity. Indeed, many LGBQ persons are growing up without the use of a “closet” and are rather choosing to *do difference* from the very beginning (Seidman et al. 1999).



The idea of doing difference from the beginning (perhaps since adolescence), although progressive in its approach to sexuality, still involves the affirmation of a sexual identity that falls somewhere outside of heterosexuality. In this respect, even the most comfortable LGBTQ person in the most affirming environment will engage in coming out—either inwardly or outwardly. As McCormack and Anderson (2010) emphasize, the influences of heteronormativity exist even in the most inclusive and affirming settings. As introduced in Chapter 2, coming out means different things to different people—but it has some sort of relevance to everyone. Despite the fact that “the closet” may no longer exist for some LGBTQ persons, coming out (albeit in varying degrees) is still central to identity formation and maintenance. But coming out is different now than it was in decades past. Sexuality, like gender and race, is a social construct. Therefore, any concept related to sexuality is socially constructed as well. Coming out is a living social entity that morphs based on historical, political, and cultural change. Prior to delving further into exploration of the contemporary relevance of coming out, it is helpful to consider the origins of this relatively fluid concept.

### **A Brief History of Coming Out**

During the Victorian era “coming out” referred to the ritual moment during which young affluent women were formally introduced to high society. The broad concept of “coming out” may have these Victorian roots, but its purpose and significance is far removed from these early origins. Fast forward to the 1920s and coming out began to refer to a less formal initiation of self-affirmed gay men into gay social life. As historian George Chauncey (1994) details, the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a definition of coming out that was rooted primarily in *entering the gay world*. It was during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that we first saw the proliferation of sexual identities, including that of “heterosexual”—thus, sexuality became an increasingly divisive social trait. Between the 1920s and 1950s, most gay men and women in the U.S. lived a sexually bifurcated existence—split between work and leisure (among other boundaries). Coming out, then, was not about announcing one’s sexuality to the heterosexual majority as much as it was becoming a part of “the club” among gay circles. “What was criminal was . . . denying [your sexual identity] to your sisters. Nobody cared about coming out to straights” (quoted in Chauncey 1994:276). This definition stands in stark contrast to modern-day conceptions of coming out which are framed just as much (if not more so) as *stepping*

*away from the straight world.* That is, confirming to family and friends (and even oneself) that you are, in fact, “different.”

Following commencement of the gay liberation movement—preceded by Stonewall—coming out increasingly encompassed the disclosure of one’s sexuality to populations outside of the gay community (D’Emilio and Freedman 2012). Coming out became more of a public avowal—an act of resistance against oppression on the basis of sexuality. Thus, the goal of coming out shifted from that of a person’s introduction to gay life into a political and social interaction aimed at challenging negative social meanings of homosexuality. The disclosure of one’s sexual identity gained footing as young LGBTQ men and women affirmed more publicly gay identities. Many men and women, previously engaged in “conventional” social arrangements (i.e., heterosexual relationships), were choosing to no longer deny their same-sex interests and thereby affirm LGBTQ identities and subsequently come out to family and close friends as such. Coming out to family, friends, and even coworkers served the purpose of diffusing broad public fear associated with popular views of homosexuality.

As society progressed on into the 1990s and 2000s issues of sexuality entered the minds of the public more readily as relationship recognition debates sprang up around the country. During this climate of increased dialog, the public expression of one’s sexuality grew from the occasional coming out story to a 1997 fever pitch centered on a two-part segment of the popular sitcom *Ellen*. The title character, played by Ellen DeGeneres, came out to family and friends as gay, thus affirming the popular notion that coming out is a matter of explaining sexual difference to other people. Fast forward to 2010, the year in which data for the current study was collected, and we saw a major public outpour of support for LGBTQ youth with Dan Savage’s “The It Gets Better Project.” Primarily carried out via YouTube, It Gets Better provides an avenue to communicate broad public support and affirmation to even those LGBTQ persons living in the least affirming environments. Indeed, the goal of coming out had broadened once again, to emphasize personal freedom, a general concern for the well-being of the individual, and the hope that bullying and intolerance would not relegate LGBTQ youth to negative life outcomes.

When speaking of the history of coming out it is necessary to also discuss the metaphorical use of “the closet.” Even among the participants in my research, “coming out” and “the closet” were often lumped together. Participants frequently touted how and when they “came out of the closet.” In this sense, it is clear that these two terms can be mutually contributory. The closet presumably refers to the

circumstance in which an individual is forced to hide his sexuality under a heterosexual visage. But as Seidman et al. (1999) pointedly confirms, many youth are growing up without ever feeling “closeted.” The closet, in this sense, is a metaphor which explains the interaction of purposively hiding any element of one’s sexual identity with the intention of preventing or subverting the negative reactions of other people. Despite asserting that we are moving beyond the closet, Seidman (2002) recognizes that, although the closet may be waning, it is nowhere near extinct. For this and other reasons (namely the continued pervasiveness of heteronormativity) coming out remains a significant element in the lives of most LGBTQ persons. Although many participants in the current study did not speak specifically of being closeted (some did), they still regarded the realization that they are LGBTQ and any subsequent sharing of their sexuality as coming out. So coming out is not contingent upon the existence or usage of a closet metaphor. Coming out has an impetus of its own, and it remains central to sexual identity formation and maintenance in contemporary society.

### **Purpose & Significance of the Study**

Of all the literature concerning lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBTQ)<sup>2</sup> persons, coming out and the development of an LGBTQ 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 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 experience associated with, coming out vary substantially from person to person?

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 LGBTQ individuals, I worked diligently to abandon all assumptions and allow the unique narrative of each interviewee to emerge. Coming out is sociologically important. An improved understanding of coming out contributes 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 the research places emphasis on progressive politics and social justice, so it

relies on an insistence that constructionism and postmodernism are mutually contributory.

Historically, much of the research on coming out has been directed at labeling stages in a “coming out process” (Cass 1979; Coleman 1982; Carrion and Lock 1997). The Cass model of coming out has served as the psychological foundation for understanding coming out for more than three decades. Even today Cass serves as the bedrock for myriad ally training programs around the country—aimed at helping straight allies understand what LGBTQ persons experience when coming out. Thus, coming out is often positioned as a structured, formulaic process through which gay and lesbian persons will experience all or most of a series of stages, until the process is completed. Qualitative researchers have begun to move beyond such rigid structures by collecting and analyzing narratives of individuals’ coming out in order to explore the uniqueness of people’s experiences with coming out (Waldner and Magruder 1999; Merighi and Grimes 2000; Grierson and Smith 2005; Gorman-Murray 2008). Along with the increased openness with which researchers are approaching the topic, studies are also increasingly broadening the scope of sexuality beyond the typical gay/straight binary.

Research on coming out has made strides, but few studies emphasize learning about how coming out may be unique to each individual. By focusing only on general trends, social researchers inadvertently contribute to the trivialization of variations in the coming out experience. Layers of complexity and individuality get stripped down only to uncover the generic broad strokes that characterize a seemingly unified, monolithic experience of doing difference in a heteronormative society. Granted, overemphasizing the uniqueness of each individual’s experiences would be just as detrimental as looking only for commonalities. My goal then is to locate the general in the particular while maintaining a watchful eye on the idiosyncratic variations that make coming out a highly individualized experience for each participant. The overall objective of this study is to provide a more nuanced, organic understanding of coming out as a general social phenomenon entered into and experienced by a wide array of people. It is a social phenomenon that, despite changing drastically over the past few decades, remains central to the lives of most LGBTQ persons.

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” or “the closet” itself constructs LGBTQ 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. 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.

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 over matters of sexuality (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009). Numerous studies have hinted that much of the intolerance expressed toward sexual minorities comes from a simple lack of understanding and empathy. It is my hope that this research provides valuable insight into the meanings associated with coming out, what contemporary incarnations of coming out look like, and how the lives of everyday people are contorted by the social expectations tied to appeasing the sexual majority. Although this study is sociological in design and execution, the implications are relevant to all social sciences as well as individuals, groups and institutions in the public sphere.

## **Study Design**

The current study takes a constructivist grounded theory approach to exploring coming out among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer individuals. Open-ended interviews were conducted in order to explore the meaning of coming out, and discern the ways in which coming out influences people’s lives. All interviews were conducted face-to-face between August and December of 2010, and the duration of each interview ranged from 60 to 120 minutes. The entire research process (sampling, data collection, transcription, coding, analyses, and write-ups) was completed by me.

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 or one’s own religiosity on coming out). Beyond exploring the meanings of coming out, the major themes included in this volume were all extracted theoretically from the participants’ narratives. I did not set out to “unearth” these particular

themes via specific questions or any a priori theory. Rather than self-imposing a series of finite research questions or hypotheses, I employed a very open set of interview questions and relied upon the interview data to dictate the results of the study. My analysis is informed by symbolic interactionism, and guided by constructivist grounded theory—which was employed for my organization, coding, and analysis (Charmaz 2006). Symbolic interactionism and constructivist grounded theory both maintain a focus on the creation and evolution of meaning. 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.

A total of 30 participants were included in 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. It is standard research practice to use pseudonyms to protect the participants, a fact that I explained at the beginning of each interview. To my surprise, many of my participants insisted that I use their actual names as opposed to pseudonyms. For those who chose to utilize pseudonyms, all notations made during these interviews included no mention of their actual names.

Most studies on coming out emphasize a specific segment of the population such as adolescents, college students, young professionals, or people in mid-adulthood. These sorts of samples allow researchers to make more direct within-group comparisons; however, they limit the investigation of coming out as a general social phenomenon entered into and experienced by people from all walks of life. Collecting data across multiple dimensions allows for greater representativeness and it helps capture the overall texture of the topic (Corsaro 1985). Historically, participants in studies on coming out tended to be white, highly

educated, and of a high socioeconomic status (Griffith and Hebl 2002). In an effort to minimize the homogeneity of the sample I employed some purposive sampling techniques which were directed at gaining diversity on the basis of gender, race, education, sexual orientation, age, and “degree of outness.”

Early on in the process of collecting data a sharp distinction emerged between two groups of participants and their modes of coming out—those born prior to 1988 (over 22 at the time of interview), and those born after 1988 (22 and under at the time of interview). Since marked differences appeared during the course of my data collection that really begged further exploration, I chose to engage in some theoretical sampling in terms of participants’ age and another characteristic (“degree of outness”). Considering the small sample size in this study, the birth year of 1988 is not a precise cut point. Nonetheless, recognition of cohort-based trends led to some theoretical sampling in order to obtain a large segment of the sample on each side of this artificial divide. Other than providing a basis of comparison, participants born prior to 1988 are not frequently discussed in the current study. Most themes included in this volume (i.e., the new dynamics of coming out) relate specifically to the participants under 22 years of age at the time of interview (2010).

Simply put, younger populations are growing up in an environment of increasingly open dialog concerning sexuality (especially since 1993, when the Hawai’i marriage case of *Baehr v. Lewin* launched relationship recognition into the social spotlight) and this came through in the data. I completed my data collection with 10 participants over the age of 25, and 20 participants under 25 enabled—thus enabling me to further explore the contemporary meanings of coming out, and gain more insight on recent developments in identity formation and maintenance. Although many of the themes included in this volume rely heavily on the experiences of these younger participants, the data provided by older cohorts provided important information on the broader context of coming out—thus allowing me to better engage in understanding how coming out is changing.

A well-rounded depiction of coming out required that I obtain a sample that includes individuals who have only come out to one or two people, as well as individuals who have come out to a greater degree. 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. So in addition to sampling individuals who were quite young, I also sought participants who were early in their coming out—regardless of age (snowball sampling does

not afford me the luxury of reaching individuals who were out to nobody but themselves).

Although I engaged in this study with the intention of exploring coming out as a general social endeavor, due to my limited sample size, and my decision to utilize snowball sampling, my findings cannot be generalized to all persons who engage in coming out. Also, despite my best efforts, the sample lacks any participants who identify as black and/or presently identifies as bisexual (for a discussion of sampling challenges, please reference the Appendix). Still, considering the breadth of participants in my sample, I am confident that my data accounts for a great many of the types of experiences that LGBTQ persons may encounter while coming out.

### **Participant Characteristics**

There is a fair amount of diversity among the 30 participants in this study. The sample is diverse in terms of age, gender, race, sexual orientation, education, and social class (see Table 1.1). The mean age of participants is 26 years of age, while the median age is closer to 24. Although more diverse than most studies on coming out, the racial/ethnic composition of my sample still lacks the degree of diversity sought. Important to note is that I did not impose a specified list of racial/ethnic identities from which participants had to choose. I opted instead to allow participants to define their race and ethnicity in their own verbiage and on their own terms. 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 racially and ethnically 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. Markedly absent are any participants who identified as African American or Caribbean American—both populations which are underserved in research on sexual identities. Throughout data collection I made a concerted effort to locate and interview black participants, but these potential interviewees ultimately chose not to participate. This unfortunate outcome encouraged me to focus my next major research project exclusively on African American and Caribbean American participants (a project which is currently underway).



**Table 1.1 - Participant Characteristics**

NAME	AGE	GENDER	RACE	SEXUAL IDENTITY	EDUC.	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/ Mediteran.	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
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	Gay	B.A.	Middle	None
Nathan	21	Man	Bi-racial	Gay	Some College	Upper Middle	Christian: non-denom.
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- prac)

The sample consists of 12 men and 18 women (two of which maintain a decidedly fluid gender identity). In terms of their present sexual orientation, 15 participants identify as gay, 9 as lesbians, 3 as queer, 1 as fluid, 1 as pansexual, and 2 prefer not to identify. As noted above, none of the participants identified as bisexual at the time of interview (although many had previously identified as such). Participants' "degree of outness," ranged from individuals who had shared their sexuality with only two or three people all the way up to those who considered themselves "completely out." As is the case with other studies on coming out, this sample is highly educated. I could suggest that highly educated people are more likely to be surrounded by an affirming environment or that highly educated people are simply more apt to speak of their experiences—but these assertions are both merely conjecture at this point. Rather than having an overabundance of

people with high upper-class standing, the average participant in this study is decidedly middle class. Although the modal group (12 people) consisted of those who designated “no religion,” this sample still yielded a fair amount of religious diversity—and some high levels of religiosity as well.

All participants lived within two hours of Orlando, Florida at the time of their interviews. As a region, Central Florida proved to be ideal for conducting this study. The region is home to two major Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) in Orlando and Tampa, as well as countless suburbs, small towns and unincorporated settlements. Generally speaking, the size of any particular Florida community has a lot to say about the quantity and types of LGBQ resources as well as gay spaces that are available. Tampa and Orlando have fairly well-established gay communities; while smaller towns like Winter Garden and St. Cloud have little to no LGBQ resources at all. The region is also home to two large research universities and a variety of highly-regarded liberal arts colleges—each of which contributes to a vibrant and growing LGBQ community. Collectively, the characteristics of Central Florida add up to an eclectic mix of social environments that were experienced and subsequently discussed by the 30 participants in this study.

### **The Plan of the Book**

This opening chapter was centered on providing a framework for investigating the concept of coming out. The major takeaway is that, in order to understand coming out, you must first comprehend the concept of heteronormativity and highlight its influence on sexual identity formation and maintenance among sexual minorities. This seemingly simple social fact is central to the analyses found in the remaining chapters. The remainder of the book is structured around the major themes that emerged from my interview data on coming out.

People often discuss “coming out” as a concept which has a singular, shared meaning. Even social scientists typically equate its meaning to the public disclosure of one’s sexual identity. In reality, the meaning of coming out varies substantially from person to person. Chapter 2 provides an organic look at the various meanings that participants in my research attribute to coming out. Meanings include coming out to oneself (self-affirmation), coming out to family/friends, and coming out as full disclosure (and oftentimes a combination of two or more of the above). The two most significant findings in this chapter are that 1) coming out is indeed still a relevant concept, and 2) coming out is not always an external endeavor. The realization that, for some

people, coming out is entirely a matter of self-affirmation problematizes research which frames coming out as being entirely about outward disclosure.

An extensive body of literature exists with regard to 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 LGBTQ identity. However, rarely does research entertain how these same three social influences alter the way in which an individual *does* come out. 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. Chapter 3 focuses on ten participants in this study, each of whom 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 an individual discloses a bisexual identity that she feels will be palatable to her family, friends, or even herself. This compromise is based on the rationale that bisexuality simultaneously satisfies 1) her personal attractions to only members of the same sex, and 2) society’s expectation that she be attracted to members of the other sex. The queer apologetic exemplifies the struggle to affirm an LGBTQ identity in a heteronormative society. It also helps explain the difficulty in maintaining a bisexual identity (or any other “intermediate” identity, for that matter).

Building upon the foundation established in the first three chapters, Chapter 4 covers a series of interactions, each of which establishes coming out as a concept that is undergoing massive transformation. The most revolutionary facet of this chapter is a subsection on “coming out with affinity, not identity.” Most sexuality research is restricted to people who have affirmed concrete sexual identities, but my data demonstrates that many people initiate coming out prior to affirming an LGBTQ identity. They come out first as “liking boys/girls” (i.e., a sexual affinity), and little to no research has investigated these early roots of coming out. Other topics included in this chapter are the tendency of people to shift identities over time (which often prompts people to “reset” their coming out) and the proliferation of progressive identities such as pansexual, polysexual, fluid, and open. For the most part, research on coming out has been limited to lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations, so these newer identities are fertile ground for sociological inquiry.

Research at the intersection of gender and sexuality is underdeveloped on the influence of gender presentation on coming out. Chapter 5 begins with a thorough review of the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality—a necessary for understanding how gender affects coming out. The chapter details how both gender conformity (e.g., a feminine female) and gender non-conformity (e.g., a masculine female) present unique challenges to coming out. For starters, the influence of gender presentation on coming out varies from person to person. For some, 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. Conversely, gender non-conformists may experience greater ease coming out broadly because they are “assumed gay,” but they also often experience greater opposition from family and friends who resist gender non-conformity. In many ways, family and friends are more willing to affirm a non-normative sexual identity than they are to accept what they perceive to be a violation of traditional gender norms. Individual variation in the perceived effects of gender presentation on coming out has a great deal to do with what coming out means to each individual, so this chapter does a nice job of tying the current topic back into material from previous chapters (particularly Chapter 2).

Coming out is frequently talked about as a point-in-time event as well as a gradual process. However, evidence provided in Chapter 6 suggests that coming out is not merely a process—rather, it is a career. This may seem like simple semantics, but it is so much more. The conceptions of coming out as a “gradual process” or 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 perspectives of coming out. A process is eventually completed. The uniqueness of the career perspective of coming out is the position that coming out is never entirely completed. It is a recognition that, as long as sexual minorities are “othered” in society, members of the LGBTQ community will continuously have to engage in coming out. Even people who live in LGBTQ affirming environments are faced with meeting new people and forming new relationships (personal, professional, etc.) which makes coming out a perpetually influential element in people’s lives.

The final chapter (Chapter 7) begins with a brief synopsis of the findings discussed throughout the first six chapters. Much of this chapter

is directed at reflecting on the results of the study and asking the questions: “What does this mean?” and “Where do we go from here?” This concluding chapter also provides some applied suggestions for researchers, service providers, and LGBTQ groups, as well as individuals. Finally, I conclude by offering insight into some other trends that were indicated by the data, yet in need of further inquiry. Other avenues for future research will be discussed as well.

As I discussed briefly above, I utilized constructivist grounded theory as the bedrock of this study. The unique feature of constructivist grounded theory is that it recognizes how data is created through the mutual contributions of researcher and participant. Such a perspective has encouraged me to engage in reflection through constant note-taking and retrospective analysis of my research methods. A lot of energy was put into issues related to reactivity, bias, and the social/political environment during which my interviews took place. All of these elements of my research methodology led to the accumulation of insight that is valuable in its own right. This material is compiled into a relatively brief Appendix which further contextualizes the research project for interested readers. I find this sort of appendix extremely helpful in terms of getting inside the mind of the researcher and realizing the many idiosyncrasies that have an impact on the direction and findings of the study.

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<sup>1</sup> “Cisgender” refers to individuals whose sex (female/male) matches the gender they were assigned at birth (girl/boy, woman/man) as well as their personal identity (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Cisgender is commonly used as a compliment to transgender.

<sup>2</sup> 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, my sampling frame included anyone who engages in a process of coming out related to their sexual orientation, so the participants need not self-identify as LGBTQ.