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## The Meaning of Coming Out: From Self-Affirmation to Full Disclosure

**Abstract** Qualitative researchers have begun to analyze narratives of individuals' experiences with coming out in order to explore the social influences that affect these processes. However, most studies on coming out are based on the assumption that "coming out" has a singular shared meaning. The present study is centered on challenging this very assumption by taking a constructivist grounded theory approach to exploring the meaning of coming out for 30 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) individuals via open-ended interviews. 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 the current study agree that coming out is a transformative process and an important element in identity formation and maintenance, thus challenging the notion that coming out is no longer a relevant concept. For some participants coming out is more of a 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. Implications for future research on coming out are included.

**Keywords** Coming Out; Meaning; Sexual Identity; Sexuality; LGBQ; Gay and Lesbian Studies

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Heterosexuality is still very much the sexual norm throughout the U.S. (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).

The body of empirical research on issues involving the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) communities has been growing considerably over the past 20 years. Of all the literature concerning LGBQ<sup>1</sup> 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 much of the psychological community that the experiences associated with coming out are likely to fit a series of formulaic stages (Savin-Williams 2001). But, 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.

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 ex-

<sup>1</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, 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.

plore 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 was the dearth of research on the meaning of virginity loss:

[o]nce 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. (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 co-workers, 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 refrains from disclosing a meaning aside from speaking about a theme extracted from his ethnographic interview data: that coming out is an ongoing process. Although a meaning of coming out is never explicitly stated, the author alludes to coming out only as the outward disclosure of one's sexual orientation. Still, he at least gives the participants leeway to define coming out as an ongoing process. Unfortunately, few studies have offered participants this opportunity to contribute their own input into the conceptualization of the term "coming out."

Some 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 on 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 LGBTQ persons. In a study of young lesbian and bisexual women, Oswald 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" (1999:66). 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 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" (1999:67 [emphasis added]). Oswald's statement begs the question of whether self-acceptance alone might even constitute coming out. Or, perhaps self-acceptance is simply a prerequisite to coming out as opposed to being part of the process.

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 LGBTQ 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 the question at hand: 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? Does one ever truly come out?

A few things should be said about the use of blanket terms such as "coming out." Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen (1999) assert that the use of blanket concepts like "coming out" 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. 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.

Assumptions by researchers about the meaning of coming out may typify people's experiences in ways that are not true to individuals' lived experiences. Such assumptions and vagaries are problematic in terms of gaining a better understanding 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. 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.

### Theory, Methods, and Data

In an effort to investigate the meaning of coming out, my analysis is informed by symbolic interactionism, and guided by constructivist grounded theory – which was employed for my organization, coding, and analysis (Charmaz 2006). Early foundations in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) would emphasize the trouble associated with using any particular theoretical framework (symbolic interaction) to guide my research. But, I believe it is natural and unavoidable that researchers incorporate their perspectives into the work. Symbolic interactionism maintains a focus on the creation and evolution of meaning and how these contribute to one’s personal and sexual identity. 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.

The beauty of constructivist grounded theory lies in its emphasis on seeking meaning (Charmaz 2000). Considering the fact that the sole research question of this study is concerned with exploring the *meaning* of coming out, this method is invaluable. Constructivist grounded theory recognizes that knowledge is mutually created between researcher and research participant (Lincoln and Guba 2000), and it avoids many of the assumptions that befall other more positivist interpretations of

grounded theory. Interviews are naturally well-suited for a constructivist approach to grounded theory in that qualitative interviews are contextually-based and mutually accomplished stories created through the collaboration of researcher and participant (Gubrium and Holstein 2002).

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 LGBTQ 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 et al. 2009). For example, referrals from a single LGBTQ organization would be likely to share many traits with one another. But, by initiating four to five different trails of snowballing, I worked to minimize this effect and reach populations who may not be accessible through any other means.

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 researchers to make more

direct within-group comparisons; however, they limit the investigation of coming out as a general social process entered into and experienced by people from various walks of life. 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 are varied in terms of outness enabled me to obtain a sample that includes: 1) individuals who have only come out to one or two people, as well as 2) individuals who have come out to a greater degree. 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 individuals may attribute 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.

Since marked differences appeared during the course of my data collection that really begged further exploration, I chose to engage in some theoretical sampling (Strauss and Corbin 1998). My theoretical sampling was centered on age and “degree of outness.” Although I started by purs-

ing a wide range of ages in my sample, I developed theoretical justification for sampling more participants under the age of 25. 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 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.

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. Considering how most studies on coming out are about 90 percent white, the participants in this sample are relatively racially/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 (participants designated their race/ethnicity in their own words). 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 gays, 9 as lesbians, 3 as queer, 1 as pansexual,

and 2 preferred not to identify. Theoretical sampling enabled me to seek participants who vary based on their “degree of outness,” at least in terms of the outward disclosure of their sexual orientation. Participants ranged from those who have disclosed their sexuality to only two or three people to those who consider themselves “completely out.”

All data were collected via face-to-face open interviews conducted by me. This approach gave me the ability to collect narrative accounts that detail the meaning of coming out, how participants disclosed their LGBTQ 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. 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). Interviews lasted 90 minutes on average.

Analysis began with open coding, which was followed by focused coding (Charmaz 2006), and the utilization of the constant comparative method. 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. I then engaged in focused coding, which

was more conceptual than my initial coding and therefore, allowed me to categorize initial codes into broader conceptual themes. Throughout my entire coding process, I followed the recommendations of both Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2000) to participate in memo writing.

### 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 LGBTQ community. In the most general sense, coming out is often compared to *telling* or *story-telling*. For example, in the case of mental health patients, individuals 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”).

Scholars such as Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen (1999) emphasize that contemporary identity dis-

closure is less focused on legitimating sexualities via coming out since non-heterosexual identities are becoming increasingly normalized. That is, LGBTQ persons are less likely to experience secrecy and social isolation, so “the closet” is not as repressive as it once was. The normalization of LGBTQ 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 engaging 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 stereotypically 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. 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 LGBTQ 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.

### 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 out 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 is 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 let-

ting 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..." Kelly conveyed that, from that point forward, she 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. 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 she ascribes

to coming out. 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.

Coming out to oneself was 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 (Lucal 2008). Western societies' socially constructed, dualistic framework makes coming out more problematic for individuals who are bisexual, queer, fluid, or pansexual. For example, a bisexual woman who is currently engaged in a relationship with another woman will be perceived as gay – that is, bisexuality cannot be understood by a single situational observation. Such realities make the public disclosure of one's sexuality less central to the meaning of coming out.

### 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 some form of 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.

### 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 study 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 believed in com-

ing out as “full disclosure” – which will be discussed more below.

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 have 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, co-workers – 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 female 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 around 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 okay 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.

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.

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 a while.” 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, co-workers, 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 disinterested in or unable 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 her home state, Gabrielle,

who is as "out" as can be, is forced to place a figurative asterisk on her "full disclosure."

Since sexual orientation is not a protected class under employment law in many states, participants cited the need to keep their sexualities private in the workplace, regardless of what coming out means to them. Although employment restrictions may curb individuals' degree of outness in the workplace, they did not seem to alter individuals' meanings 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 LGBTQ persons residing in states that offered legal 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 preceded by self-affirmation. 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.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Coming out is an important element in the lives of LGBTQ persons, and it is widely considered to be a crucial element in the development of a healthy sexual identity among members of the LGBTQ community. It may serve 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. A singular meaning of coming out cannot be derived without ignoring the broad variation seen across the participants in this study. All 30 participants did agree on one thing: coming out is a transformative, ongoing process – a career. For some participants, this transformation was more a personal journey of self-affirmation. Still, for most participants, coming out means much more than just "coming out to oneself." For most participants, coming out means (at least in part) the sharing of their sexuality with others. This includes disclosing their sexuality to family and close friends, or perhaps even disclosing their sexuality to any and everyone (i.e., full disclosure). Participants most commonly referenced both coming out to oneself and coming out to others as being central to the meaning of coming out.

Aside from detailing the variety of meanings associated with coming out, the single most important contribution of the current study is the finding that coming out is still a relevant concept related to sexual identity formation and maintenance. Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen (1999), as well as other contemporary sexuality scholars, contend that coming out is no longer focused on legitimating sexualities via an outward disclosure. True enough, for two participants in this study coming out was only about self-affirmation



– and not about disclosure at all. Still, coming out was important to them and their sexualities. Evidence from my interviews challenges the notion that coming out is a thing of the past. Every single participant in the current study actively engaged in coming out, and they each considered coming out central to their life trajectories.

Coming out is both a personal and a social process that appears to be omnipresent as long as we operate within a heteronormative society. The face of coming out may be changing – many teens and young adults are assumed gay by friends and family. The assumption that someone is gay is typically based on outward characteristics that are stereotypically 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. Consider a teenage girl who is assumed gay, yet confronted by her best friend about her sexuality nonetheless: she will still be faced with matters of self-affirmation and potentially a confirmatory disclosure to her friend – both of which are examples of coming out. Even if her sexuality never becomes a public matter, she will still manage the process of coming out to herself.

Most researchers that study coming out refer to coming out as a purely external endeavor. 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 limits the scope of research. Kitsuse (1980) warns against conceiving of

coming out as only a matter of 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 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.

Plenty of people engage in self-acceptance and affirmation, yet have no interest in disclosing their sexuality to other people. The finding from this study that, for some people, the meaning of coming out is entirely a matter of self acceptance challenges the definitions utilized by many scholars in which coming out is defined only as an external endeavor. The notion that coming out can be a purely internal process problematizes research that assumes a heterocentric model of coming out which focuses solely on explaining difference to others. Considering the frequency with which participants spoke of coming out to oneself as being central to the meaning of coming out, “coming out” should be conceptualized as a process that includes self-affirmation (i.e., coming out to oneself).

Participants who are further removed from conventional dualistic thinking (i.e., they think beyond a gender binary) are more inclined to de-emphasize coming out to family and friends and focus instead on coming out as a personal journey of self-affirmation. 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 et al. 1994; McLean 2007).

Part of the difficulty associated with disclosing a bisexual identity is that few people in the general population understand anything about bisexuality (Bradford 2004). 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 coming out as a purely personal journey.

The meaning of coming out held by most participants still includes some element of coming out to others. However, there appears to be a fairly even split between those who emphasize coming out to family/friends *versus* those who emphasize coming out to any and everyone (i.e., coming out as “full disclosure”). As was the case with coming out to oneself, those who stress coming out as being a matter of full disclosure are oftentimes individuals who maintain fluid or open sexualities. But, this is not always the case. Many gay and lesbian participants also emphasized full disclosure as a central element in the meaning they attribute to coming out. It may be that, as non-heterosexual

identities continue to gain acceptance, coming out will be more about full disclosure since individuals will have less to fear about sharing their sexuality. Then again, as posited by Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen (1999), increased normalization of all sexualities may simply make the public disclosure of one’s sexuality unnecessary. Follow-up interviews with the participants in this study may shed some light on the effect of increased public acceptance on coming out.

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. Although, like many other studies on coming out, I had a hard time obtaining racial diversity in the sample, the most challenging characteristic upon which to draw diversity is what I call “degree of outness.” LGBTQ 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 disclosed their sexuality to only one or two people. The meaning and related experiences of coming out are likely very different amongst those who have and are newly engaged in coming out. So, I have to recognize this as a limitation of the study. Although there are a few other limitations to the current study (small sample size, lack of participants who identify as black or presently identify as bisexual), the findings and subsequent implications far outweigh the limitations.

The overall 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 the variety in meaning when designing studies – or at least recognize the limitations of using a finite definition of the concept. 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 study 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 biased find-

ings. 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.

Participants in the current study spoke freely about their entire trajectory of coming out – from early affinities to eventual identities. 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 associated with coming out.

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