



Coming Out

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"Coming out" is commonly defined as a revelation or acknowledgment that one is a member of a sexual minority. The phrase, which borrows the vocabulary of the debutante ball in which young women are presented to society, is used in a number of ways.

While it is often employed as a shorthand for "coming out of the closet" and living openly as a lesbian or gay man, the term also frequently refers to a person's first same-sex sexual experience, his or her self-acceptance as a homosexual, a person's participation in the gay and lesbian community, and an individual's revelation of his or her sexual orientation to others. Perhaps most significantly, coming out is a process that is both personal and social, as individuals move from discovery to acceptance to revelation. In a homophobic society, the process of coming out also takes on a political hue.

Changing Meanings

The term "Coming Out" is believed to be of early twentieth-century origin. In the earlier decades of the century, gay men used the term to describe their acculturation into the gay subculture, a sense that lesbians also adopted shortly thereafter.

This meaning was introduced to the academic community in the 1950s when Dr. Evelyn Hooker observed that "very often, the debut--referred to by homosexuals as the coming out--of a person who believes himself to be homosexual, but who has struggled against it, will occur when he identifies himself publicly for the first time as a homosexual, in the presence of other homosexuals, by his appearance in a bar."

In her explanation of "coming out," Hooker stresses self-acceptance, public acknowledgment, and the role of the gay bar as a safe space for homosexuals to be themselves.

In the 1950s, the term signified a coming out into a new world of hope and communal solidarity. However, by the 1970s, after the Stonewall rebellion, it came to signify not so much coming out into a new world as coming out of the loneliness, isolation, and self-hatred of the closet.

Precisely because homosexuals can easily "pass" as heterosexuals, hiding in the closet was considered a viable option for gay men and lesbians in a homophobic society. But in the new political awareness fostered by the gay and lesbian political movement, the closet came to be regarded as a stultifying and stifling place that itself contributed to the sense of shame and stigma that homosexuals experienced.

Moreover, no mass movement for glbtq equality could form if people remained in the closet. Gay men and lesbians were thus urged to "Come out of the Closet and into the Streets," not only for greater self-fulfillment and healthier self-regard, but also as a means of helping to improve the conditions of life for all gay men and lesbians.

The Political Aspects of Coming Out

The political aspect of coming out is apparent in the National Coming Out Project of the Human Rights Campaign. Shortly after the 1987 March on Washington, National Coming Out Day--October 11--was declared an annual holiday for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people. Observed particularly on college campuses, National Coming Out Day urges glbtq people to reveal their sexual orientation to others. "Coming out" has become a form of political activism that participants hope will increase support for glbtq causes.

Another political aspect of coming out is the practice of "outing," in which an individual's homosexuality is disclosed by others against his or her wishes. Those who have been targeted for outing have usually been celebrities and politicians, especially those who have worked against gay and lesbian causes.

Although the practice is deeply controversial within the glbtq community, outing represents a marked change in attitude from that of the pre-Stonewall period when the paramount value among homosexuals was respect for privacy. Supporters of outing contend that prominent individuals should be outed to illustrate that homosexuals are everywhere and that those who lead secret gay and lesbian lives, while publicly working against gay and lesbian causes, deserve to be embarrassed for their hypocrisy.

Identity Development Models

Stage models are traditionally used to outline major milestones in the social and cognitive development of an individual. Because homosexuality was assumed to be a mental disorder, development as a homosexual used to be regarded as an offshoot of the "normal" sexual development. However, with the acceptance of homosexuality as a normal sexual orientation by the psychological community, models have been developed to outline the transformation of a homosexual from a person imbued in self-hatred to one radiating the aura of self-acceptance.

Vivienne Cass, an Australian psychologist, was the first to create a model of homosexual identity formation. She used a series of clinical interviews to generalize her findings into a six-stage developmental model. Those stages are: (1) *identity awareness*, when the individual becomes conscious of the fact that he is different from his peers; (2) *identity comparison*, when the individual believes that he or she may be homosexual, but continues to attempt to "pass" as a heterosexual; (3) *identity tolerance*, when the individual realizes that he or she is homosexual in a heterosexist world; (4) *identity acceptance*, when the individual begins to explore the gay community, and also gay or lesbian identity; (5) *identity pride*, when the individual becomes active in the gay community to the point that accepting homosexuality and rejecting heterosexuality are his or her primary concerns; and (6) *synthesis*, when the individual fully accepts himself or herself and others as equal members of the community.

Since its inception in 1969, Cass's model has received wide acclaim and continues to assist clinicians with affirmative treatment of homosexual clientele. But it, like many of the models of this period, has been criticized for being too rigid and failing to encompass the new, dynamic understanding of sexual orientation.

A model proposed by Eli Coleman in 1985 focuses more on the behavioral conception of homosexuality. According to Coleman, there are five stages: (1) *pre-coming out*, when a child acts out because he or she senses that he or she is not normal; (2) *coming out*, when the child, now an adolescent, discloses his or her sexual orientation; (3) *exploration*, when the adolescent becomes involved in the gay community, gets a sense of his or her position within this new social structure, and may begin having casual sexual encounters; (4) *first relationships*, when the young adult becomes tired of evanescent relationships and begins to place value on long-term meaningful relationships with same-sex peers; and finally (5) *integration*, an open-ended process that is marked by additional long term commitments, possibly leading to marriage.

A study by Dube and Savin-Williams determined that gay male adolescents progress along the following set

of milestones of sexual maturity: awareness (10.0 years), sex with other males (15.4 years), self-labeling (15.8 years), disclosure (17.0 years), and first relationships (18.0 years). In terms of ethnic minorities, they also found that Latino men had the lowest age of awareness at eight and a half years old, with Asian American men having the latest sexual encounter with another man at seventeen. They also found that African-American men had sex with other men before identifying as gay, and Asian American men had sex with other men after.

Ultimately, however, coming out is a very subjective process, varying from person to person. Individuals may encounter a different hierarchy of steps, skip some steps entirely, or encounter something completely new and different. The glbtq community is in a state of flux as regards labelling, orientations, and gender identities.

Indeed, work by Lisa Diamond, who recently published a 5-year follow-up of a cohort of lesbian and bisexual women, questions the stability of presumably permanent sexual orientations. She found that many of the women in her study relinquished their lesbian and bisexual identities and later identified as heterosexual, despite their continuing willingness to engage in same-sex sexual relations.

Socio-Cultural Stressors and Reactions

Recent studies have placed the average age of coming out within the mid- to late-teens, with some precocious youth coming out even earlier. This is an astounding 10-year drop from prior studies, which reported that the average age of coming out hovered somewhere in the mid-20s. Of course, moderators such as geographic location, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, and other considerations serve as constant reminders that society plays a large part in the sexual development of all youth regardless of orientation.

Still, glbtq youth certainly have a number of concerns different from those of their heterosexual peers. In fact, in many parts of the world, coming out to families and peers can result in more than just a simple slap on the wrist. Legal and social penalties vary by culture, but can range anywhere from a seemingly nonchalant dismissal to death. Hence, adolescence is often a time of great stress for homosexual youth everywhere.

In the Western world, coming out to parents is one of the primary sources of anxiety and stress among homosexual youth. Because of their financial dependence, many youth fear negative reactions from their parents (that is, being cut off from financial aid). Others report fear of jeopardizing the quality of the parent-child relationship itself.

Research has shown that the majority of gay and lesbian youth choose to disclose their sexual orientation to their mothers first, as opposed to their fathers or to both parents simultaneously. They also often find different ways of dealing with their mothers and fathers, tending to use more indirect disclosure styles with fathers than with mothers. Psychologists theorize that this effect is heavily influenced by differences in maternal-paternal parental closeness, but further research is necessary to corroborate this theory.

Questioning and gender nonconforming youth, many of whom later identify as homosexual, often report less satisfaction with their social relationships than other youth. They may come to feel that maintaining long-lasting friendships with same-sex heterosexual peers, while ignoring or lying about their sexuality, demeans the authenticity of friendship itself. Or a closeted homosexual youth may feel that the illusion of heterosexuality is of paramount importance. Even in adulthood, homosexuals have been found to be more likely to opt out of reporting a hate crime if it was motivated by their sexual orientation, presumably to avoid making their personal lives public business.

Conclusion

Coming out is generally thought of as an important passage to maturity in the glbtq community, an acknowledgment of one's sexuality and a necessary prerequisite to accepting one's place in the community. In practice, however, coming out is not a single life event, but a gradual and lifelong process through which homosexuals integrate their personal identities with their public personae.

Most gay people are "out" to some of their family members, friends, and acquaintances, but usually not to all of them. Even after accepting one's homosexuality (and thus coming out to oneself), the decision to come out to others remains a vital question that usually has to be answered on an individual basis.

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