

'Coming Out' as an Identity Forming Process

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In order to come out as homosexual to oneself, associates and the public, there must be an understanding of the concept of homosexuality in that society and to that individual. Similarly, there must be such an understanding of possible sexual identities in order to find oneself 'in the closet'. To be 'in' or 'out', there must be a notion of what is being hidden, or revealed. This is taking a social constructionist understanding of sexuality and sexual categorisation, in contrast to essentialist views that believe it possible to hold a lesbian or gay identity even if there is no social or individual understanding of what such terms may mean in that particular culture or time in history (Calhoun, 2000: 21). Before the late nineteenth century, 'homosexual' as a distinct identity concept did not exist. There were homosexual acts, but these were non-procreative sins anybody was seen to be capable of committing (Seidman, 2004: 15). Individuals who felt same-sex desire, but were able to keep such feelings or experiences hidden, might even not have felt any need to alter their public identity. There may also have been more scope for gender-bending behaviour patterns or appearances as at that time gender experimentation was not so heavily associated as being representative of sexual deviance. There would have been little suspicion or concerns in the public mind to drive a witch-hunt for that type of 'sinner' yet. Queer individuals probably did not think of themselves as having a deviant identity that needed to be dealt with, as sexual behaviour was not such a central factor in personal identity at the time. Such is still the case in a number of non-western cultures that have been less influenced by Freudian notions of sexual behaviour being the fundamental component of identity.

By the 1940s the homosexual identity was engrained in Western public consciousness as a symptom of psychological disease (Sedgwick, 1991: 2). However, until the late 1950s and the cold war, the environment that most Western homosexuals grew up in was that of assumed heterosexuality. Unless the distinct gender roles were disrupted in public by an individual's behaviour, their sexual orientation would be unlikely to be challenged. Many queers fitted their same-sex desires around a heterosexual lifestyle: getting married and following the kind of career directions prescribed to them by their gender. While this was still a performance and denial of a certain part of themselves, there would have been less fear of discovery or threat from questioning than was to follow in the decades to come. To discuss the changing possibilities for, and effects of, coming out throughout the twentieth century, the concept and history of 'the closet' needs first to be understood.

“the closet was shaped in postwar America primarily by two events: the making of a national culture of homosexual pollution and state-driven social repression” (Seidman, 1994: 21).

When the already existing criminalising laws against homosexual behaviour began to be put into practice more aggressively in the late 1950s, the closet began to be formed in parallel as a necessary space for homosexuals to organise their lives and private identities. The increased persecution of homosexuals alongside communists (often

attacked as one and the same enemy) at this time was in part due to the cold war political climate, which was seeking scapegoats for the perceived threat to the family unit under patriarchal control that was necessary for capitalist American society to function. A number of factors created this situation, such as the new experiences of men and women during the war, giving people new expectations and ideas for altered possibilities for their lives. Hence, capitalist governments felt the need to step up their control on behaviour and bring in extra tight controls on parts of people's lives previously thought private. America was said to have experienced a "heightened level of deliberateness and aggressiveness in enforcing heterosexual dominance" (Seidman, 1994: 25). Inadvertently, this could be said to have actually made people's homosexuality a more important part of their identity, even if they were forced to keep it a secret:

"between roughly 1950 and 1980,... the fact that avoiding suspicion and exposure sometimes shaped a whole way of life, meant that homosexuality functioned as a sort of hidden core identity" (Seidman, 1994: 10).

I.e, homosexuality was able to become a core identity because of its social repression where before there was no reason for it to be so. In a way, the repression of homosexuality had the effect of creating homosexuality (for some). Once individuals self-identified as homosexual, there opened up the necessity to manage this stigmatized identity, i.e. by hiding it from friends, family and society – by stepping into 'the closet'.

Despite the problems of oppression throughout the twentieth century for those self or other-identified as homosexual, distinct stable sexual identity models can have their advantages for the individual concerned. Primarily, the ability to 'come out' and declare oneself a homosexual either to self or to others, against a capitalist society based around, and reliant on, the assumption of heteronormative lifestyles, can be a liberating experience of self-development (Burke, 2000: 591). As Plummer (1995: 27) states,

"In the early part of the twentieth century... not only did the person not tell the 'other', frequently they could not even tell the self. With feelings denied and personal control reduced, a politics of emotion was at work."

Without the potential to self-identify as homosexual, the denial of the importance of same-sex desires may have been more commonplace. When such feelings are denied to oneself, it would be inappropriate for an outsider to describe such the situation as being 'in the closet' as the individual may be unaware of the extent that they may be adhering to a heteronormative performance of identity. Once same-sex desires become outstandingly and undeniably impossible to hide from one's sense of personhood, it becomes necessary to organise this new found characteristic of self and emotion and to find a strategy of coping with which to integrate these feelings into a manageable lifestyle.

"An organising feature of gay and lesbian life may be seen as the 'Closet'. Here secrecy keeps any story of lesbian and gay life from public view".

Although the public may not have had an understanding of what it meant to be lesbian or gay, and the state would have preferred to keep closet doors firmly shut so as not to have to deal with any challenge to their heterosexist regime, this secrecy has proved to be an essential tactic for surviving homophobic environments. The dualism of the closet is that it provides a space for thinking about same-sex desires privately but prevents issues of sexuality becoming public or political.

This ritual of coming out of the closet has become a necessary part of every homosexual life story. It is a coming of age event to be told and re-told in communion with others who can empathise, to build a community of support for those who have gone through this process. The coming out story in literature over the past century gives comfort to homosexual readers as they see themselves in literary protagonist. These stories outline and define the necessary steps towards identifying as gay or lesbian, creating and reinforcing a homonormative life story, i.e. a limited and limiting description of what it means to experience same-sex desire. Indeed, “telling a gay story will open up some possibilities and close down others” (Plummer, 1995: 28). There are problems resulting from this as postmodern identity politics proliferate; is it possible to form a confident sexual identity without having a name for it? Can there be a coming out story for non-gay queers?

In the twentieth century, disapproval of homosexual behaviour and a binary understanding of sexual identity may have pushed those experiencing same-sex desire into denial and even to perform the exaggeration of a heteronormative lifestyle. Alternatively, and especially towards the end of the century, those who chose to come out and live an openly homosexual lifestyle may have felt pressured to reject any opposite-sex desires they may still (or ever) have felt, as these could be seen to threaten the stability of their fought-for identity. Even today, the bisexual identity is rarely seen as a solid, stable identity within gay or straight circles; indeed, it is often interpreted as a pre-gay identity, or simply a straight-experimental one.

The revelations and declarations that are prevalent in gay and lesbian coming out narratives are indicative of their importance towards incorporating one's sexual identity into a sense of self. It would seem that “the most momentous act in the life of any lesbian or gay person is when they proclaim their gayness... [when] a sense of identity or self is achieved” (Plummer, 1995: 82). Historically, before homosexuality existed and became the identity for same-sex desire experiencing individuals, and now for those who feel this is an insufficient category to describe their orientation, such individuals may find themselves without a definable identity. Those experiencing same-sex desire could find themselves unable to describe their sexual orientation to others and unable to discover others of a similar orientation. Now there is less necessity to come out as a political act (as was encouraged by the Gay Liberation Front in the 1970s) and individuals may even find the public and social response to their coming out is muted. Stonewall was iconic as a fight for gay identity, demanding it from society at large, which was bound to cause those involved to feel a stronger attachment to that identity and more solidarity with those who have gone through a similar oppressive, then liberating, experience. In ‘Telling Sexual Stories’ (1995), Plummer discusses the concept of ‘signification’, that is, how an oppressive environment which attaches negative connotations to certain types of lifestyle or behaviour, might increase an individual's consciousness of and feelings towards such

issues. He theorises that “such problems can loom large in consciousness, making it more and more significant and central” (Plummer, 1995: 88). Dennis Altman agrees,

“to be a homosexual in our society is to be constantly aware that one bears a stigma” (In Weeks, 1990: 1).

From this, then, we can postulate that in a more permissive society, the need to come out and define as gay or lesbian is less crucial to forming a complete understanding of oneself. The lack of a “unitary phenomenon designated ‘homosexual’” is now not only a situation that existed before the modern usage of the term ‘gay’ but is now the basis of ‘post-gay’ queer theorising (Plummer, 1995: 142).

The comradeship between men which often included homosexual acts in Roman and Greek histories was in a way mirrored in the historical ‘coming out’ of gay activists in Europe and North America at the end of the twentieth century. Gay individuals who were discovering the gay community for the first time found support, advice, encouragement and indeed comradeship within the scene. As Saxey shows, the rejection of opposite-sex desire is a repeated element within literary twentieth century coming out narratives, which valorise a rigid, polar (and gay) sexual identity. Characters who experiment with identities that are more fluid or eventually find romantic closure with an opposite-sex partner are repeatedly portrayed negatively as succumbing to societal heteronormative pressures.

The prestige that accompanies taking on a homosexual identity that came about during and after Stonewall serves to validate and support homosexuals. This backlash to homophobia inadvertently devalues non-gay queers and potentially excludes them from the gay community. Alongside this, the reinforcement of polar identities limits individuals who enter the gay community and subsequently find they experience opposite-sex desire. To them it may seem that everything they have fought for is at risk of disrepute; that there would be cries of “I told you so!” from the ‘it’s just a phase’ critics. The presumption is that “those who may later in life ‘go gay’ will initially [have been] socialised to believe that they are heterosexual” (Plummer, 1995: 84). In such cases it is easy to say that distinct sexual orientation labels are to blame; but until ‘queer’ is accepted as a stable yet varied identity, coming out and declaring oneself queer may not provide the space for a coming of age, self development process that a gay or lesbian identification might.

Although the spectrum model of sexuality is becoming more widely accepted, fluidity of identification over time still has a propensity to be frowned upon. Coming out stories show us that to be told you are ‘going through a phase’ is to be insulted, to be disbelieved and not taken seriously. If the process of going through such phases were to be seen as an acceptable process for every individual and each of these phases appreciated as equally valid throughout a person’s lifetime, there is no reason that such experimentation should be devalued. The length of time that a person experiences same-sex desire and even chooses a gay or lesbian identity should not necessarily directly relate to the validity of their feelings.

Identifying with a label for one’s sexuality may be increasingly difficult in postmodern society as understandings of the homo/heterosexual binary are broken into a multitude of potential sexual identities which may lie anywhere along a spectrum between the two poles. This dissolution of binary identities at first glance

could appear to be coming full circle, returning to an early nineteenth century understanding of sexual behaviour, that is, a pre-sexual identity understanding. However, rather than simply a step backwards in identity politics, we seem to be heading closer to the spectrum model of sexuality – what is occurring seems to be more a continual fragmentation than a dissolution of the binary. The option to be ‘label-free’ is increasingly popular, rejecting all definitions of sexuality as irrelevant to personal identity.

As media coverage of events such as the Oscar Wilde trials helped to form a national concept of homosexuality as an identity at the beginning of the twentieth century, more recently the deconstruction of the binary model has increased in media and literary genres, bringing a fuller understanding of sexuality to mainstream consciousness, alongside the less limiting option of bisexuality.

Medical and psychological professionals originally used the term ‘queer’ to describe those engaging in homosexual behaviour, towards the end of the nineteenth century. Such terms were “not just new labels for old realities. They point to a changing reality, both in the ways a hostile society labeled homosexuality, and in the way those stigmatized saw themselves” (Weeks, 1990: 3). Non-straight individuals themselves are now reclaiming ‘queer’ as an all-encompassing term. To those outside the scene however, the misinterpretation of ‘queer’ as being equivalent to ‘homosexual’ may cause problems for those identifying as ‘queer’.

Within the gay and lesbian community, having completed the coming out process to fully embrace a gay or lesbian identity brings about respect, admiration and empathy from those who have gone through the same process. To Wayne Curtis,

“When did you come out? The question is inescapable. Every gay man has his story, and his friends and lovers will, sooner or later, ask him to tell it. It is our common bond with one another... and brings to mind our own years of fear and pain.” (In Plummer, 1995: 49)

In this way, gay and lesbian identities function as social commodities. The valorising of those who have come to a gay or lesbian conclusion for their identity in coming out stories sets up a hierarchy alongside the spectrum of available identities. The hierarchy created throughout standard coming out stories is therefore likely to limit the options for those searching for a positive model identity to represent a fluid or variable sexual orientation.

The perception of self-definition is that it is a sign of maturity. Experimentation and trying out different identities are associated with adolescent behaviour – something immature and therefore less significant or heartfelt. Orientation of desire and an individual’s history of sexual experience may have little or even no bearing on people’s chosen sexual identity. Historically (and in a post-gay society),

“Homosexual experiences could be absorbed into a wide variety of differing lifestyles, with no necessary identity as a ‘homosexual’ developing. There is, first of all, the casual encounter, which rarely touches the self-concept. It might be followed by guilt or even physical sickness, be seen as a drunken aberration or a ‘passing phase’.

Or it might be a result of a deliberate attempt to explore a new experience” (Weeks, 1990: 33).

It is presumptuous to assume or demand that sexual behaviour or feelings will or should dictate identity. This is a culturally specific phenomenon; the importance of which developed in the Western world and whose existence facilitates interaction and categorisation of individuals based on Western gender specific values. Not only in the gay and lesbian community does identity perform a cultural function. In comparison to race or class identity (which are not chosen), public sexual identification is a choice and a process. The orientation of desire towards a certain gender or towards both genders might be biologically controlled, but how such desire is integrated into or consumptive of a public identity is generally up to the individual concerned, even if it is influenced by factors such as the extent of oppression that is experienced. This makes the choosing of a gay or lesbian identity, through coming out, an unavoidably politically and socially affected event, especially coming out in public. Even coming out in private (to oneself) requires identification as ‘other’ from the heterosexual norm. Although not chosen, interplay between class, race and gender identities will have a bearing on how coming out is experienced and even whether it is a suitable option for all. Seidman and Saxey, amongst others, point to the limitations of the coming out narrative for non-white, non-middle class gays and lesbians. The step of abandoning family and local (straight) community in order to fully enter a gay, urban, community is often portrayed as necessary for a positive gay, out, life. However, those who find necessary support in a culturally specific community against racial prejudice may feel it impossible or undesirable to abandon this network (Saxey, : 17).

Seidman (2004: 40-41) explains that the apparent wave of gay pride post-Stonewall mainly was only available to financially independent middle class white males living in urban areas. Because of this situation, many working class and non-white queers found themselves in a cleft stick. Unable to abandon support from their respective straight communities, they were also unlikely to find others in the emerging gay community who could fully relate to their predicament. It is presumptuous however, to assume that for all such individuals their homosexuality was a core part of their identity making them feel alienated. As discussed earlier, even the concept of homosexuality is culturally and historically specific. In contrast to the description of the gay community as a community of socially advantaged, if sexuality minoritised, individuals, Larry Gross (1993: 22) describes the usefulness of the closet as an option mainly only available to the upper classes. Outing of publicly prominent individuals was a popular tract of the radical homophile movements of the 1980s who felt their cause would benefit. Those who were subject to outing were seen to be living with unfair privilege in the sense that in order to continue to have same-sex experiences but remain in the closet socially and publicly, access to a lifestyle of leisure was necessary, as well as financial protection from the risks of prosecution (Gross, 1993: ix). So, the experience of being in the closet, as well as the attractions and risks of coming out, would have been very different depending on one’s social and financial position, putting more pressure on those who felt the repression most severely to change society’s attitudes towards homosexuality.

The telling of gay and lesbian coming out stories actually constitutes a community building process. As the community develops, the addition of similar voices (and the rejection of dissident voices?) reinforces and strengthens such stories. Esther Saxey draws our attention to the main tropes within twentieth century coming out narratives

and suggests their potential to have liberating and limiting effects. She indicates that an initial first step in the coming out process is personally becoming aware of having same-sex desires (Saxey, :60). Reading others' coming out stories and identifying with the text carries an important role for many individuals in this realisation (Hamer, D. 1995: 108). Not just coming out stories, but Greek philosophy on love relationships between men are often cited as instigators of such self-realisations. For example,

“John Addington Symonds (1840-93), poet and critic,... became fully conscious of his own sexual longings after reading works of Plato at the age of eighteen” (Weeks, 1990: 50).

Once there is an awareness of the possibility of same-sex desire, another step in the coming out narrative appears to be finding support within the gay community. Many individuals follow the pattern of leaving sub-urban family lives where they have experienced feeling different, identifying as 'other', then migrating to more gay friendly urban environments where it is easier to find a gay community. The change in social environment to associate with a group of like-minded individuals is likely to have a great effect on the meaning of an individual's sexual-orientation to their self-identity. Although it would be necessary to have taken steps towards coming out (even if not publicly, then to close associates) in order to become a part of the gay community, coming out can be understood as a process, a series of steps with varying degrees of 'outness'. Interestingly, how being a part of, and reliance on, the gay community might affect the autonomy of an individual's decision to declare themselves as consistently “gay” is rarely questioned. An understanding of the self as an autonomous individual and as part of a group, understood as separate influencing constructs towards a complete identity, would explain this. Hobbes believes it is possible to have an autonomous identity separate from social influence or interaction, i.e.:

“who we are as human beings is not derived from our sociability; rather, we are social creatures because we are human beings” (Werhane, 1996: 18).

That is, the identity of a human being is not dependent on social interaction but exists as a more innate presence. This could be extended to sexual identity issues, if gay identity were understood in a metaphysical context; not needing any experience of the concept of 'gayness' in order to exist; being gay, it would be natural to want to socialise with other gay people. In contrast, Levinas proposes that social confrontations and interactions are necessary to a fuller understanding of, and construction of, self-identity, i.e:

“who we are and how we define ourselves is clarified and realized only when we confront other human beings as human beings. ...this confrontation or exposure to another is the condition upon which subjectivity, the ego, the self, develops” (Werhane, 1996: 20).

This de-naturalising of identity concepts allows the experience of being part of a gay community (as part of the coming out process) to be analysed more critically. Seidman agrees that taking initial steps towards fully coming out allows “integration into a gay world that will affirm their sense of self” (Seidman, 1994: 42).

Making confessional declarations of sexual identity by coming out assumes that there exist understood concepts to describe what is to be declared, and something hidden to confess. Foucault describes how silence can be equally as powerful as speech, but that “speech is always liberatory” (in Saxey :51). Once the precursors to coming out are established and enforced in society then, liberation becomes possible for homosexuals, particularly in terms of their ability for self-definition.

The emphasis on self-definition in radical political organisations in the 1970s also attaches a moral-political superiority to those who are able to, and choose to, come out and define as gay. The attitude of the gay liberation movement was that ‘the declaration of one’s sexual identity [is] a key political strategy, combining visibility, unity and the intended disruption of the assumption of heterosexuality’ (Saxey, :70). I.e. it was seen as a politically active move to self-define as ‘other’ than the norm. This is repeated in literary coming out narratives, where it is often the case that: “Difference becomes a virtue, those who fanatically police the norm, or thoughtlessly subscribe to it, are negatively portrayed” (Saxey, :76).

This encouragement of self-marginalisation could, however, be seen as unintentionally reinforcing the binary understanding of sexuality; the gay community’s valorising of those also defining as ‘other’ is in turn accepting, and validating the normativity of heterosexuality (Traber, 2001: 30). Women’s rights movements in the 1970s onwards also expressed the need for autonomy in their self-definition. Being made aware of feminist criticisms of patriarchal society and gender hypocrisy, by feminist activists and authors, can provide opportunities for self-realisation of a homosexual identity, and even simply the acknowledgement of the possibility of same-sex desires and homosexual lifestyles, through the ‘cultivation of ‘protolesbian sentiments’’ (Jolly, 2001: 477). Such potential of literature to change people’s conceptions, including the effect of narrative fictional texts, puts extreme importance on the methods of portrayal of the various identity options expressed.

The sudden surge in coming out stories in fictional or biographical literature since the 1970s was only possible post-Stonewall:

“a political climate leads to a focus on identity which is expressed and reinforced through narrative” (Saxey, 20).

Such linear coming out narratives have come to define contemporary understandings of homosexual identity (Saxey, 1). In parallel to the historical creation of homosexual identity by medical and psychoanalytical narrative models (i.e. case histories), the coming out narrative allows an abstract conception of a gay identity to become attached to, and become central to, a self-defined identity. The cultural acceptance of linear coming out narratives present in post-Stonewall literature may also limit the potential for the incorporation of a non-gay queer identity into one’s understandings of self. Steps widely accepted as necessary to coming out, and the value systems involved with the completion of this process, are likely to place gay and lesbian identity as particularly central to overall self-definition.

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